

Parashat Toldot

A Little Bit of Lavan

Rabbi Ari Kahn

With the start of the Parasha we are reintroduced to the second patriarchal couple – Yitzchak and Rivka:

בראשית כ"ה

(יט) ואלה תולדות יצחק בן-אברהם אברהם הוליד את-יצחק: (כ) ויהי יצחק בן-ארבעים שנה בקחתו את-רבקה בת-בתואל הארמי מפדן ארם אחות לבן הארמי לו לאשה:

(19) And these are the generations of Yitzchak, Avraham's son. Avraham fathered Yitzchak. (20) Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka, the daughter of Betuel the Arami of Paddan Aram, the sister of Lavan the Arami, to be his wife. (Bereishit 25:19-20)

The introduction lacks symmetry, in more ways than one. First, in describing Yitzchak, the opening verse is repetitive. Yitzchak is the son of Avraham, and Avraham fathered Yitzchak – are these not two different ways of saying the same thing? Next, Rivka is described - only once - as the daughter of Betuel, but seemingly superfluous information about her brother is added. The emphasis in the verse on Yitzchak's lineage seems to indicate that this is a man who follows in holy father's footsteps; not only is Yitzchak the son of Avraham, Avraham is his father, both literally and figuratively. However, when it comes to Rivka there are apparently two problematic influences. Not only is she the daughter of Betuel – as if that weren't enough of a problem - but she also has a brother named Lavan, who is also “quite a character.” How all of this may impact the story which unfolds remains to be seen.

בראשית (פרשת תולדות) פרק כה פסוק כא

(כא) ויעטר יצחק לה' לנכת אשתו כי עקרה הוא ויעטר לו ה' ונתהר רבקה אשתו: Yitzchak entreated God on behalf of his wife because she was barren. God answered his entreaties, and Rivka, his wife, conceived. (Bereishit 25:21)

Even though it will soon become clear that this couple had been married for some twenty years before Rivka became pregnant, the description in the verse

makes it sound like an immediate response – Yitzchak prays; Yitzchak's prayers are answered, and God responds.

The episode that immediately precedes this chapter gives us the same impression:

בראשית כ"ד

(סב) וַיִּצְחָק בָּא מִבְּוֵא בְּאֵר לַחֵי רֹאֵי וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב: (סג) וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לַפְּנוֹת עָרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה גְמָלִים בָּאִים: (סד) וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְא אֶת-יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל:
(62) Yitzchak came from the way of *Be'er Lahai Roi*, for he lived in the land of the South. (63) Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field at the evening. He lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming. (64) Rivka lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel. (Bereishit 24:62-64)

Yitzchak is returning from a place of spiritual significance; *Be'er Lahai Roi* was a place of revelation, a place of importance for his brother Yishmael, and for Hagar¹. Yitzchak stops in the field to pray, presumably for what was his most acute need at that moment, a wife.² As he stands in prayer, his prayers are answered almost immediately, and Rivka appears.³

ספורנו בראשית כד:סג

¹ See Bereishit 16:13-14.

בראשית ט"ז

(יג) וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמֵי-הַנְּהַל הַדְּבָר אֵלֶיהָ אֵתְּהָ אֵל רֹאֵי כִּי אָמְרָהּ הִנֵּנִי הִלֵּם רֹאֵי אֶתְּהָ אֶתְּהָ רֹאֵי: (יד) עַל-כֵּן קָרָא לְבְּאֵר לַחֵי רֹאֵי הִנֵּה בֵּיר-קַדֶּשׁ וּבֵּיר-בְּרֶד:

Bereishit 16:

(13) She called the name of Hashem who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees," for she said, "Have I even stayed alive after seeing him?" (14) Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi. Behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.

² See Ha'amek Davar Bereishit 24:63.

העמק דבר בראשית כד:סג

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה. כבר פירשו חז"ל שהוא הי' מתפלל מנחה. וע"כ אין הפי' בשדה כמשמעו שהרי אסור להתפלל בשדה כדאי' בברכות ספ"ה חציף עלי מאן דמצלי בביקתא. אלא כדאי' במס' פסחים ר"פ האשה דבשדה היינו הר המוריה שקראו שדה וכ"כ התוס' שם וכמ"כ לעיל י"ב י"ז דבשביל שמדת יצחק הי' עבודה שהוא שורש לפרנסה ע"כ קרא אותו מקום שהוא שער השמים שדה המסוגל לפרנסה. ואין הכונה שהי' יצחק עומד אז בהר המוריה אלא הוא התפלל תחת אילן וכדומה ועינו ולבו היו לצד הר המוריה שנקרא שדה והתפלל אז על הפרנסה שבכלל זה הוא השגת אשה שהיא צרכי האדם ונקראת ג"כ פרנסה כלשון הגמ' פרנסת נשואין. והזמין הי' לפניו באותה שעה את אשתו וזהו וישא עיניו וגו':

³ This parallels the prayer of Eliezer, when he prays for a wife for Yitzchak, before he completes his words – Rivka appears.

