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בס"ד

Parashat Toldot Part I Ribqah's Prophecy, "Predetermination" and Her Intentions

1. Introduction

The first words of our *parasha*, "And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham" (Gen. 25:19), parallel the first words of the previous paragraph, "And these are the generations of Ishmael the son of Abraham" (v. 12). However, the contrast between the continuations of the two verses is striking. The Ishmael verse then turns to the mother, "whom Hagar, the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham," while our verse continues with, "Abraham begot Isaac." As Rashbam points out, by skipping the mention of Sarah and essentially repeating the information of the Abraham-Isaac relationship, our verse emphasizes the crucial point that the patriarch's official lineage proceeds only through Isaac. This is in accordance with G-d's statement to Abraham to heed Sarah's request to send away Ishmael, "for through Isaac shall seed be called to you" (21:12). In its summary of Abraham's children, Chronicles takes a similar approach (1 Chr. 1:28, 34).

After stating, "Isaac was forty years of age when he took Rebekah...as his wife" (Gen. 25:20), the Torah informs us that Rebekah was barren. However, this information is not transmitted in a straightforward manner; rather, we are told, "Isaac entreated Hashem concerning his wife, for she was barren" (v. 21). Although the continuation of the verse informs us that "Hashem responded to his entreaty and Rebekah his wife conceived," we soon discover – indirectly, by means of learning Isaac's age at the time of the childbirth – that she had been barren through the first twenty years of marriage.

The unusual syntax, highlighting Isaac's prayer for progeny at the beginning of his story and as an essential element of it, reinforces the foundational principle that governs the incipient nation. This principle had been manifest in Sarah's barrenness and

her miraculous birth of Isaac after she and the aged Abraham had despaired of having a child. The future nation was not going to result from the natural order of the world! G-d brought it on the scene to be His nation to serve His purpose of bringing blessing to the world and there were several indispensable conditions attached to this relationship. The new nation must recognize that it was dependent on G-d's favorable intervention for its very existence and that acknowledgement of such dependence with its concomitant requirement of maintaining worthiness were to be essential elements for its success.*

Rebekah had an extremely troublesome pregnancy which the Torah described as "the boys were crushing one another inside of her" (25:22). Wondering why she was undergoing such distress, "she went to inquire of Hashem" and Hashem responded to her request. The Torah does not inform us to whom she went, or if she perhaps went to a place where people who aspired for an oracle would go. (Such places were known in the ancient world.) But through use of the Tetragrammaton in her inquiry and in the response, it is clear that she did not violate the fundamental principle of the new religion. Some suggest she went to Abraham. However, had that been the case, his identity would not have been kept anonymous since it would have been a matter relevant to the context. Indeed, Abraham's knowledge of G-d's response to Rebekah would have complicated the family situation beyond what the text can bear.

Targum Jonathan and *Genesis Rabbah* (63:6), followed by Rashi, are of the opinion that Rebekah went to the presumed "academy of Shem and Eber" (the son and great-great-grandson of Noah, respectively). These personages, viewed by the Sages as sages and teachers of G-d's laws as they were then formulated, may represent those enlightened individuals in the ancient Near East who through the

centuries propounded edifying standards of law and behavior. Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20) seems to be an example of them.

2. The Oracle

The message Hashem gave Rebekah was as follows:

Two nations are in your belly
Two peoples from your loins shall separate
One people shall be mightier than the other
And the elder shall serve the younger (Gen. 25:23).

In the larger context, this statement refers to the continuing fulfillment of Hashem's promises to Abraham, that He will multiply his progeny to become a multitude of nations (17:4-6) and that He would establish a covenanted nation through his son Isaac (v. 21). Although cryptic, Rebekah is informed that Divine intervention is at work in her pregnancy, promoting a dimension of the destiny of the twins. They will grow into two nations who will enter into rivalry with each other, with the younger persevering through ongoing struggles to eventually become ascendant.** In the following verses we are shown that the elder did not possess the necessary interest, vision and disposition to carry on the heritage of his father and grandfather, while the younger did. It is important to note that G-d's intervention in human affairs to promote His plan to move human society forward blends in with the natural order; thus, the unfolding of the twins' future proceeds along the lines of normal human development with human free will.

That the one to be ascendant (and carry on the Covenant) would be the younger is consistent with the reversal of primogeniture concerning family leadership as seen throughout the Bible, particularly in the Book of Genesis (Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Perez, Ephraim). In Israel, being a firstborn was not to be the decisive consideration for leadership as it was in other nations, although it did confer certain rights and privileges in materialistic spheres. Proper qualifications – and at critical junctures, divine selection – were to be vital. The reversal of primogeniture provided a thrust forward for concepts of equal opportunity for all.

