

## What blinds us?

By Rabbi Eliezer Barany

**When Yitzchak was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esav and said to him, “My son.” He answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die.”** (Sefer Bereshit Chapter 27 Verses 1-4)

The Torah tells us that Yitzchak decided to bless his son Esav in his elder years, when his eyes were too dim to see. Is there some sort of connection between providing the blessing and his eyes dimming? We know eyesight tends to degenerate as a person ages, so of what significance is this detail mentioned?

Rashi, noting the seemingly unnecessary added detail, provides us with three responses: HIS EYES WERE DIM - through the smoke raised by these women in offering incense to idols (Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 8). Another explanation is: When Isaac was bound upon the altar and his father was about to slay him, at that very moment the heavens opened, the ministering angels saw it and wept, and their tears flowed and fell upon Isaac's eyes which thus became dim (Genesis Rabbah 65:10). Another explanation is: They became dim just in order that Jacob might receive the blessings (Genesis Rabbah 65:8).

Rashi notes that there is a causal relationship between the dimming of the eyes and the giving of the blessing, however, what does each answer reveal to us?

We can note that the second answer tells us that his eyes became dim during Akeidat Yitzchak, an event that occurred many years earlier. Therefore, it must not be that he was blinded immediately prior to conferring this blessing.<sup>1</sup> However, the third answer seems to say that he was blinded at this point in time in order to allow Yaakov to receive this blessing. What

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<sup>1</sup> Although I take this timeline for granted, Rabbeinu Bachya Ben Asher explains that Yitzchak was blinded at this time, despite this incident occurring much earlier. See his commentary on Bereshit 27:1 for his reasons given, however, it seems that he had a different text of the midrash than Rashi who seems to disagree about the timing of blindness.

then can we observe about the first answer? Was he blinded immediately prior to this event, but not for the sake of Yaakov? Additionally, if according to the second answer he was not blinded at this time, why would the Torah make reference to his lack of sight at this point?

It seems clear that the second answer, concerning Yitzchak becoming blind upon the altar, shows that the midrash is highlighting a casual relationship. He may have become blind years earlier, but is this midrash saying that the entire purpose of his blindness is due to being able to provide Yaakov with a blessing that Yitzchak intended for Esav?

**When Esav was forty years old, he took to wife Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Yitzchak and Rivkah.** (Sefer Bereshit Chapter 26 verses 34-35)

The Torah tells us that prior to attempting to bless Esav, Yitzchak and Rivkah were bothered by Esav marrying certain Hittites. Rashi, quoting Midrash Rabbah, tells us that Yitzchak and Rivkah were bothered by this because, “they worshipped idols (Midrash Rabbah 65:4).” What does being bothered by this event lead to the Torah next telling us that Yitzchak looked to offer a blessing to Esav? In fact, how are we to understand that the smoke of Avodah Zarah blinded Yitzchak. Was he attending these offerings? If so, how many was he attending to cause such permanent damage to his eyesight? Additionally, Eliyahu Munk, in his translation of Rabbeinu Bachya’s Torah commentary asks, why were Rivkah’s eyes not dimmed as well?

Perhaps according to this understanding he was not literally blinded. I would like to suggest that according to the first answer, the forethought, the prophecy of Yitzchak, had ceased at this point.

The Gemara tells us that, “The Divine Presence does not rest upon an individual from an atmosphere of sadness.” (Mesechet Shabbos 30b). Perhaps Yitzchak was saddened by witnessing Esav marry idolaters, and therefore his prophecy ceased. In fact, this fits with the storyline because Yitzchak then asks Esav to prepare him a meal in order to bless him. Yitzchak was not in a soothing state to properly provide a prophetic blessing so he requested that Esav be the one to make him feel better. He perhaps hoped that this would allow him to garner a more appreciative feeling towards Esav in light of the recent events.

This line of reasoning fits in line with another Midrash Rabbah comment (Genesis Rabbah 65:7) that Yitzchak was blinded by this “bribe” of Esav. This shows that not all felt that this was a literal blindness, and furthermore, they saw from the text that Yitzchak was trying to turn a blind eye to Esav’s personality.

Rivkah however was not subject to this type of sadness. The Torah testifies that Yitzchak loved Esav and Rivkah loved Yaakov (Sefer Bereshit Chapter 25 Verse 28), along with the rest of the narrative pointing to Rivkah being closer to Yaakov. As such, even though she too was bothered by Esav marrying the idolaters, it was nonetheless expected. She did not feel disheartened because she was more aware of Esav’s personality, so her eyes were not dimmed.

Without prophecy, he could not know about the habits of Esav other than what he saw. He knew that he had negative habits, which is why Esav married idolaters, but he didn’t know the full gamut. As Rashi tells us, Esav was wont to deceive Yitzchak:

A CUNNING HUNTER literally, understanding hunting — understanding how to entrap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him, “Father how should salt and straw be tithed”? (Genesis Rabbah 63:10). Consequently his father believed him to be very punctilious in observing the divine ordinances. (Rashi on Sefer Bereshit 25:27) Yitzchak recognised that Esav was not perfect. He attempted to deceive Yitzchak, yet Yitzchak was aware that Esav married idolaters. So Yitzchak saw an incomplete, not fully accurate, picture of Esav.

What can we glean from these three answers? It seems that the first answer focuses on Esav losing the blessing, not Yaakov earning it. The third answer seems to say that for no other reason did Yitzchak become blind other than to provide Yaakov with this blessing. As such, one approach focuses on Esav causing the loss of the blessing and one focuses on Yaakov earning the blessing. In regards to the answer provided that Yitzchak was blinded during the Akedah, perhaps the midrash is telling us that Yitchak’s nature was changed, irrespective of his children.

After going up on the altar as an Olah sacrifice, he was forever changed. We see midrashim highlight practical applications. He was not allowed to leave Canaan (See Rashi on Bereshit Chapter 25 Verse 2) and he would not take a maidservant to have children with (See Rashi on Bereshit Chapter 25 Verse 26); he was a new person. He had sacrificed his soul before Hashem (Mesechet Shabbos 89b). Perhaps what led to this confusion of who should receive the

blessing is just a natural outgrowth of Yitzchak being who he now was. As a changed man, he viewed the world differently than other people.

What was the reason for Yaakov receiving the blessing intended for the first born? Was it because Esav lost it, was it because Yaakov earned it, or was it due to some characteristic of Yitzchak? We may not know which of the three reasons caused Yaakov to receive the blessing, but we do know those three details existed.

Sometimes in life we may merit something due to our achievement, due to someone else's failure, or due to merely living a certain way. Perhaps we can learn from this Rashi that we cannot expect one of the three reasons to be the constant cause, but rather we should strive to improve ourselves in all three areas. We should strive to seize opportunities for growth, we should try to not do something that might inhibit our growth, to merely rely on other actions we have done. Finally, we should not think that we are generally doing well and just rely on the status quo to remain the same. We need to look to all three fronts, and not blind ourselves from the other possibilities.