בראשית כ"ד

(טו) וַיְהִי-הוּא טָרֶם פָּלָה לְדַבֵּר וְהִנֵּה רִבְקָה יֹצֵאת אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְבִתְוֹאֵל בְּוֵ-מִלְכָּה אִשְׁתׁ נְחֹר אֶתִּי אֲבִרְהָם וְכָדָה עַל-שִׁקְמָה:

Bereishit 24:

(15) It happened, before he had finished speaking, that Rivka, who was born to Betuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Avraham's brother, came out with her pitcher on her shoulder.

ויצא יצחק לשוח נטה מן הדרך על דעת לשפוך שיחו לפני ה' בשדה שלא יפסיקוהו עוברי דרכים
אף על פי שכבר התפלל בבאר לחי ראי וקודם שהתפלל נענה על דרך מן היום אשר נתת אל
לבך להתענות נשמעו דבריך:

He had detoured from his regular path to the field in order to pour out his heart to God in prayer. He did not want to be interrupted in his devotion by passing travelers whom he would have to greet. This was in spite of the fact that he had already prayed in *Be'er Lahai Roi*, and he was answered before he began to pray, as it says (Daniel 10:12) "For from the day you set your mind to prayer and fasting, your prayer was heard." (Seforno, Bereishit 24:63)

Another crucial element to our understanding of these verses is that Yitzchak's prayer in the field takes place during the day. Rabbinic tradition attributes the afternoon prayer of *mincha*⁴ with this very particular scene: Yitzchak's prayer is unique precisely because of the setting in which it is uttered. Unlike *shacharit*, the morning prayer prior to the start of the workday, and unlike *arvit* with which the workday comes to an end, *mincha* is a prayer for the middle of the day. It is therefore quite appropriate that this prayer is said in the field, the place of labor; the essential essence of this prayer infuses physical existence with spiritual power.

It may be argued that not much is known about the life of Yitzchak; the verses are sparse when compared to the details of the lives of our other patriarchs. On the other hand, this forces us to be hypersensitive to what the text does tell us. The field -*sadeh*- is a theme in the life of Yitzchak. An entire chapter (26) tells of his planting in the field and digging wells. Yitzchak was a man of the field; he knew the value of work in the field. It is certainly not a coincidence that his prayers come from the field as well.

Sensitivity to this very central element in Yitzchak's life sheds light on Yitzchak's relationship with his son Esav, who is described as "a man of the

⁴ Talmud Bavli, Brachot 26b.

תלמוד בבלי ברכות כו:
יצחק תגן תפלת מנחה, שפאמר "ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה לפנות ערב", ואין "שיחה" אלא תפלה, שפאמר "תפלה לעני כי יעטר ולפני ה' יושף שיחו".

Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated: "And Yitzchak went out to converse [*lasuah*] in the field toward evening" (Bereishit 24:63), and conversation means nothing other than prayer, as it is stated: "A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint [*siho*] before the Almighty" (Tehilim 102:1).

field.”⁵ Yitzchak surely understood that the challenge presented in the personality of Esav was the same challenge represented by *mincha*, the afternoon prayer: to infuse the physical with spirituality, to raise up a prayer from the fields.

This brings us to the episode of the blessings. In his later years, Yitzchak summons his son Esav in order to bless him, but the blessing is contingent on Esav bringing the hunt from the field.

בראשית (פרשת תולדות) פרק כז פסוק א - ד

(א) ויהי כִּי־זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהַיֶּן עֵינָיו מִרְאֵת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־עֶשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲבִנִי: (ב) וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא זָקֵנְתִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי: (ג) וְעַתָּה שְׂאֵ־נָא כְלִי־תְלִיָּה וְקִשְׁתְּךָ וְצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה וְצוּדָה לִי צֵיד: (ד) וַעֲשֵׂה־לִּי מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי וְהִבִּיאָה לִּי וְאֹכְלָה בְּעֵבֶר תְּבָרְכֵנִי בְּפִשִׁי בְּטֶרֶם אָמוּת:

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 field and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that my soul can bless you before I die.”

