

Toldos 2023

Finding Their Way

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the Torah's features is that it doesn't whitewash its heroes. It presents them as real people, which R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch notes is a key element of the Torah's credibility as a moral guide.

The story of Yakov and Esau's childhood and upbringing offers an illuminating masterclass on family dynamics:

ויגדלו הנערים, ויהי עשו איש ידע ציד, איש שדה; ויעקב איש תם, יושב אהלים – The boys grew up together; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Yakov was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. (25:27)

Yitzchak and Rivka raised their twin boys together – ויגדלו הנערים – yet were surprised that they turned out differently – ויהי.

Rashi criticizes this blanket parenting technique, citing the proverb in Mishlei that advises parents to educate every child in their own way; so that when they grow up, they don't lose their way – חנך לנער על פי דרכו, גם כי יזקין לא יסור ממנה.

The Malbim intuitively notes that different people need different things, and all people are different!

Parents need to be on the same page and reinforce each other, but it's certainly not easy. And it is obvious today that it is the problematic and unruly children who need extra love, acceptance, and embracing, which is undoubtedly the most challenging thing of all.

The cookie-cutter approach is highly effective for the cookies it is designed for, but not so much for humans. It should not surprise us that one size does not fit all; because it never has – כשם שאין פרצופיהן – דומין זה לזה, כך אין דעתן שוין זה לזה.

It was and is a mistake to raise a Yakov and an Esau in the same way with their differing abilities and aptitudes. Whatever Yitzchak might have hoped for Esau, history has borne out that he did not live up to the family legacy, and we can only wonder what might have been if there had been some way for a man of Esau's talents to channel them for the better in partnership with his brother.

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch ponders whether Yitzchak and Rivka not being on the same page about how to raise Esau might have contributed to the environment of competition and strife between their children, preventing them from being themselves, resulting in the jealousy and rivalry that defines the



relationship between Esau and Yakov. This disagreement was likely why Rivka orchestrated the ruse for the blessings, to show Yitzchak how he could be fooled.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that one of Yakov's most incredible blessings was that he could recognize the value of the diversity of his twelve sons – even if only at the end of his life – and blessed each of them with an individualized yet still cohesive and complementary future – the scholars of Levi would teach the rest; the warrior-kings of Yehuda would lead in peace and war; the traders of Zevulun would support the scholar of Yissachar, and so on. Each child had different predispositions, and he foresaw a way for them to come together.

Invariably, a child will grow up and exercise their independence in ways one or both parents don't approve of. But any attempts to enforce conformity will backfire and cause deeper alienation in the long run because that's not who the child is anymore. Parents and teachers must never forget that however much the Torah requires us to be good people, the recipe is different for each of us, and it will look different from person to person.

R' Shlomo Farhi sharply notes that the proverb advises parents to raise every child in the child's way, not the parent's way – על פי דרכו, not דרכך. Even more pointedly, the proverb doesn't even predict that he won't veer from the way you taught him, only that he won't veer from his own path.

We should not teach our children to be just like us; we would do well to follow the proverb – הנהג לבער – על פי דרכו, גם פי יצקין לא יסור ממנה.

If you teach your children to find themselves, they will never be lost.

Nature & Nurture

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the oldest debates in the history of psychology is nature versus nurture.

Nature is what people think of as pre-wiring and is influenced by genetic inheritance of ancestral personality traits and other biological predispositions; nurture is generally taken as the influence of external environmental factors and learned experience. As with most such questions, the answer is probably non-binary and lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

When the Torah begins the story of the adult Yitzchak's family, the next chapter of our ancestral history, the Torah specifies in explicit detail where Rivka came from:



וַיְהִי יִצְחָק, בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה, בְּקִחְתּוֹ אֶת-רִבְקָה בֵּת-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי, מִפְּדַן אֲרָם—אָחוֹת לְבֵן הָאֲרָמִי, לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה
Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka – daughter of Besuel the Aramean from Padan-Aram, sister of Lavan the Aramean – to be his wife. (25:20)

The thing is, we know who Rivka is! The Torah has only just introduced us to the kindly Rivka a few short lines earlier. Eliezer has only just encountered her and brought her to Avraham and Yitzchak’s home, and not much else has happened.