The oracle is granted to Rebekah since it was she who had been experiencing the internal “struggle” and she sought a divine message as to its meaning. At this time, Isaac was very likely not receptive to a message that one of his offspring would become detached from the Covenant. Sarah's request to send away Ishmael “seemed very bad in Abraham's eyes.” He had not intended to comply with it had Hashem not intervened and instructed him to do so (21:11-12) – and Ishmael was from a mother not within the Covenant! Perhaps Isaac was in denial, avoiding facing a most difficult but inevitable reality.

The birth and early development of the brothers is depicted in conformity with the oracle – the two boys are very different and distinct and do not appear to be destined to be progenitors of the same nation. Through a revealing anecdote, the Torah shows that the older brother, whose character was on the impulsive and superficial side, lacks the requisite interest and vision to be deeply dedicated to the family heritage while the younger brother possesses the inclination and necessary interest. We will discuss this matter in our coming study.

3. Ongoing Trials

However, it is only a suitable inclination that is granted the younger brother. G-d's intervention does not guarantee Isaac and Rebekah or their descendants any degree of automatic success. On the contrary, His intervention, necessary as it was, complicated the situation, guaranteeing that one son would not be part of the new nation and that a mighty, long-term struggle was in store for them and their progeny.

The sensitive reader, mindful of the principle that G-d is righteous and just and does not needlessly mete out suffering, may interpret this as follows. The state of affairs in the world, deriving from the natural order and behavioral tendencies implicit in creation, dictates certain necessary characteristics for the nation which G-d would bring forth. Such a nation would not be prepared to fulfill its monumental mission without first confronting and overcoming tremendous struggles, including wrenching travail within the family. Perhaps it also is the case that a national disposition to firmly stand for righteousness and justice (דרך ה', “The Way of G-d,” [Gen. 18:19]) necessarily entails a long-term struggle for survival.

But, provided certain conditions are met, eventual success is “predicted.”

Previously, G-d had informed Abraham that formation of the new nation would involve severe hardship and suffering for his descendants. They were destined to be strangers in a land not their own for four hundred years, including a period of enslavement and affliction (Gen. 15:13). For what purpose must children be born into such suffering?

Again, the interpretation may be associated with an aspect of the natural order of things. A nation such as the Israelite one was primed to be, committed to the Covenant with G-d to fulfill G-d’s purpose requires extraordinary discipline and great sensitivity to others, especially to the needy and downtrodden. Such a national disposition cannot be properly established and nurtured without having a major humbling experience such as that of slavery, followed by redemption, deeply etched into the national consciousness and transmitted from generation to generation.

Indeed, the very origin of the Israelite nation – the selection of Abraham and his development into the patriarch he became – was fraught with immense trials and tribulations. As pointed out earlier, the long-term barrenness of Sarah and Rebekah accentuates the importance of the new nation’s recognition of its dependence on its relationship with G-d and His performing a miracle for its very existence. Jacob’s chosen wife Rachel also was barren for a significant period of time. G-d’s covenanted nation cannot fulfill its purpose without appreciating its own essential nature. (Leah conceived promptly because “Hashem saw that Leah was hated” (29:31).

4. On Divine Promises

Since Rebekah had foreknowledge that Jacob was predestined to become ascendant, why did she prod him to deceive his father to obtain the blessings? She promoted what is universally acknowledged to be unethical behavior. Jacob expressed the pragmatic concern that such deception ran a risk; it might jeopardize his welfare, precipitating a curse if his father discovered the ruse before he granted the blessing. But Rebekah brushed off his concern with extraordinary confidence and determination. And

above all she knew that even upon successful execution of the ruse it would necessarily be discovered and it would undoubtedly cause one of her sons to hate the other, with possibly the direst of consequences.

