
THE TANACH STUDY CENTER mail.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Questions for Self Study - by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT TOLDOT

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

'WHITE LIES'

1. In your opinion, is it permissible to lie for a 'worthy cause'?
In Parshat Toldot, we find what appears to be a classic example, when Rivka instructs Yaakov to 'steal' his father's blessing (intended for Esav).

To verify this, carefully review the story in 27:1-20, and try to determine if Rivka expects that Yaakov will need to lie, or if she assumes that Yitzchak will 'not ask any questions' when Yaakov brings him the food? [If the latter, why should she assume this?]

Review 27:18-19. In your opinion, is Yaakov caught by surprise when his father asks him "mi ata bni"?

In 27:19, does Yaakov actually 'lie'?

In regard to this question, see the following sources (quoted by the commentators) that may indicate that at certain times 'white lies' are permissible: Breishit 20:13 and 22:5; Shmuel Aleph 16:2 & 21:6; and Melachim Bet 8:10. In your opinion, do these examples support the situation in Parshat Toldot? [In what manner are those situations similar to our story re: Yaakov and Esav?]

See Rashi on 27:19, noting how he explains that Yaakov really never 'lied'. In your opinion, is this "pshat"?

Then see Ibn Ezra, noting how he presents quite the opposite approach. Attempt to explain why they argue?

It is also highly recommended to see Chizkuni and Radak on 27:19. Be sure that you understand how Radak's explanation is quite different than Chizkuni's, noting the different examples that he quotes. [What is the possible 'danger' in 'misunderstanding' Radak's approach?]

2. Can you cite examples when later on in Yaakov's life he is 'cheated' and lied to? If so, attempt to relate this to the events that take place in Parshat Toldot. Would you consider this coincidental?

Would you consider this a 'punishment' of Yaakov?

If so, does this imply that Yaakov acted incorrectly, or is it possible that he did the right thing, yet must still bear the 'consequences'?

[Note that there are no 'easy' answers to these questions.]

The BIRTHRIGHT for a 'BOWL OF SOUP'

1. Review 25:29-34, i.e. the story of how Yaakov purchases the "bechora" (birthright) from Esav.

Based on a cursory reading, does it appear that Yaakov has acted in a proper manner? If not, be sure that you can pinpoint precisely what it is improper about his behavior.

2. In your opinion, what precisely is the "bechora" [birthright of the first born son] that is being sold? In other words, does it relate to something monetary; to something physical, or to something spiritual?

3. In your opinion, is Esav's health situation so deteriorated when he asks Yaakov for a bowl of soup - that he would have died had Yaakov refused to give him soup? In other words, is he simply tired & hungry (but not in any danger of dying), or is starving to death?

Based on either understanding, how can you explain Esav's statement of "hineh anochi holech lamut" (behold I am going to die) in 25:32?

Does it appear that Yaakov is unfairly taking advantage of this situation? In your answer, relate to the Torah's summary statement at the conclusion of this story: "va'yivez Esav et ha'bechora" (see 25:34). How does 25:34 relate to 25:32?

In this regard, see Rashbam on 25:32!

3. Once Yaakov had acquired the "bechora" from Esav, what privileges (and/or responsibilities) did it confer?

Relate your answer to the possible reason why Yaakov may have wanted this "bechora"?

Can you explain why Esav was willing to sell the "bechora" for a bowl of soup? In your answer, relate to 25:32 and 25:34.

In your opinion, was it out of desperation?

How do these events help us understand what occurs between Yaakov and Esav later on in their lives? In your answer, relate to Breishit 32:14-21.

TEMPLE 'PATTERNS'

1. In 26:25, we find that Yitzchak "built a MIZBAYACH and called out in God's Name". Recall, that on several occasions, Avraham did something very similar (see 12:6-8, 13:1-4, and 21:33, noting their contexts).

