

Parashah Twenty-Five

Genesis 27:1–29; Isaiah 46:3–11; Hebrews 11:17-22

Notes by Tim Hegg

Recently I read a notice in the paper that an airplane carrying missionaries was mistaken for a drug plane and shot down by the Peruvian government near the city of Ichitos. The news piece caught my attention for a number of reasons. First because one of my college roommates grew up in Ichitos, himself a missionary's kid. Secondly, because the missionaries were with a mission agency with which I was familiar. But thirdly, the incident tugged at my heart because Roni Bower and her six-month old daughter were killed in the crash, even though her husband and the pilot survived. I tried for a moment to imagine what the sorrow and grief must be for this father and husband as he tried to deal with the loss of his wife and daughter—and all as a terrible mistake by a foreign government and people to whom he had committed his life and energies. This kind of story causes us, once again, to ask the question: “Is God really in control?” “Does He order the events of our lives?” Or is the course of this world, and our lives in it, simply the result of the collision of random events without meaning or purpose?

A similar question arises in our *parashah* today: “how can God choose Jacob over Esau, when it is clear that Jacob has “won the day” through deceit and trickery—even lies! Why would this kind of person be chosen by God to receive Divine blessing and the position in history as one of the Fathers of the covenant—a covenant which would in time embrace all of mankind?

The Sages also struggled with this and thereby highlight for us a very important issue. This issue is the manner of God's election, both of individuals and of the nation of Israel. In the theology of the Sages, God's choice is not really sovereign, at least not in the full extent of that word. Rather, His choice is weighted or “tilted” by the character of the one chosen. It simply does not fit into the Rabbinic scheme of things to have either the nation of Israel, nor her progenitor, Jacob, chosen on the sole basis of His choice. For the Sages, there must be something worthy in the nation, or in Jacob, which, in some measure, attracted God's blessed choice.

For example, the Sages suggest that when the Torah was given at Sinai, God sent the notice out in 70 languages, to indicate that He was offering it to each and every nation of the world. As the story goes, every nation declined to receive the Torah as unworthy or of no value. Israel alone responded with “all that You have said, we will do.” Thus Israel became God's chosen because she saw the value of Torah and received it (cf. b.*Ta’anit* 25a; b.*Shabbat* 88b; b.*Sota* 32a; Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 5:9).

In similar fashion, Rashi decides that Jacob, though shrewd, did not lie! He understands v. 19 this way: “I am (myself), Esau (is) your first born. . .” Further, in v. 24, since the Hebrew only has Jacob saying אָנֹכִי, “I am,” Rashi concludes Jacob never actually said “I am Esau,” but only told the minimum in a shrewd way, thereby putting the fault upon Isaac for the mistaken identity!

Please understand: I hold Rashi in high regard as one of the great commentators and grammarians of his day. Surely his insights into the text are often profound and rewarding. But this time he is clearly grasping at straws! The text is replete with the obvious fact that Jacob lied, deceived, and manipulated his blind father into declaring a legal transaction without the advantage of all the facts.

Now this is quite an indictment upon Jacob, the Father of the nation of Israel! The Torah specifically states: (Lev. 19:14) “You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block

before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am Adonai.” The Sages make it clear that this text means much more than simply putting a physical stumbling block in the path of a blind person. They interpret it to mean that one is prohibited from leading a blind person astray in any manner which takes advantage of his weakness. In other words, if the Sages admit that Jacob lied and deceived his blind father, he is cast in a very negative light.

But why would Rashi and others attempt to put Jacob in a good rather than bad light? The answer is simple: we all naturally want to believe that God has chosen us for His people because we are, in fact, worthy of His choosing. But what this story teaches us above all else is that God's election is not based upon any righteousness in the person He chooses. Some have taught that since God knows all things in advance, He looked ahead and chose those who would be upright. Such a notion is entirely discounted by the life of Jacob. If anything, the fact that God chooses Jacob over Esau (cf. Mal. 1:2; Rom 9:6-18) shows that God chooses whom He will, not on the basis of a person's self-righteousness, but purely on the basis of His own sovereign love.

Actually, if we stop to consider this whole issue a little closer, we come to the conclusion that the only way anyone could think that they had been chosen by God because they were better than other people is if they had not honestly understood the nature of sin. We tend to categorize sins in a hierarchy of values—sins which are more heinous and severe are more weighty than the “lighter, not-so-egregious” sins. It is true, of course, that some sins carry a heavier penalty in the Torah than others, but when we consider sin against the backdrop of God's utter holiness, we see clearly that sin, any sin, becomes an infinite spot against the stark whiteness of His glory. Therefore, to think that one sinner is better than another is to miss the fact that even the smallest amount of black turns a bucket of white paint, to one extent or another, gray. God will never, yes, *could never* allow His glory to be diminished by overlooking or receiving as acceptable even the “smallest” of sins.