To place the oracle to Rebekah and her behavior in fuller perspective, a comment on the biblical concept of divine promises and consequent results is in order. G-d’s promise does not generally mean that the relevant outcome is predetermined regardless of human behavior. Throughout the Bible, the normal state of affairs is that the exercise of human free will, with very few exceptions, is relevant to the outcome, even with regard to recipients of divine promises. What is predetermined is the opportunity, disposition or possibility for a particular outcome. Whether or not one fulfills the granted potential is dependent upon the proper exercise of free will. This is not to say that G-d does not superimpose His will on occasion, overpowering (effectively suspending) human free will to promote His ends in the world, but it is not His standard practice to do so. The supposed conflict between divine omniscience and human free will is not an issue addressed in the Bible. Man was granted free will – that is a given – and one may postulate whatever theological corollary required to support it. (Many have subscribed to the doctrine that G-d restricted His knowledge to the extent necessary to enable human free will to exist. Or, by definition, G-d’s granting free will to man made contradictory knowledge impossible to exist.)

Many biblical narratives illustrate the principle that even an explicit promise from G-d is not an absolute guarantee to the recipient even as concerns the most basic requisite for fulfillment of the promise – the recipient’s life itself. Abraham twice deceptively presented his wife as his sister out of fear that he might be killed on account of her, despite having previously received G-d’s promise of future success and progeny. Isaac did likewise. In his prayer, Jacob stated: “Please save me from...Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and smite me, mother upon child. And You have said, ‘I will deal very well with you and establish your seed like the sand of the sea’” (32:11-12). As the Sages say, *אֲשָׁמָא יִגְרוּם הַחֲטָא*, perhaps a sin may be committed that will nullify the promise (see *b. Ber.* 4a). Obviously, there is no guarantee to an individual that he will act appropriately and choose meritoriously to receive what is vouchsafed him.

Guarantees refer only to potential rewards. As Rashi summarizes many statements of the Sages, “There is no guarantee to the righteous in this world” (on Gen. 37:2).

When G-d instructs the prophet Samuel to go to Bet Lehem to anoint David king, the prophet asks: “How can I go? Saul will hear about it and put me to death!” (1 Sam. 16: 2). The prophet fears that going on a mission to fulfill a task that was unambiguously assigned him by G-d may result in his death! G-d does not rebuke him for his reply or demand he place more trust in His saving power. Rather, He responds by instructing him to create a pretext for his trip: “take a calf with you and say ‘to sacrifice to Hashem have I come,’” a pretext that the prophet utilizes. G-d’s original instructions to Samuel addressed the larger picture and left the details to the prophet to work out. He was to go to Bethlehem to anoint David king; it is up to him to attend to matters within the sphere of human action according to human standards. Common sense caution is always required – without it, guarantees are null and anything may happen.

5. Rebekah’s Motives

Back to the question: What was Rebekah’s thinking that led her to act as she did? Perhaps she thought that Isaac, by misjudging his sons, would interfere with the fulfillment of the divine plan. Perhaps she felt that if she and Jacob did not do everything possible for Jacob to receive the blessing, their inaction would be iniquitous and interfere with the “predetermined” result. It does not appear that her motivation was merely to hasten fulfillment of the promise. It does not seem likely that she would risk the enormous negative consequences that would ensue if the ploy failed, or even if it succeeded, unless she felt certain that it was absolutely necessary to do so.

The fourth strophe of the oracle imparted to Rebekah, וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר, is somewhat ambiguous and capable of bearing two opposite meanings. The “preferred” translation, in accordance with the standard syntax of biblical Hebrew, in which the subject of a clause precedes the object, is “the elder shall serve the younger.” However, especially considering that it is in a poetic context, the object may precede the subject, such as in פִּי אֱמַת יְהוָה הִפְי (“for truth, my

mouth utters” [Prov. 8:7]), or in אֲבָנִים שֶׁתְּקוּ מֵיָם (“Stones, the water wears away” [Job 14:19]). Accordingly, the clause could be construed as, “the elder, the younger shall serve.” This possible literary indeterminacy may reflect uncertainty intrinsic to the oracle and could have played a role in Rebekah’s actions. However, most commentators feel that the larger context indicates the standard translation.

Why did Rebekah not inform Isaac of the insight into the future granted her through her prophecy? She probably tried, even though we are not specifically informed of it. As Isaac appears unprepared to accept her view, the Torah may have respectfully omitted her attempts at convincing him, which would have required an unbecoming depiction of the patriarch’s refusal. Perhaps certain individuals are vouchsafed an oracle regarding a personal situation that only they can recognize as prophetic because of their inner experience and courage to face the implications. The message was framed in very personal terms, perhaps indicating that only Rebekah could have a full grasp of it.

However, there are strong indications that Isaac was far more knowledgeable of what was transpiring with his sons than Rebekah or Jacob realized at the time, but had his reasons to conceal it. Perhaps Rebekah had succeeded in transmitting to him the true dimensions of the situation without realizing it; or perhaps he had become aware based on his own observations. But he loved Esau. He was very likely determined to somehow keep him within the fold of the future nation and was striving to maintain his good relationship with him.