As you study chapter 26, note the events that lead up to Yitzchak's building of his "mizbayach" in contrast to events that took place before Avraham built his "mizbayachot". In what manner are these events similar, and in what manner are they different?

In your opinion, what is the 'highlight' of chapter 26, and how does it relate to 26:23-25? In other words, attempt to explain the relationship between the mizbayach that Yitzchak builds and the 'peace accord' that he reaches with Avimelech, as well as the nature of the treaty that is made between them (see 26:13-28, compare with 21:22-34).

2. In these stories in Sefer Breishit, we see how building a mizbayach seems to be followed by "calling out in God's Name". In what manner is this similar to what will take place in the future, i.e. when Bnei Yisrael will build the Mishkan (and/or the Bet ha'Mikdash)?

Is there a connection between arriving at 'peace with our enemies' and building the Bet ha'Mikdash? In your answer, relate to Devarim 12:8-12, and II Shmuel 7:1-15, as well as to the basic purpose of the Bet HaMikdash, as explained by Shlomo ha'Melech in Melachim Aleph 8:10-21 [See also Melachim 10:1-11!]

3. Ramban, in his commentary to 26:20 explains how the events in chapter 26 foreshadow the building of the first, second, and third Temples. In what manner do the questions discussed above support that Midrashic interpretation?

Finally, relate the last line of that Ramban to our discussion of the overall theme of Sefer Breishit (i.e. based on our understanding of the events at Migdal Bavel - as discussed in our shiurim on Parshiot Noach & Lech L'cha).

PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION

[for shiur on topic: "bechira" or "bracha"]

1. Even though God first promised Avraham Avinu that his "zera" [offspring] will inherit the "aretz" (see 12:7, 13:14-17, 15:18), later on in Parshat Lech L'cha, God 'qualified' those original promises, by informing him that only Yitzchak will be considered his "zera" (see 17:19-21, 21:12).

Note how this very point is confirmed at the beginning of Parshat Toldot, when God first speaks to Yitzchak - see 26:1-5.

In your opinion, is there any reason for Yitzchak to think that only ONE of his two sons would be chosen, and not both? If so, explain that reason.

If not, why do you think Yitzchak chose to bless only Esav, and not both Yaakov & Esav?

2. Clearly, Yitzchak wants to bless Esav. However - is it clear what this blessing was supposed to entail? In other words, was the purpose of Yitzchak's blessing to single out Esav as the chosen son, to the exclusion of Yaakov? If not, what was the purpose of Yitzchak's blessing?

To answer this question, carefully study the blessing that Yitzchak originally intended to give Esav (see 27:28-29), i.e. the blessing that Yaakov took by trickery. - Then, compare this blessing to the early blessings of "bechira" that God bestowed upon Avraham and Yitzchak (as noted in the previous question). [For example, does it mention "zera v'aretz"?

See Ramban 27:4! How does Ramban answer this question?

] In your opinion, does this blessing relate to the concept of "bechira"?

If yes, WHY does Yitzchak give Esav the "bechira"?
[Has any forefather thus far chosen who the "bechira" goes to?]
If not, what type of blessing is this?

3. Do any other fathers in Sefer Breishit bless (or curse) their children? If so, at what stage in their life to they do so, and for what purpose? In general, what are those blessings based upon?

[Relate to the end of chapter 9, as well chapters 48->49.]
In regard to the blessing of "bechira" -i.e. the concept of becoming God's special nation - in your opinion, who do you think that it makes sense that only God should be allowed to bestow this blessing - or does it make sense that the forefathers themselves should have a say in the matter?

Relate to God's purpose in the entire "bechira" process.

4. Later on in the story, Esav convinces his father to give him a blessing as well (even though Yaakov 'stole' the original blessing that was intended for him). Carefully study that blessing (see 27:37-40) and compare it to the original blessing (see 27:28-29).

In what manner are these two blessings similar, and in what manner are they different? Attempt to explain why!