Why does the Torah restate in detail who Rivka’s family was and where she came from?

Rashi notes this and suggests that the Torah here contrasts her gentle, kind, and warm heart with the callous selfishness and greed of the environment she grew up in, illustrating that she overcame negative influences and still earned her place in Avraham’s famously open home. Or in other words, her nature beat her nurture.

R’ Shlomo Farhi notes that as much as the famous adage in Pirkei Avos cautions against the powerful influence of bad neighbors and a poor environment, Rivka’s example clearly and conclusively demonstrates the power of an individual to transcend adverse circumstances.

What’s more, we can contrast Rivka, who grows up with bad people around her, yet retains her kind and warm spirit, with Esau, who had a close relationship with Yitzchak, under the guidance of no less than Rivka herself! And yet, instead of Esau becoming a full working partner in Avraham’s covenant, as his father had so dearly hoped, he lost his way entirely.

Leaning too heavily on nature or nurture is deterministic, the belief that our actions are ultimately determined by causes external to free choice and is wholly incompatible with Judaism. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that nature dictates our limits, and nurture defines where you start within that range. But at best, that only modifies the starting point; where you come from does not define the boundaries of what you do or who you become.

Transcending environments is actually a key theme in each generation of these chapters of our ancestral history. Apart from Rivka transcending her family environment; Avraham had to leave the only home he’d ever known behind- לך לך; Yakov had to flee home with just the clothes on his back to get away from his murderous brother and spent years trying to find his place – ויצא.

Whatever path you’re on, you can always change your direction if you want to. And it cuts both ways, Rivka could ignore negative influences and become a wonderful person, and Esau could disregard the most positive and loving influences and lose his way entirely.

We don’t choose our family, and we don’t choose our upbringing, but the surest way to forfeit your choice is to doubt that you have one. “It’s just the way I am” isn’t a justification for treating people poorly. It’s a pathetic excuse for harming and hurting others, whether through controlling or belittling



others and whether it's to exalt yourself or simply in the name of leadership and authority. It's up to you to decide which elements of your identity and personality show up and when.

Your cultural environment, peer pressure, and even your genetics do not excuse you from taking ownership and responsibility for your life and choices. Maybe due to your circumstances, you can't be expected to cure cancer or end world poverty, and that's perfectly fine. But nothing is stopping you from being gentler, kinder, softer, warmer, and more scrupulously honest.

Your life, trajectory, and choices have always and only ever been yours alone.

Becoming Yourself

3 minute read | Straightforward

Deception is one of the key recurring themes in Yakov's life story – as perpetrator and victim.

Yakov opportunistically bought Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup and masqueraded as Esau to get his blessing. This set a course of events in motion, where Yakov had to flee to his uncle Lavan, who then deceived Yakov by substituting Leah in Rachel's place, causing lifelong tension between them and their children; culminating in the brothers' abduction of Yosef and the subsequent cover-up of Yosef; which ultimately led the family and the Jewish People to the mire of Egypt.

Late in life, when he met Pharoh, Yakov recognized the constant struggle his life had been:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מִגֹּרֵי, שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה: מְעַט וָרַעִים, הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיַּי, וְלֹא הִשְׁיֵגוּ אֶת-יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיַּי אֲבֹתַי, בְּיָמֵי מִגֹּרֵיהֶם – Yakov said to Pharoh: 'The days of the years of my journey are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, they have not approached the days of the years of the life of my fathers in their days.' (47:9)

Yakov recognized his difficulties, and we ought to as well. It is simplistic to dismissively hand wave and whitewash Yakov's role in the way his life unfolded. R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch emphasizes that it is critical to proudly acknowledge the way the Torah characterizes our heroes' flaws so that we learn that although perfection is ever-elusive, excellence is not.

