

## **A Well Tread Path**

**Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

Among the many interesting points in the exchange between father and son during Yaakov's 'stolen blessing', there is a verse on which our sages are quite focused. After the blinded Yitzchak hears and feels Yaakov, he remarks, "the voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Eisav" (Breishit 27:22). Our tradition takes this statement to be one that speaks to the ages. The "voice of Yaakov" and his descendants are a central and defining element of the national heritage. The Talmud (Gittin 57b) says that, "there is no successful prayer that doesn't come from the descendants of Jacob and there is no successful war that isn't waged by the children of Eisav."

The Talmud is telling us of two very different nations. The children of Yaakov will identify with prayer, while the children of Eisav will identify with the sword. The Talmud understands Yitzchak's seemingly naïve statement of confusion as a succinct classification of the central elements present in his sons. But this characterization is important for us as well. As Nachmanodies points out, a central theme of the book of Breishit is the concept of "Maaseh Avot Siman L'Banim" – the actions of the fathers are a sign to the children. The actions of our forefathers are important not just for their Historical implications but they have direct significance for us as well. The attributes of our forefathers continue to shape our people to this day. We continue to act on and pass along the spiritual DNA that they created long ago. Yaakov's legacy was prayer and so is ours.

But what is prayer? Prayer is many things to many people, but at its core prayer is a way to reach out to G-d. As in any relationship there needs to be constant communication and our relationship with the Almighty is no different. Although prayer is made up of praises, thanks and requests this is a deceptively simple construct. If G-d knows our thought then communicating any of these things to G-d seems to be unnecessary. The reality is that prayer is simply an avenue of connecting to the infinite. The concept of prayer is simple, yet powerful. It is the sanctity of time. We take a few minutes out of our lives to commune with G-d.

It is interesting to note that the Talmud (Brachos 27b) tells us that each of our forefathers introduced one of the three daily prayers. Once again we see the more formal aspects of prayer being a part of our spiritual DNA. Avraham, Yitchak and Yaakov all had intense and profound relationships with G-d, and expressed this in part through prayer. Prayer is a time to consider our relationship with G-d and its ramifications. It is a time to step out of our busy days and contemplate the bigger picture. Opportunities to recall the role of G-d in our lives are constant; it is our job to seize them. The time in each of our days is ours to use as we see fit, we must allocate it wisely. Prayer is our chance to utilize our time for furthering our connection to G-d, as we follow in the path of those who came before us.

The other aspect of prayer mentioned in the Talmud is the Temple sacrifices. The Temple was the paradigm of sanctity of place. G-d's house, as it were, was a place where one could feel the presence of G-d in this world strongly. It was a place of focus and vision; A place that defied nature. Prayer is the synergy of these two sanctifications, place and time.

The Jerusalem Talmud (Taanit 4:5) takes the enduring nature of the verse a step further. There is a sense of conflict in this verse, as well. The verse alludes to the Jews crying out in response to the Beitar<sup>1</sup> massacre at the hands of Eisav's descendents. This can be understood as simply meaning that we cried out in pain at the atrocities committed. But perhaps, the reference is also to prayer. Prayer defines the Jewish people but prayer is also our weapon. Indeed, when Yaakov at the end of Breishit (48:22) recalls his taking of the city of Shem with his "sword and bow." The Talmud (Bava Basra 123a) understands this as a reference to his prayer and his entreats to G-d.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Gittin 57 for a full explanation of the massacre. It is one of the reasons that we fast on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av