Relate this parallel to your answer to the previous question.

5. In your opinion, why does Rivka intervene in her husband's plan to bless Esav? Can you explain why she doesn't tell Yitzchak directly that he is making a mistake?

In your opinion, what type of blessing does Rivka think that Yitzchak plans to give Esav?

Does Rivka know something that Yitzchak doesn't? In your answer, relate to 25:19-26, especially 25:23! [See also Parshanut section below: questions #1 and #2. See also Radak on 27:4-5!]

How can that background explain her behavior?

6. When the entire incident is over, Yitzchak bestows upon Yaakov an additional blessing (before he leaves home). Review 28:1-6, noting the key points of this blessing and its context. How does this blessing differ from the first blessing that Yitzchak gave Yaakov (i.e. the blessing he thought he was giving to Esav)?

In what manner does this 'additional' blessing relate to the theme of "bechira" discussed thus far in Sefer Breishit? What earlier blessing in Sefer Breishit is this similar to?

Does Yitzchak grant this blessing, or does he now 'pray' that God will bestow this blessing on Yaakov? [Read carefully!] Can you explain why?

Later on in Sefer Breishit, does God ever confirm this blessing which Yitzchak gave to Yaakov? If so, when and where does this 'confirmation' take place!

[If you give up, start your search in Breishit chapter 35.]

7. It seems that it was certainly God's intention for Yaakov to receive the blessing of "zera v'aretz". However, for some reason, Yaakov only receives it in a very 'round-about' manner. Attempt to explain why. In your answer, relate to the concept of "maase avot siman la'banim" [the events that took place in the life of the forefathers foreshadow future events in Jewish history].
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PART III - PARSHANUT

RIVKA'S SECRET

1. In 25:23, the Torah informs us: "va'yomer Hashem LAH" - to HER. It appears as though only Rivka heard this nevuah. In your opinion, did God speak directly to Rivka? See Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra & Chizkuni. How do they answer this question? Can you explain why?

2. In your opinion, did Rivka ever tell Yitzchak about this nevuah?

If yes, why did Yitzchak nevertheless prefer Esav?

If no, can you explain why she didn't tell him?

Relate your answer to Rivka's behavior in the story of the blessings in chapter 27:

'IF HE WAS A RICH MAN'

1. Based on the various stories concerning Yitzchak and his family, in your opinion, how wealthy of a man does he appear to be?

Then, study the Ibn Ezra on 25:34, where he explains that one of the reasons why Esav was not interested in the birthright was because his father was poor and did not expect to inherit much. Read that Ibn Ezra carefully, follow his proofs for why Yitzchak was so poor!

Then see Ramban's rebuttal of this approach in his pirush to 25:34.

As you will see, this is a rather amazing debate between two giants of parshanut. Enjoy!

[If you are familiar with the life history of both Ibn Ezra and Ramban, you will probably understand the underlying reason for these two very different approaches.]

- for shiur #2 -

WHAT MITZVOT DID THE AVOT KEEP?

1. In 26:5, God informs Yitzchak that Avraham had kept everything that God commanded, including His "mishmarti, mitzvotai, chukotei, v'torotei".

Review 26:5, and attempt to identify what each of these words mean, and what they refer to. Can you bring an instance when any of these words or phrases were used earlier in Sefer Breishit?

As you answer this question, attempt to understand the meaning of each word, while considering the following points:

- Should we expect to find these commandments that Avraham kept within the stories about him in Sefer Breishit?
- Should we expect that Avraham had kept certain mitzvot, even though there is no story in Chumash about him doing so? If so, what would those mitzvot be, and what would be the source of such an assumption?
- Should we define the meaning of each of the words in 26:5 - based on what they refer to later on in Chumash, or based on the simple meaning of the word in Hebrew?

2. After you have reached your own conclusions, see how each of the following commentators dealt with this question. [Note as well how their respective commentaries reflect their different approaches to "parshanut" (and the three considerations noted above):

First, see Rashi (on 26:5).