The Torah explicitly suggests that Yakov hurt Esau:

כַּשְׁמַע עֵשָׂו, אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אָבִיו, וַיִּצְעַק צְעָקָה, גְּדֹלָה וּמְרָה עַד-מְאֹד – When Esau heard his father's words, he cried with an extremely great and bitter cry (27:34)



R' Jonathan Sacks highlights that the Torah narrates emotions sparingly, and uses four modifiers here – גְּדֹלָהּ וּמְרָה עַד-מְאֹד –

This hurt came at a great cost; the Zohar suggests that these tears alone were responsible for thousands of years of suffering, over a blessing. When Yitzchak was on his deathbed, Rivka knew that Yitzchak could not see Esau for who he was, so she instructed Yakov to act like Esau and take his blessing:

וַיְתֵן-לָהּ, הָאֱלֹהִים, מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ וְרֹב דָּגָן, וְתִירֹשׁ וְעֵבְדוּךָ עַמִּים, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶי לָךְ לְאֻמִּים – הַיְהִי גְבוּר לְאֶחִיךָ, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶי לָךְ בְּנֵי אֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן; אֶרְרֶיךָ אָרוּר, וּמְבָרְכֶיךָ בָרוּךְ, וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶי לָךְ בְּנֵי אֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן; אֶרְרֶיךָ אָרוּר, וּמְבָרְכֶיךָ בָרוּךְ – May God give you the dews of heaven, and the fats of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let people serve you, and nations bow down to you. Lord over your brother, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be every one that curses you, and blessed be every one that blesses you. (27:28,29)

This is the great blessing Yakov suffered so considerably for, and it seems a little underwhelming. As R' Jonathan Sacks sharply notes, this is a blessing for wealth and power; it is plainly not the blessing of Avraham's covenant, which is about family and the Promised Land. Avraham gave Yishmael a blessing for wealth and power, and Esau could have one too.

Once Yakov and Rivka's ruse was discovered, and just before Yakov left for good, his father Yitzchak blessed him one last time, transparent with who he was speaking to:

וְאֵל שְׂדֵי יִבְרָךְ אֹתְךָ, וַיַּבְרַךְ וַיְבָרֶךְ; וְהֵייתָ, לְקַהֲל עַמִּים. וַיְתֵן-לָהּ אֶת-בְּרַכְתּוֹ אֲבָרְהָם, לָךְ וּלְבָנֶיךָ אִתְּךָ – לְרִשְׁתָּךְ אֶת-אָרֶץ מְגַרִּיךָ, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם – May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful, and multiply you, that you may be a congregation of people; and give you the blessing of Avraham – to you, and your children together; that you may inherit the land of your residence, which God gave to Avraham. (28:3,4)

By imparting Avraham's blessing to Yakov with no pretenses, the Torah suggests that the entire ruse and ensuing struggle was unnecessary, that the strife and deception that characterized Yakov's life was based on a misunderstanding.

God's blessing is abundant; it is not exclusive or zero-sum. Yishmael and Esau can also have God's blessing; it will not detract from our own.

Perhaps when Esau and Yakov met again years later, Yakov had learned this lesson, and that was how they were able to reconcile:

– קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּרַכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הִבָּאת לָךְ, כִּי-חַנּוּן אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יֵשׁ-לִי-כֹל; וַיִּפָּצַר-בוֹ, וַיִּקַּח – “Please take my blessings that I gift to you; because God has been gracious with me, and I have enough,” he urged him; and he took it. (33:11)



R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that the material gifts to Esau were the literal return of the material blessing – קח-נָא אֶת-בְּרִכְתִּי; and bowing to Esau showed his deference to Esau's place; acknowledging the wrongdoing of their youth. Instead of trying to usurp Esau's position in the family and take his blessings; Esau could be Esau, and Yakov could be Yakov – וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו, יֵשׁ-לִי רֵב; אָחִי, יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר-לְךָ.

Once Yakov fights off the literal specter of trying to be like Esau, he earns the name and title of Yisrael, which has a connotation of straightness.

We each have our own blessings, and we mustn't seek our brother's blessing. His blessing is his, and yours is yours.

Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.

It's Not About Who You Are; But What You Do

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah speaks in human language, and storytelling is one of humanity's most powerful tools.

Some parts of the Torah are communicated in the forms of laws, and others in stories. Integral messages can be passed through the ages, each generation filtering it through its wisest minds, gleaning new insights in each telling.

Some say that our tradition's stories are not about ordinary people like us; they are about perfect saints who were qualitatively different from us.

This is not a universally held position, and with good reason. If the stories are about holy people who are different from us, how can their stories be relevant guidance for our lives?