Yitzchak, who has excelled at praying from the field and making the mundane holy, hopes to do the same with his son Esav. By **commanding** him to hunt and prepare food of the field, the hunt itself is transformed into a **mitzvah**. Yitzchak has created the means with which he hopes to elevate Esav, as he had elevated the field itself in his younger days. Yitzchak continues to infuse the mundane with spirituality – including, or perhaps especially, the soul of his son Esav.

But lest we forget, there is another parent, Rivka, and another sibling, Yaakov. She overhears this conversation and derails the plan. There is another narrative, another strand that must be considered and understood, and it is alluded to from the outset.

בראשית כ"ה

⁵ Bereishit 25:27.

(יט) וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק: (כ) וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּקַחְתּוֹ אֶת־רִבְקָה בַּת־בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדַן אֲרָם לְבֵן הָאֲרָמִי לִוְיָ לְאִשָּׁה:

(19) And these are the generations of Yitzchak, Avraham's son. Avraham fathered Yitzchak. (20) Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka, the daughter of Betuel the Arami of Paddan Aram, the sister of Lavan the Arami, to be his wife. (Bereishit 25:19-20)

Rivka was not only the daughter of Betuel, she was the sister of Lavan. We previously had a glimpse of Lavan, and we will learn much more about him as the narrative unfolds. When we are first introduced, Lavan seems like an opportunist. When Avraham's emissary appears, we can easily imagine Lavan eyeing the jewels the man bears. He is interested in the money, and quite capable of manipulative behavior in order to get his hands on it: After a marriage agreement is reached and gifts have changed hands, Rivka's brother Lavan (and her mother) suggest a delay of indeterminate duration before the bride-to-be sets out on her journey – if at all:

בראשית כ"ד

(נה) וַיֹּאמֶר אָחִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ תֵּשֶׁב הַנְּעָרָה אִתָּנוּ יָמִים אֵו עֶשְׂוֹר אַחַר תֵּלֵךְ:

Her brother and her mother said, "Let the young lady stay with us some days, or ten. After that she will go." (Bereishit 24:55)

Years later, fearing Esav's wrath, Rivka uses eerily similar language when she instructs Yaakov to run away for "a few days," setting him off on a journey that will take decades to complete.

בראשית כ"ז

(מג) וְעַתָּה בְנִי שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְקוּם בְּרַחֲלֶךָ אֶל־לָבָן אָחִי חֲרָנָה: (מד) וַיִּשְׁכַּת עִמּוֹ יָמִים אַחְדָּים עַד אֲשֶׁר־תָּשׁוּב חַמַּת אָחִיךָ:

(43) Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Lavan, my brother, in Haran. (44) Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away; (Bereishit 27:43-44)

Perhaps this is precisely the sort of delay Lavan had in mind when he made his cryptic suggestion to Avraham's representative.⁶

⁶ Later, when Yaakov runs away and works for Lavan, similar language is used regarding Yaakov's experience; the seven years seem like days.
Bereishit 29

This is not the only similarity between Rivka and her brother Lavan. After her exchange with Avraham's servant at the well, Rivka runs home and recounts the events and the conversation to her mother. Lavan hears, and leaps into action:

בראשית כ"ד

(כח) וּמְרִיצַת הַנְּעִיָּה וַתֵּגֵד לְבֵית אִמָּהּ כְּדִבְרֵי־הָאֵלֶּה: (כט) וּלְרַבְּקָה אַח וּשְׁמוֹ לָבָן וַיֵּרֶץ לָבָן אֶל־הָאִישׁ הַחֹזֵץ אֶל־הָעֵינָן: (ל) וַיִּהְיוּ כִּרְאֹת אֶת־הַנְּזֻם וְאֶת־הַצְּמִידִים עַל־יָדָי אַחֲתָו וּכְשָׁמְעוֹ אֶת־דִּבְרֵי רַבְּקָה אַחֲתָו לֵאמֹר כֹּה־דִבֶּר אֵלַי הָאִישׁ וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאִישׁ וְהִנֵּה עֹמֵד עַל־הַגְּמְלִים עַל־הָעֵינָן:

(28) The young lady ran and told her mother's house what had transpired. (29) And Rivka had a brother, and his name was Lavan. Lavan ran out to the man, to the spring. (30) And when he saw the ring, and the bracelets on his sister's hands, and when he heard the words of his sister Rivka, saying, "This is what the man said to me," he approached the man, who was standing by the camels at the spring. (Bereishit 24:28-30)

Like her brother, Rivka also has a highly developed sense of hearing; in fact, hers is even keener than her brother's. Whereas Lavan overhears conversations between others, Rivka hears other people's thoughts. When Esav is enraged that his brother has taken the blessing intended for him, he is so infuriated that he contemplates murdering Yaakov - and Rivka hears Esav's unspoken thoughts:⁷

(20) Yaakov served seven years for Rachel. They seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her.