Does Rashi assume that Avraham kept the entire Torah, including rabbinic prohibitions? If so, what leads him to this conclusion?

On what does he base the meaning of each word in 26:5?

Next, see Ramban, first noting how and why he disagrees with Rashi's interpretation. Then, note how he provides a different explanation for Chazal's understanding that the Avot kept the entire Torah. In your opinion, which approach makes more sense?

Then, see the concluding section of this Ramban, where he offers his own interpretation "al derech ha'peshat" of each word in this pasuk!

Note how Ramban focuses on the literal meaning of each word, and how he relates their context to his understanding of the events of Avraham Avinu's own life, as described in Sefer Breishit!

Why do you think that Ramban refers to this latter interpretation as "pshat" in contrast to the Midrashic opinion that the Avot kept the entire Torah?

3. Now, see Rashbam, noting how his approach is quite different that either Rashi or Ramban. Can you explain the logic of his approach and why he attempts to establish a 'one to one' correspondence between each word in this pasuk and some event in Avraham's life?

Can you explain what problem Rashbam faced as he attempts to explain the phrase "chuotei v'toratei", based on his approach up until this point? Why does he introduce his interpretation to this phrase as "omek pshuto"?

Are the examples that he brings for "chukotei u'toratei" based on events in Avraham Avinu's own life? [Attempt to find examples!]

Note how drastically Rashbam's approach differs from Rashi's. Considering the fact that he was Rashi's grandson, how may this explain his introductory phrase of "omek pshuto"?

Next, see Chizkuni on 26:5, noting how his interpretation is almost identical with that of Rashbam - up until a certain point. Then note how his explanation of "chukotei v'toratei" differs! Can you explain why he supports his interpretation with psukim from Sefer Tehillim about Avraham Avinu? Is his approach more 'consistent' than Rashbam's? Explain!

4. Next, see Ibn Ezra, noting how his interpretation is very different from any that we have seen thus far. Can you explain the logic behind his approach, and why he introduces his explanations with the word "v'yitacheyn" - [and it could be (but not necessarily)]?

Note as well his interpretation for "chukotei"? Is this the standard meaning of this word that you are familiar with? Can you explain why he understands the word "chok" in a very different manner? [Relate to the meaning of the word "chok" in Breishit 47:22 & 47:26, see as well his commentary to Vayikra 19:19!]

Finally, note how Ramban's own commentary on this pasuk "al derech ha'pshat" is very similar in approach to that of Ibn Ezra! Note however how (and why) they differ in regard to "mishmarti".

5. Next, see Radak, noting how he relates his interpretation to the seven Noachide laws. Can you explain how (and why) his approach is both similar but different than all of the other approaches you've seen thus far?

Attempt to relate his commentary to this pasuk based on the philosophical thinking of his time period.

6. Last, but not least, see Seforno on 26:5, noting once again how his approach is both similar but different than all of the other approaches we've seen thus far. What element in his commentary is **totally** different than all of the others that we have studied thus far?

How does his interpretation relate to his understanding of the overall theme of Sefer Breishit (as he discussed in his intro to Sefer Breishit) in regard to the purpose of why God chose Avraham Avinu? Relate to the concept of "tikun olam", "or lagoyim", and 'calling out in God's Name'!

In the second section of his commentary to 26:5, Seforno also explains how God's statement to Yitzchak in 26:3-5 relates directly to the events that follow in the continuation of chapter 26. Be sure that you understand how. As you read the remainder of chapter 26, see if you agree with his conclusions!

In that story, note how and why Seforno understands that God has expectations from Yitzchak, based on the similarities between this story, and earlier events that took place during the life of Avraham.

7. In your opinion, which of the above six approaches is closest to "pshat"? What is the underlying reason for this wide range of opinions?

b'hatzlacha
menachem