As R' Shlomo Farhi observes, while the Torah's terse stories obviously do not capture the character of these great people in three dimensions, we also cannot ignore the Torah's deliberate characterization and presentation of these stories, emphasizing and highlighting specific actions and people frame their particular way. We should sit up and notice, wondering what we are supposed to learn from the parts that don't quite align with our picture of greatness.

When famine struck Avraham's new home in Israel, he decided that his family would have better food security in Egypt's fertile land, and they left Israel. While this was an eminently reasonable decision to have made based on his assessment of the facts, the way it worked out was that he placed Sarah in a highly compromising situation that required divine intervention after Pharaoh took her.



TorahRedux

The Ramban criticizes Avraham for leaving Israel and not counting on God's promises and that by abandoning Israel, he directly jeopardized those promises and endangered his family.

The Maharitz Chajes notes that stories are often the Torah's medium for teaching us about morality because mature people understand that moral choices are often difficult and rarely black and white. While the law is made of words, those words have to be lived out, and only a story transmits the turmoil and weight of how those words and values interface with real life.

R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that the Torah's enduring hold is that our heroes are not gods or demigods; they are mortal men. God is God, and humans are human – and humans make mistakes.

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch notes that this kind of discussion is an essential feature of our rich heritage. Our ancestors are prototypes of what the ideal human acts like, but the Torah does not whitewash its heroes; excellent humans are still human.

Our role models cannot be idealized characters; they wouldn't be relevant if they weren't materially like us. What makes them great is precisely the fact that they weren't so different from us. They faced the same kinds of problems: how best to protect and provide for their families; and how to maintain their beliefs and practices while trying to do the right thing.

Avraham was not born holy and perfect, nor under extraordinary or supernatural circumstances. Avraham did not possess some innate characteristic that gave him a religious advantage. Avraham is first and foremost in our pantheon of great figures because, throughout his struggles, he maintained his integrity and persevered – sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly. He is great because of the things he did, not because he was born that way.

The Torah speaks in whole truths to give a three-dimensional view of the people we look up to. The Torah is for and about humans; because it's ok to be human.

Some people suggest that focusing on our hero's misdeeds is disrespectful, but perhaps they have it backward. Their humanity does not undermine our respect for them; it is the very basis of our respect and veneration!

The Torah is replete with stories about how great people also make mistakes.

Adam eats the fruit; Noach doesn't save a single person; Avraham compromises Sarah; Yitzchak favors Esau; Yakov tricks his father; Yosef is vain, and his brothers engage in human trafficking. The generation that comes out of Egypt is doomed to die in the wilderness. Moshe doesn't get to the Promised Land. The Promised Land doesn't result in the Final Redemption. Failure is a core theme of almost every story in the Torah!



But crucially, here we are 3000 years later, learning those stories, still trying. Perfection is ever-elusive, and there is no finish line. The Torah's stories guide our way through the ages because they matter to us. They teach us that humans can fail, but if perfection is out of reach, greatness is not.

If all our greats are humans; then all humans possess the capacity to be great. That's why their stories matter to us.

Greatness isn't who you are; it's what you do that defines you.

In The Land of the Blind

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's heroes are individuals of impeccable character and quality, entirely above reproach, and we cannot comprehend the character of the people they were. However, that being said, the Torah tells us stories in a very deliberate way, and we can and should talk about the Torah's characterization in these stories.

Our ancestor Yakov was someone who had to fight and grind throughout his life to get what he was owed; nothing ever came easy. We read the stories of his trials, the archetype and model of a Jew in exile, and take comfort and strength from his immense grit and perseverance throughout the turbulent times in his life.

But some incidents give us pause.

In particular, the incident where he masqueraded as his brother Esau to his blind and aging father to appropriate the blessing intended for Esau.

The Jewish People are called the Upright Tribe – שבטי ישורון. We take our common name from Yakov himself, a person renowned for being straight – ישר-אל. But Yakov tricked his father into giving him something that, although intangible, was meant for another.

How do we justify Yakov as honest and upright?