בראשית כ"ט

(כ) וַיַּעֲבֹד יַעֲקֹב בְּרַחֵל שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים וַיִּהְיוּ כַּעֲשֵׂי יוֹמִים בְּעֵינָיו כִּי־אָהָבָהּ אֶתָּהּ:

⁷ It is possible that this was not the first instance in which Rivka displays the ability to hear other people's thoughts. When the servant (Eliezer) arrives and prays that God provide a wife, the scene is described twice, with a very subtle difference. In the first telling, the text reads as follows:

בראשית כ"ד

(טו) וַיְהִי־הוּא טָרָם כְּלָה לְדַבֵּר וְהִנֵּה רַבְּקָה יֹצֵאת אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָהּ לְבֵתוֹאֵל בְּוַמְלִכָּה אִשְׁתׁ נְחֹר אָחִי אַבְרָהָם וּבָדָה עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ:

It happened, before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rivka came out, who was born to Betuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Avraham's brother, with her pitcher on her shoulder. (Bereishit 24:15)

When the servant repeats the story, he clarifies that his words were not audible, rather they were a silent prayer - yet Rivka somehow heard, and knew the precise words with which to respond:

בראשית כ"ד

(מה) אָנֹכִי טָרָם אֶכְלָה לְדַבֵּר אֶל־לִבִּי וְהִנֵּה רַבְּקָה יֹצֵאת רַבְּקָה יֹצֵאת עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וַתֵּרֵד הָעֵנָנָה וַתִּשְׁאַב וַאֲמַר אֵלַיָּהּ הִשְׁקִינִי בָּא:

Before I had finished speaking **in my heart**, behold, Rivka came out with her pitcher on her shoulder. She went down to the spring, and drew water. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' (Bereishit 24:45)

בראשית כ"ז

(מא) וַיִּשְׁטֹם עֵשָׂו אֶת־יַעֲקֹב עַל־הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַךְ אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו בְּלִבּוֹ יִקְרְבוּ יָמַי אֲכַל אָבִי וְאֶהְרַגְהָ אֶת־יַעֲקֹב אָחִי: (מב) וַיִּגַּד לְרַבְקָה אֶת־דְּבָרֵי עֵשָׂו בְּנֵהּ הַגָּדֹל וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לְיַעֲקֹב בְּנֵהּ הַקָּטָן וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנֵּה עֹשֶׂו אָחִיךָ מִתְנַתֵּם לָךְ לְהַרְגֶּךָ:

(41) Esav hated Yaakov because of the blessing with which his father blessed him. Esav said **in his heart**, “The days of mourning for my father are at hand. Then I will kill my brother Yaakov.” (42) The words of Esav, her elder son, were told to Rebekah. She sent and called Yaakov, her younger son, and said to him, “Behold, your brother Esav comforts himself about what you have done by planning to kill you. (Bereishit 27:41-42)

Rivka's “gifted” hearing skill is explained by some commentaries as prophetic ability.⁸

In this earlier episode, we would be tempted to attribute her behavior not to her “hearing” but to her decency. It is only in retrospect, when we see a repetition of this phenomenon and the very same words with which it described, that we may suspect there is more to her hearing than would otherwise have been expected.

⁸ **Bereshit Rabbah 67:9. Targum Unkulus** hints the interpretation at least in this verse, in other places he seems to reaffirm here prophetic ability – see further on in this essay. Targum Pseudo Yonatan and Rashi says she was told by “Ruach Hakodesh”

תרגום אונקלוס בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב

וְאֶת־חַוּוּא לְרַבְקָה יִת פִּתְגָמֵי עֵשָׂו בְּרַח רַבָּא וְיִשְׁלַחַת וְקָרַת לְיַעֲקֹב בְּרַח זַעִירָא וְאָמַרַת לִיהָ הָא עֵשָׂו אַחֵיךָ כְּמִין לָךְ לְמַקְטֵלָךְ.