Isaac’s awareness of the situation may be surmised from the nature of the blessing he granted Jacob at the moment when he thought he was blessing Esau (Gen. 27:28-29). There is no explicit mention of progeny, “the blessing of Abraham” is unattested and a critical item that goes with them – inheritance of the land – is omitted. When subsequently, on the occasion of instructing Jacob to go to Paddan-aram and knowingly blesses him, he mentions all these (28:3-4). Although both sons are foreseen as having children and multiplying greatly, the blessing of progeny knowingly given to Jacob is glowing and expansive, more fitting for the son through whom the covenantal line is to pass. The blessing originally prepared for Esau was essentially a materially

oriented one, comprising economic prosperity, national eminence, and status over his brother, reflecting his position as firstborn (27:28-29); it was specially crafted for a son whose father knew his limitations well.

Upon discovering the ruse, Esau demanded a blessing (27:36) but Isaac responded that he did not have another one for him, implying that what was reserved for Jacob must remain for him. Upon Esau's pressing and crying, Isaac does formulate a blessing for him, never mentioning the blessings he later gave Jacob!

Furthermore, we may assume that Isaac could never have expected the primary blessings to proceed through the children of Esau's wives, who were a constant source of bitterness to both himself and Rebekah. This latter information was tellingly incorporated in the text immediately before Isaac instructs Esau regarding the blessing (26:35), putting the matter in perspective for the reader. Rebekah and Jacob obviously did not understand Isaac.

Finally it must be asked: How could Rebekah (and Jacob) have thought that an unethically obtained blessing could have any efficacy? Surely G-d, who alone decides to fulfill or not fulfill the request that lies within the blessing, would not sustain it! Rabbi S. R. Hirsch answered that they never thought the blessing given under false pretenses would have any intrinsic value; their intention was to prove to Isaac that he was vulnerable to being duped by Jacob, the **בן פשוט**, the "simple," guileless son, so that he should realize that Esau had been deceiving him all along. Accordingly, he would reconsider his course of action in relating to his sons. However, the text does not seem to support such an analysis.

Perhaps we are to understand the narrative in the context of the history of ancient Israel, when the man of G-d was perceived as having received from Him the power to dispense blessings as he saw fit. Once uttered, these blessings were considered "granted" and would be honored by G-d. This narrative, together with what follows, teaches the sublime lesson that it is not so, as we will discuss in a coming study.

Endnotes

* The mini-passage is framed by the statements that Isaac was forty years of age at marriage and sixty years of age at the birth of his sons (Gen. 25:20, 26). This makes Abraham at those milestones 140 and 160 years of age respectively, obvious multiples of the significant biblical symbolic numbers seventy and eighty. This parallels the transition from seventy to eighty that we so often encounter in association with the Covenant. It should be recalled that the combined total attestations of the pre-Covenant names of Abram and Sarai from the beginning of the Torah through the last verse of Genesis 16 (just prior to the expanded covenantal passage of Genesis 17 that brings in circumcision and highlights the number eight, as we pointed out in our study on that chapter), is seventy. At the point that G-d changes Sarai's name to Sarah (17:15), completing both the Abraham and Sarah name changes, the combined total of both names in both forms from the beginning of the Torah is eighty. Finalization of G-d's covenantal pledge to Abraham and Sarah occurs at the status level of eighty. See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

** Historically, Edom (including Seir), the nation the Torah describes as descending from Esau, was located to the east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea and extended south to the Gulf of Eilat. Moab was to its north and the land of Israel immediately to its west, extending along a significant portion of its border. The Torah makes a point that Esau had established a kingdom in which eight kings had reigned prior to Israel having a king (36:31-39). When King David subdued Edom, Scripture states **וְיָהִי כָּל אֲדוֹם עֶבְדִּים לְדָוִד**, "All Edom became vassals to David" (2 Sam. 8:14), employing a key root-stem of Rebekah's oracle. There existed a long-term rivalry between Edom and Israel (or, after the Israelite kingdom split into two, with Judah, the southern nation). In Deuteronomy, Moses recalls G-d's warning to Israel that they are not to provoke or take from the territory of their "brothers, the sons of Esau" (2:4). He also states, "You are not to abhor an Edomite, because he is your brother...the third generation may enter the assembly of Hashem" (23:8).