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**The Bialystoker Synagogue
Parshat HaShavua sheet**

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

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Parshat Toldot

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Latest time for Kriyat Shma – 9:22

WITH DEATH DO US APART!

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

After a debilitating stroke, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Jerusalem, continued to say a weekly mussar shmues (ethical sermon) at the yeshiva. Hundreds of students strained to hear the brilliant words of wisdom that were peppered with anecdotes and aphorisms that shed new light on the age-old words of sages of yore. But one Parshas Toldos, the Rosh Yeshiva stunned his audience as he opened his remarks. “Ich gai shtarben!” (I am going to die!) he announced. In a raspy voice, he repeated the words over and over again. “Ich gai shtarben!” The students’ faces turned ashen. They were not sure whether or not to summon ambulances and medical teams when he suddenly stopped, smiled, and finished his thought, “that is exactly what Esav (Esau) told his brother Yaakov (Jacob) in this week’s portion!” Indeed, the transaction in which Esau gives up his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup was preceded by those very words. “Behold I am going to die,” cried Esav, “so why do I need my birthright?” (Genesis 25:30)

The thought of death was a catalyst in Esav’s decision to rid himself of the birthright and its responsibilities. But why? Everyone dies. However, what did the ultimate end have to do with Esav’s decision? Why did it play a role in deciding whether or not to trade in the birthright for a cup of lentil soup? Could Esav not just as easily responded to Jacob’s offer in the following manner: “Behold, the birthright carries too much responsibility. What do I need it for?” What, however, does the concept of death have to do with it?

A student of the Telshe Yeshiva once related the following story: An airplane carrying Dovid, a Telshe Yeshiva student, back to Cleveland began experiencing severe turbulence. The young man became quite nervous, but after seeing that his own Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, was sitting in front of him, he felt secure. “After all,” thought the young man, “with such a tzadik (righteous man) on board, what possibly could go wrong?” Suddenly the captain’s voice was heard over the intercom. “We are experiencing some difficulty with the plane’s hydraulic system and may be forced to make an emergency landing. Everyone please return to your seats, fasten your seatbelts, and follow the instructions given by your flight attendants.” Dovid quickly leaned forward toward his Rebbe. “Perhaps we are in danger. I have a Tehillim in my carry-on luggage. Are there any particular Psalms or prayers should I recite?” Quickly, Rav Gifter reassured the young man, and suggested to him a few appropriate Psalms. Then he urged him to quickly buckle up and prepare for landing. His advice was interrupted by shouts coming from a frantic passenger who sat next to Dovid. “Stewardess, quick! Get over here! Make me a double scotch on the rocks. Make it Johnny Walker Blue Label! Better make it fast, and better make it good, ’cause it may be my last drink before I die!”

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin, explains that the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos tells us do repent one day before our death. (Avos 2:15). Obviously, those of us who do not know when that day is to arrive must reflect and ask pardon daily. But the catalyst of serious reflection and sobriety is the very thought of the final moment – death. Its approach should shake us if not wake us into teshuvah. Esav’s approach is disturbingly different: I will cast away any vestige of responsibility or spirituality, because, after all, tomorrow I may die. His catalyst of Epicureanism is our cause for stoic concern.

And so for a bowl of lentil soup, a cocktail of craving gulped down in a moment of passion, Esav abandons his world of eternity. And the motivating factor behind his faux pas should have inspired him to seek the meaning of life. A question that we must all ask ourselves, when we stare at the prospect of gloom or wait for its imminent arrival, do we drink or do we think?

Esav's Potential

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

"And the children crushed within her..." (Bereishit, 25:22)

And [the children] crushed: When she would pass by entrances of places of Torah study of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would run and toss about to go out of his [mother's womb]... when she would pass by entrances of idol worship Esav would toss about to go out... (Rashi, Bereishit, 25:22, sv.)

The behavior of Esav in the womb is very difficult to understand. The Midrash seems to imply that Esav was evil from the time that he was a fetus. The commentaries point out a problem with this Midrash; they bring sources that the *yetzer hara* (negative inclination) only enters a person from the time he was born, yet according to this Midrash, Esav already seemed to have a strong *yetzer hara* in the womb!