And the words of Esav her eldest son were shown to Rivka, and she sent and called Jakob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, Esav your brother plotteth against thee, to kill thee.

תרגום ירושלמי (יונתן) באנגלית בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב:ב"ב

וְאֶת־חַוּוּא לְרַבְקָה בְּרוּחַ קוּדְשָׁא יִת פִּתְגָמֵי עֵשָׂו בְּרַח רַבָּא דְחַשִּׁיב דְחַשִּׁיב בְּלִבֵּיהּ לְמַקְטוּל לְיַעֲקֹב וְשִׁדְרַת וְקִרְאָת לְיַעֲקֹב בְּרַח זַעִירָא וְאָמַרַת לִיהָ הָא עֵשָׂו אַחֵיךָ כְּמִין לָךְ כְּמִן וּמַתִּיעַט עֲלֶיךָ לְמִיקְטֵלָךְ.

And the words of Esav her elder son, who thought in his heart to kill Jakob, were shown by the Holy Spirit to Rivekah, and she sent, and called Jakob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, Esav your brother lies in wait for you, and is plotting against you to kill you.

רש"י בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב:ב"ב

ויגד לרבקה – ברוח הקדש הוגד לה מה שעשו מהרהר בלבו.

Rashi Bereishit 27:42:42

WERE TOLD TO Rivka – It was told her by the Holy Spirit what Esav was thinking in his heart (Bereishit Rabbah 67:9).

מדרש רבה בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב:ב

(ט) וַיִּגַּד לְרַבְקָה וְגו' (בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב), מִי הִגִּיד לָהּ, רַבִּי חֲגִי בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי יִצְחָק, אֲמָהוּת נְבִיאוֹת הָיוּ וְרַבְקָה הִזְתָּה מִן הָאֲמָהוּת. רַבִּי יִצְחָק אָמַר אֲפִלוּ [תלם] הַדְּיוֹט אֵינוֹ חוֹרֵשׁ תֵּלֶם בְּתוֹךְ תֵּלֶם, וְנְבִיאִים חוֹרְשִׁים תֵּלֶם בְּתוֹךְ תֵּלֶם, וְאֶת אָמַר (תהלים ק"ה:ט"ו): אֵל תִּגְעֹעַ בְּמִשְׁיָחִי וְלִנְבִיאִי אֵל תִּרְעֹעַ. וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לְיַעֲקֹב, אֲמָרָה לוֹ הִרְשָׁע הִנֵּה פָמָה הוּא תוֹהָא עֲלֶיךָ, פָמָה הוּא מִתְנַתֵּם עֲלֶיךָ וְכִכְר שְׂתָה עֲלֶיךָ פּוֹס תַּנְחוּמִין.

שכל טוב בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב:ב"ב

ויגד לרבקה – ע"י מלאך, דא"ר חגי אמנו רבקה נביאה היתה:

רד"ק בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב:ב

ויגד לרבקה – והיאך הוגד לה, והוא לא אמר אלא בלבו? אפשר כי בנבואה נאמר לה כי נביאה היתה, כדברי הקבלה, או אפשר, כי כמו שחשב בלבו כן אמר בלא מתכוין והוגד לרבקה.

Radak, Bereishit 27:42

מדרש רבה בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב

(ט) וַיִּגַד לְרִבְקָה וְגו' (בראשית כ"ז:מ"ב), מִי הִגִּיד לָהּ, רַבִּי חַגַּי רַבִּי חֲצִיקָה, אֲמָהוֹת נְבִיאוֹת הָיוּ וְרִבְקָה הָיְתָה מִן הָאֲמָהוֹת.

"It was told to Rivka:" Who told her? Rabbi Hagai taught in the name of Rabbi Yitchak, the matriarchs were prophets and Rivka was among the matriarchs. (Bereishit Rabbah 27:42)

This prophetic ability was mentioned previously by Targum Onkolus, when Yaakov hesitated before fulfilling his mother's instructions to impersonate his brother and take Esav's blessing. Yaakov tells Rivka that he is afraid that such action would lead to a curse and not a blessing:

בראשית כ"ז

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־רִבְקָה אִמּוֹ הֲיֵן עֲשׂוֹ אֶחָד אִישׁ שְׂעָר וְאֶנֶכִּי אִישׁ חֶלֶק: (יב) אוֹלַי יִמְשְׁנֵנִי אָבִי וְהִנֵּיתִי בְעֵינָיו כְּמַתְעַתֵּעַ וְהִבֵּאתִי עָלַי קִלְלָה וְלֹא בְרָכָה: (יג) וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִמּוֹ עָלַי קִלְלָתְךָ בְּנֵי אָדָם שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְלֹד קַח־לִי:

(11) Yaakov said to Rivka his mother, "Behold, Esav my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. (12) What if my father touches me? I will seem to him as a deceiver, and I would bring a curse on myself, and not a blessing." (13) His mother said to him, "Your curse will be on me, my son. Only obey my voice, and go get them for me." (Bereishit 27:11-13)

Rivka's response, according to the Targum, goes beyond a mere dismissal of Yaakov's fears:

תרגום אונקלוס באנגלית בראשית כ"ז:י"ג

יֵה עָלַי אֲתָאֵמֶר בְּנִבְוָאָה דְּלֹא יִיתוֹן לְנוֹטִיָּא עָלֶךָ בְּרִי בְּרַם קְבִיל מְנִי וְאַיִזִּיל סָב לִי.

And his mother said to him, I have been told in a **prophecy** that there shall be no curses upon you, my son; only obey me, and go, and take for me. (Targum Onkolus 27:13)

Rivka may not have been referring to a recent prophecy, rather to one that she had received years earlier, when after years of childlessness she experienced a strange and unsettling pregnancy:

how did she come to know about Esav's intentions which he had not articulated? It is possible that she experienced a prophetic revelation, seeing that she was a prophetess (compare Rashi). It is also possible that what Esav had thought about doing, he inadvertently mentioned to someone so that the one who had heard him reported it to Rivka.

בראשית) פרק כה פסוק כב - כג

(כב) וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶפֶה וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתִּלְדִּי לְדָרֶשׁ אֶת־הָ': (כג) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֵאמֹם מִלְּאֵם יִאֲמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

(22) The children struggled together within her. She said, "If it be so, why is this happening to me?" She went to inquire of Almighty. (23) God said to her, "Two nations are in your womb. Two peoples will be separated from your body. One will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger." (Bereishit 25:22-23)

Rivka knew. She knew things her husband did not know, and this knowledge influenced her attitudes and actions from the very start. She knew she was carrying twins; she knew they would not live in harmony, that they would not act like brothers. She knew they would sire two separate nations, and she knew that her younger son, Yaakov, would prevail.

Perhaps Yitzchak had imagined his two sons working side by side toward a common goal. Together they would be unstoppable: the studious, spiritual Yaakov protected by the strong and capable Esav. For this vision to become a reality, all Yitzchak needed to do was to instill in Esav an appreciation for spirituality.⁹

Rivka knew this was not the way things would play out, that this unity between the two very different strengths of her sons would not materialize as her husband envisioned it. She knew that she would have to step up, that she - and not Esav - would have to look out for Yaakov. She knew that rather than teaching Esav to be spiritual she would have to teach Yaakov to be more physical, more grounded in this world, and perhaps even a little more manipulative. She knew she would have to teach her younger son to be more like her own older brother, Lavan.

This explains the strange introductory verses with which we began: Rivka is identified not only as the daughter of Betuel, but as the sister of Lavan, for indeed she was both. Just before her children are born, the text reminds us that Rivka shares traits with Lavan – and those traits will soon become manifest, but not necessarily where we might have expected to see them. We might well

⁹ See my Explorations Expanded 122-143, and especially footnote 12 and citation from the Sfat Emet.

wonder how Esav's personality developed as it did;¹⁰ there are those who try to blame his wild, bloodthirsty nature on the genetic imprint passed down from Rivka's family. Perhaps this is so; perhaps this is a convenient excuse. Lavan was sly, a slick-tongued trickster - traits never displayed by Esav, but behavior which is manifest in Rivka and her son Yaakov.

Perhaps this is the character trait that Esav points to when he accuses Yaakov of deceiving him not once but twice:

בראשית כ"ז

(לו) וַיֹּאמֶר הֲכִי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמַיִם אֶת-בְּכֹרְתִי לָקַח וְהִנֵּה עָתָה לָקַח בְּרִכְתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא-אֶצְלַת לִי בְרָכָה:

(36) He said, "Is he not rightly named Yaakov? For he has held me back these two times. He took away my birthright, and now he has taken away my blessing." He said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" (Bereishit 27:36)

Yaakov took the blessing intended for Esav - not by force, nor as a result of the earlier trade they had made, but by shrewdness. Esav now began to wonder if the earlier "sale" he had made to his brother, which had seemed at the time like the deal of a lifetime, was not also somehow one more instance of his younger brother hoodwinking him.