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch highlights a reading of how the story unfolded, noting that Rivka is the instigator of the entire course of events:

וּרְבֵקָה אָמְרָה אֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּנֵה לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־אָבִיךָ מְדַבֵּר אֶל־עֵשָׂו אָחִיךָ לֵאמֹר: הֲבִיאָה לִי צִיד וְעָשֵׂה־לִּי מִטְעָמִים וְאֶכְלָה וְאָבְרַכְכָּה... לִפְנֵי ה' לִפְנֵי מוֹתִי: וְעַתָּה בְּנֵי שָׁמַע בְּקִלְי לְאִשְׁר אֲנִי מְצִוָּה אֹתָךְ



son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home, Rivka said to her son Yakov, “I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, ‘Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with God’s approval, before I die.’ Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you...” (27:6-8)

Rivka tells Yakov to act as if he were Esau, and Yakov responds that he is uncomfortable doing so:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־רִבְקָה אִמּוֹ הֲנִי עֹשֶׂה אֶחָי אִישׁ שָׁעַר וְאָנֹכִי אִישׁ חֲלָק: אוֹלַי יִמְשְׁנֵי אָבִי וְהָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כְּמַתְעַתֵּעַ וְהִבֵּאתִי עָלַי קְלָלָה וְלֹא בְרָכָה: – Yakov answered his mother Rivka, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am smooth-skinned. If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing!”

There is an unbridgeable tension here between deception versus honor and loyalty. Quite correctly, Yakov expresses his discomfort with Rivka’s idea, precisely because he is not a trickster – וְהָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כְּמַתְעַתֵּעַ. But at this point, Rivka pulls the proverbial ace:

וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִמּוֹ עָלַי קְלָלְתָּהּ בְּנִי אַךְ שְׂמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְלֹא קַח־לִי – But his mother said to him, “My son, any curse would be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me.” (27:13)

At this juncture, Rivka exercises her maternal authority to silence Yakov’s protest, and the story goes on. We can continue to look up Yakov because he is not a crook; he is obedient to his mother.

While this is a compelling reading, it doesn’t answer the crux of the problem. While it serves the purposes of salvaging Yakov’s image, Rivka becomes tarnished instead, and we must ask the same question of Rivka, only it looks substantially worse now; she has forced her son to trick her husband – his father – to take something intended for his brother.

To reinforce the question, what exactly is the point of the ruse here? It’s so incredibly pointless, if only because it is sure to be foiled the very next time Esau speaks to his father!

Moreover, to the extent we can understand how blessings work, why would we think it even works that way? The blessing is God’s to bestow – is God also taken by a gruff voice behind a silly disguise?

R’ Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the point of the deception is the fact of the deception itself. This is not a story about Yakov stealing blessings; it’s a story about Yitzchak’s blindness to who his children have become.

The Midrash suggests that Yitzchak was blind ever since the Akeida, where his father bound him up and was prepared to kill him. It’s not a stretch to suggest that this traumatic experience blinded him to Esau’s shortcomings, unable to contemplate discarding his son in the way he so nearly was.



TorahRedux

Esau had disgraced the family legacy, a feared killer who married idolators and indulged in their pagan practices, which another Midrash links to Yitzchak's blindness. Esau was not the scion of his grandfather Avraham.

Esau didn't become the person he did when he went out into the big wide world. Esau found his ignominious way while still living under his father's roof – and Yitzchak was blind, completely oblivious! Sure, Esau was a smooth operator, and that's on Esau; but Yitzchak bought the ruse. He would not, or perhaps could not, see him for who he was.

So if Yakov, so bookish and refined, could pass himself off as the macho hunter, then perhaps the macho hunter could also pass for bookish and refined! Indeed – R' Shlomo Farhi sharply notes that Yakov's concern in the story is only ever the appearance of trickery, not trickery itself, because the story isn't about stealing blessings – וְהָיִיתִי מְתַעֲתֵעַ / וְהָיִיתִי בְעֵינָיו כְּמְתַעֲתֵעַ!

There is no crime here, and this story should not give us pause about the greatness of some of our greatest. Rivka's intention in setting Yakov up to deceive Yitzchak was simply to show how easily he could be deceived. Deception for dishonest gain is wrong – at the beginning of the story, at the end, and throughout. One of the story's conclusions is that blessings go where they're meant to, and they're not limited.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.