Rav Nosson Weiss answers this by closely analyzing Rashi's words - he only says that Esav wanted to go towards the places of idol worship, but he does not say what Esav wanted to do there. This means that Esav had an inborn inclination towards places of evil, yet it would be up to him when he grew up to use that inclination in a constructive way. The most obvious positive way that he could do this would be to destroy such places, rather than be spiritually destroyed by them. Thus, we see that Esav was not evil from the womb, rather he had a natural leaning which could be used for the good or for the bad. Indeed, a careful analysis of the Rabbinic sources describing Esav's early life demonstrates that he did indeed possess great ability in fighting evil. The Torah describes the young Esav as a "man who knew how to trap". The Midrash says that one interpretation of these words is that he would trap criminals with his mouth; they would deny their involvement in a crime and he would trick them into admitting the truth. The Targum Yonasan on the same verse makes an even more dramatic revelation - that Esav actually killed the leader of the idol worshippers, Nimrod. Thus, he evidently had a talent in destroying evil. Had Esav continued applying his natural attraction to evil positively he could surely have achieved greatness and fulfilled the role that Yitzchak desired for him. Instead he allowed himself to be overcome by the immorality that he encountered and degenerated into an evildoer of the worst kind.

The Midrash tells us that a very different persona in the Prophets shared a similar inclination to Esav - the great King David. God sent the Prophet Shmuel to anoint David as King, but Shmuel saw that David had a red complexion. The color red represents an inclination to kill, and when Shmuel saw that David has this leaning, he feared that he would be a murderer like Esav. God reassured him that David would apply this inclination in the correct way and use it to kill when Jewish law permits it, such as to defend the nation when it is attacked.

We have seen how Esav's natural leaning towards evil did not mean that it was inevitable that he would be a sinful person, but that when he grew up he applied his free will in the wrong way. This teaches an important lesson with regards to how a person develops his character traits. Every trait can be applied in a positive or negative way; one can choose to use this trait for selfish reasons or he can channel it in a positive way to perform God's will.

Midstream Adjustment

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

In Parshat Toldot, Isaac wants to give the special "birthright" blessing to his son Esav. Rebecca, however, knows prophetically that Esav is undeserving of such a position, so she has Esav's twin brother Jacob disguise himself and receive the blessing instead.

Afterwards, when Isaac realized the switcheroo - that he had indeed blessed Jacob - he began to tremble greatly. Isaac trembled even more than he had years earlier at the *Akeida*, when he was bound on the Altar ostensibly to be slaughtered.

Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz explains why Isaac trembled so greatly. It's because he realized that for all these years, he had incorrectly judged Esav as being worthy of Jewish leadership. All his hopes and dreams for Esav would now go unfulfilled. It was a shock to Isaac's system, having to adjust to the new reality - the truth as it now became known.

Let's try to appreciate how shocking this could be. Imagine you were living in the Soviet Union during the mid-20th century, as a card-carrying member of the Communist party. You read volumes of Marxist ideology, and believed all the propaganda that Communism will ultimately liberate humanity. But then, the Communist experiment proved a failure, and the Soviet empire broke apart amidst a flood of capitalistic spirit. How crushed you are!

Yet will you be willing to admit that you'd been wrong all this time? All of us, at one time or another, find ourselves clinging to an old position, even when we know it's wrong. We have so much invested that it's painful to admit our mistake. But we need to realize that it's even more painful to go through life repeating that same mistake.

In this parsha, Isaac understands clearly that it was God's will that Jacob be blessed. Even at an old age, Isaac is able to change, to grow, and to move forward with the new reality.

Beyond Mediocrity

by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

In this week's Torah portion, we see that while Esau is a man of violent nature, Jacob is very much his opposite. The Sages tell us that even in the womb, when Rebecca passed a Temple of idols, Esau would be pushing to get out, and when she passed a place of Torah study, Jacob did the same. This is not necessary literal, but the point is clear - from their very conception, Esau was pulled toward evil and Jacob towards good.

But how can that be? Surely free will is the cornerstone of Jewish philosophy! How can these two boys be held responsible for their actions if they were programmed in this way from day one?

The answer is clear. Each of us faces different challenges. Some are born with an angry disposition. Some are born with a sensual nature. Some are born with a nature that yearns for money. Some are born lazy. For each human being the test is different. That's why we cannot compare, nor can we judge. Who are we to know the challenges with which another is faced?