Yitachak, too, has his eyes opened – but in a very different sense - when he realizes what has happened, what Yaakov has done:

בראשית כ"ז

(לג) וַיִּתְחַדַּד יִצְחָק חֲרָדָה גְדֹלָה עַד-מָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר מִי-אֶפְּוֹא הוּא הִצֵּד-צִיד וַיֵּבֵא לִי וְאִכְלָה מִכֹּל בְּטָרֶם תָּבוֹא וְאֶבְרַכְהוּ גַם-בְּרוּךְ יִהְיֶה: ... (לה) וַיֹּאמֶר בָּה אֶתִּיד בְּמִרְמָה וַיִּקַּח בְּרִכְתּוֹ:

(33) Yitzchak trembled violently, and said, "Who, then, is he who has hunted the venison and brought it me, and I have eaten of it all before you came, and I blessed him? Yes, he will indeed be blessed."... (35) He said, "Your brother came with **deceit**, and has taken your blessing." (Bereishit 27:33-35)

¹⁰ See Seforno Bereishit 25:20.

The normative reading of the text is that Yitzchak trembled, and this would generally be interpreted as a response of fear. Strangely, Yitzchak describes Yaakov's behavior as deception – but still insists that the blessings will come true, that the perpetrator of the deception will be blessed. Why didn't Yitzchak withdraw the blessing he had mistakenly bestowed on his "righteous" son who has now proven himself a scoundrel?

The Targum's translation explains the very specific language of this verse, which reveals Yitzchak's new understanding of the situation:

תרגום אונקלוס בראשית פרק כז פסוק לג

ותנה יצחק תנה ותנה יצחק תנהא רבא עד לתדהא ואמר מן הוא דיכי דצד צידא ואעיל לי ואכלית
מכולא עד לא תיעול וברכתיה אף בריך יתי.

And Yitzhak was wonderstruck with great astonishment, and said, 'Who, then is that person who hunted game, and brought it to me, and I partook of all when you had not yet come in, and I blessed him? Indeed, blessed shall he be. (Targum Onkolus, Bereishit 27:33)

Rashi highlights the subtlety of the Targum's translation:

רש"י בראשית כ"ז:ל"ג

ויחרד – כמתרגומו ותנה, לשון תמיה.

TREMBLED – As the Targum renders it: *tivah*, which means he was astonished. (Rashi Bereishit 27:33)

Rather than trembling in fear (as the Targum renders this word in other places), Yitzchak was not so much afraid as astonished: Could this really have been his son Yaakov? *This* Yaakov – the Yaakov he had never seen before - will indeed be blessed. One more word in the Targum helps explain the source of Yitzchak's astonishment:

תרגום אונקלוס בראשית כ"ז:ל"ה

ואמר עאל אחוד בחקמא וקביל ברכתך:

And he said, Your brother came with wisdom, and has received your blessing. (Targum Onkolus Bereishit 27:35)

רש"י בראשית כ"ז:ל"ה

WITH deceit – with wisdom (Rashi Bereishit 27:35)

Yitzchak is astonished by Yaakov’s display of wisdom and guile. The word he uses, *b’mirma*, is suspiciously similar to a word we heard at the beginning of the parasha – a word used to describe Betuel and Lavan¹¹ – and, we now realize, by extension¹² - a word that also describes Rivka and Yaakov:¹³ Betuel the *Arami* and Lavan the *Arami*- they hail from Aram, and they act, as do Rivka and Yaakov after them, *b’mirma*, with guile.¹⁴

At first, Yitzchak thought that Esav could be “fixed” with a dose of spirituality, but he learns that it is Yaakov who is “improved” with a dose of guile. Yitzchak finally comes to understand what Rivka had known all along:¹⁵ Esav would not

¹¹ See Bchor Sho, Bereishit 25:20.

ר' יוסף בכור שור בראשית כ"ה:כ'

ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרון (שמות ט"ו:כ'), וכן אלישבע בת עמינדב אחות נחשון (שמות ו':כ"ג). וגם הזכיר כאן לבן, על שיש לדבר עליו לפני גבי יעקב.

¹² Rashi (25:20) insists that Rivka did not learn anything from her father or brother, a contention not easily supported by the text.