So why does God choose Jacob? What are we suppose to learn from this? Paul found this whole scenario incredibly important in the theology he came to understand as he re-read the Tanach with new eyes after being confronted by the living Messiah on the road to Damascus. His “secure” position as one of the most zealous Jews of his time evaporated before the very One he intended to persecute. In the light of the *Shekinah* Who blinded Him, he saw himself for what he truly was, a sinner under the unbearable judgment of the Almighty. But what became evident to him in time was that Yeshua's appearance to him on the road to Damascus was a sovereign act which he did not deserve—an act which drew him to the truth and brought him to genuine, saving faith. He came to realize that his physical lineage was of no eternal value apart from the gift of faith.

Jacob eventually learns the same thing when he wrestles with the Angel/Messenger of Adonai. Wounded in the very place which was symbolic of a man's strength (the thigh), Jacob (deceiver) whose name is changed to Israel (Contend with God? Upright before God? Prince of God?) is found worshiping while leaning (either on his bed or staff) at the end of his life. The “supplanter” limped the rest of his life—in his weakness he found God to be his strength.

Thus, God chooses those He will draw near to Him, those He will bless, not on the basis of their good works, but by His sovereign choice alone. As the Divine Potter, He has the right to do with His creation as He pleases, and to bless those He will bless. In fact, the amazing thing is that He chooses any at all, for none are worthy of His grace.

Such a truth, when fully received, works in us a deep humility. When we see ourselves as “Jacobs” and realize that in spite of our sinfulness God has chosen us as members of His own family, we are left only to bow before Him in adoration and thanksgiving, giving Him all the praise

and accepting none of the credit ourselves. All of the blessings we have come from His hand, and all of them are, in the final analysis, undeserved. Indeed, the reason we offer a *barachah* for every commandment we perform is to remind us that both the giving of the *mitzvot*, as well as the desire and strength we have to perform them, is another manifestation of God's love and grace.

Unfortunately, this sublime truth of God's sovereign election has been misunderstood and misused. Some have considered the doctrine so contrary to the need of mankind to be responsible to God, that they have pretended it does not exist in Scripture. Others have argued that if such a teaching is allowed to stand, it will offer a platform for people to “live like the devil” since one's actions are not the basis for God's blessing.

This was the very argument that Paul's objectors brought when he taught them about God's sovereign grace (Rom 5:19-6:2). When he said, “God forgives a person and brings him into close fellowship with Him only on the basis of His grace, and not on the basis of the person's good deeds,” the people responded, “well, if we were to take your teaching to its logical end, then you would be saying to us that we can live however we want—doing good works or living in sin makes no difference!” Actually, this kind of thinking is not uncommon in some circles, where the popular perspective is “I'm not perfect, I'm just forgiven.” Of course, this is true of all of us, but the perspective is wrong. Our perspective ought to be “I want to be perfect because I've been forgiven.” The idea that God's grace stands separate from His requirements of holiness is not the teaching of the Scriptures either. In fact, God's grace enables a person to grow in holiness, and this growth is one of the sure proofs that God has given His grace. For Paul, the infusion of faith into the heart of God's chosen ones produces a love for Him and His Torah which inevitably shows itself in doing what He commands. His Torah (“instruction”) becomes our delight, and we find in His ways the joy of life itself.

All of this is, admittedly, full of mystery. How can we look at the events of life, some of which are full of grief and sorrow, and keep on believing that God is in control? How can we see incidents of anguish and still believe that God's plan is being unfolded, that He is in control, and that all of these events, both those of great joy and deep sorrow, are ultimately for His glory and the means for the completion of His plan to conclude all things in Yeshua? We can maintain this only on the basis of faith, for we cannot find a rationale explanation that satisfies. Faith lays hold of that which we cannot see with the eyes of human understanding. Faith admits that something is true because God has said it is, when all of our emotions and thoughts lead us to the contrary.

Our *haftarah* portion (Isaiah 46:3-11) gives us the answer:

“Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, And all the remnant of the house of Israel, You who have been borne by Me from birth, And have been carried from the womb; Even to your old age, I shall be the same, And even to your graying years I shall bear you! I have done it, and I shall carry you; And I shall bear you, and I shall deliver you.”

This is a statement of God's commitment to His chosen ones, those who have relationship with Him through the covenant. But it can only be received by faith, for the promise is for the future and one which, therefore, can be seen only by eyes of faith. Do you see the argument of the Almighty here? He was the one who carried us from the very time of our birth, from the womb. He sustained us when we could never have sustained ourselves. And He promises to be with us even to old age, when, once again, we may not be able to care for ourselves. He has promised to carry us, to bear

us, to deliver us. That is His promise—we must trust Him to keep it.

Somehow, Isaac understood this whole scenario, for even when it was plain to him that he had blessed Jacob rather than Esau, he did not withdraw his blessing, but allowed it to remain, apparently, because he had been given spiritual insight that this was what God intended. He trusted God for the outcome of what looked like a mistake, but clearly was not. Thus, our Apostolic section simply states: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come." May our faith be strengthened to trust in God's all encompassing care.