רש"י בראשית כ"ה:כ'

בת בתואל מפדן ארם אחות לבן – וכי עדין לא נכתב שהיא בת בתואל ונאחות לכן ומפדן ארם? אלא להגיד שבחיה, שהיתה בת רשע ונאחות רשע ומקומה אנשי רשע ולא למדה ממצעשיהם:

THE DAUGHTER OF BETUEL OF PADAN-ARAM, SISTER TO LAVAN —Has it not already been written that she was the daughter of Betuel and sister of Lavan of Padan Aram? But we are told these facts once more to proclaim her praise — she was the daughter of a wicked man, sister of a wicked man, and her native place was one of wicked people, and yet she did not learn from their behavior (Bereishit Rabbah 63:4).

¹³ At least according to Rashi, guile was something Yaakov lacked when he was first introduced as an *Ish Tam*.

רש"י בראשית כ"ה:כ"ז

תם – אינו בקי בכל אלה, קלבו כן פיו, מי שאינו חריף לרמות קרוי תם:

A PLAIN MAN – not expert in all these things: his heart was as his mouth (his thoughts and his words tallied). One who is not ingenious in deceiving people is called plain, simple.

¹⁴ See Baal Haturim short commentary, Bereishit 25:20.

טור הפירוש הקצר בראשית כ"ה:כ'

לבן הארמי – אותיות הרמאי.

¹⁵ Part of the prophecy of Rivka as understood by the Talmud is the two brothers/nations would not only be separate they would have an inverse relationship, when one rose the other would fall. See Megila 6a Yitzchak too understands this point, see the Targum to 27:40.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ו עמוד א

קסרי וירושלים אם יאמר לה אדם הרבו שתיקה אל תאמן ישבו שתיקה אל תאמן תרבה קסרי וירושלים תרבה וירושלים וירושלים קסרי תרבה קסרי תאמן שצאמר אמלאה התרבה אם מליאה זו תרבה זו אם מליאה זו תרבה זו. רב נחמן בר יצחק אמר מהכא ולאום מלאום יאמץ

Caesarea, which represents Rome, and Jerusalem are diametric opposites. If, therefore, someone says to you that both cities are destroyed, do not believe him. Similarly, if he says to you that they are both settled in tranquility, do not believe him. If, however, he says to you that Caesarea is destroyed and Jerusalem is settled, or that Jerusalem is destroyed and Caesarea is settled, believe him. As it is stated: “Because Tyre has said against Jerusalem: Aha, the gates of the people have been broken; she is turned to me; I shall be filled with her that is laid waste” (Ezekiel 26:2), and Tyre, like Caesarea, represents Rome. Consequently, the verse indicates that if this city is filled, that one is laid waste, and if that city is filled, this one is laid waste. The two cities cannot coexist.

serve as the protector of Yaakov. The partnership imagined by Yitzchak would never come to fruition. Yaakov would have to manage on his own, but Yitzchak saw that Yaakov, who had mastered the necessary tools of a glib tongue and sly bargaining skills, had the guile to survive and even thrive in the real world. Yitzchak understood that Yaakov was ready for the next stage, and he sends him off to face Lavan and find a wife for himself,¹⁶ – for as Lavan will soon learn, Yaakov will not be the perpetual victim. Although Lavan will get the best of him in the first round, Yaakov will emerge victorious, in his battle with Lavan and in life, because Yaakov had a bit of Lavan in his own bag of tricks. After all, he had been trained by his mother Rivka, daughter of Betuel and sister of Lavan the *Arami*.

Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak said: The same idea may be derived from here, a verse dealing with Yaakov and Esav: “And the one people shall be stronger than the other people” (Genesis 25:23), teaching that when one nation rises, the other necessarily falls.

תרגום אונקלוס בראשית כ"ז

(מ) וְעַל סַרְבָּדָה תִּישִׁי וְיֵת אַחֲוֵד תִּפְלַח וְיִהְיֶה כִּד יִעֲבְרוּן בְּנוֹהֵי עַל פְּתֻגְמֵי אוֹרֵיתָא וְתַעֲדֵי נִירִיה מְעַל צְוֵרָה.

By the sword you shall live but your brother shall serve. Yet it shall be when his descendants transgress the words of the Torah you will be able to remove his yoke from upon your neck .

¹⁶ Rivka is quite dramatic and manipulative when after telling Yaakov that he will need to run for his life to Lavan’s home, under the guise of (only) finding a wife she has Yitzchak command Yaakov to go on the journey she had already planned for Yaakov.