Esau was born with a violent nature. His challenge in life was to subdue it, to harness his passion, and channel it into bringing positive change to the world. He would use his anger in the spiritual battle against evil. Use his passion to bring others to truth. He was not forced to walk down a path of murder and debauchery. It was a path he very much chose for himself.

That's fine for Esau, but what of Jacob? Where was his test? Jacob's test was much more subtle in nature. The challenge of the math genius is whether he will push himself to his fullest potential, or be satisfied with being just one step ahead of the crowd. I can't help but feel when I see a rabbi who was brought up in a Torah society, whether he would be the same person if his background had been less sheltered. Greatness lies not in where you get, but in how far you come. The destination doesn't matter as much as the journey.

To become a righteous person - after having that nature from birth and being brought up in Isaac's holy home - was no great challenge for Jacob. The question was whether he was going to become more than that. Would he going to strive for greatness instead of just goodness? Jacob could have settled for mediocrity in the same way as his brother settled for immorality. And had he done so, his mistake would have been equal to Esau's. Set your sights high in life. That's why you're here.

All's Well That Ends Well

By Rabbi Stewart Weiss

Everyone loves a person of action, a go-getter, a creative self-starter. Avraham and Sarah certainly qualified, traveling the world to spread the word of One G-d. Yakov was also quite an activist, making bold and decisive moves when the situation called for it. Yitzchak, however, seems to be passive in the extreme. He's dragged to the *akeida*, dragged to the *chuppa*, manipulated by his wife Rivka and his twin sons. He even lives in a place called "Gerar," which means "dragged".

One of the few instances where Yitzchak *does* take direct action is when he re-digs the wells his father Avraham had dug, after the Plishtim decided to seal them up and cover them with sand. Yet, when it comes time to name the wells, Yitzchak chooses the exact same names his father had used. Is this yet another sign of his reluctance to take independent action?

I suggest something else is going on here. Consider: A well, or oasis, in the middle of the desert is an absolute G-d-send. The weary traveler, thirsting for water, is overjoyed to find a place to quench his thirst. He doesn't care who owns the well, or what the cost of a drink is; he knows that he cannot drink sand. Without water he will die.

The insane decision of the Plishtim (read: Palestinians) to seal the wells is clearly an expression of extreme, suicidal anti-Semitism. But it is more than that. It is also a desire to hide the evidence, to try and obliterate the Jewish connection to that spot. How similar our enemies of today to our enemies then! Not only do they wage war against us, they desperately try to deny our connection to our land. They destroy antiquities, burn down synagogues, change the names of Biblical sites. The arch-terrorist Arafat had the audacity to declare, "In all their digging since 1967, the Jews haven't uncovered a single artifact connecting them to Jerusalem." The infamous Wakf declares that there never was a *Bet HaMikdash* - Temple - in Jerusalem.

So now we understand why Yitzchak re-names the wells with the same names Avraham used. He wants to reverse the insidious plans of the Plishtim and re-establish the historical connection of *Am Yisrael* to *Eretz Yisrael*. Despite their persistent efforts to rewrite history, our enemies cannot obscure the fact that this is our Land, and nobody else's.

We can be passive about many things; but *Eretz Yisrael* is not one of them.

“Yitzchak entreated Hashem on behalf of his wife because she was barren. Hashem answered his entreaties, and Rivka, his wife, conceived” (25:21)

Though both Yitzchak and Rivka prayed for a child, the posuk says that Hashem responded to the prayers of Yitzchak. Rashi explains that the prayer of a righteous person whose parents were also righteous cannot be compared to the prayer of a righteous person whose parents were wicked. That is why Yitzchak's prayers were answered before Rivka's. A good analogy to this concept is that a person is more likely to give a business deal to his friend's son ahead of a competitor who he does not know at all. If a person is close to Hashem, then his children's petitions to Hashem will have a better chance of getting through. One lesson that we can learn from this story is that if we work on improving ourselves and becoming closer to Hashem, we can help our children in the future because we can ensure that their prayers will be answered in their time of need many years in the future.

“And afterwards, his brother emerged, and his hand was grasping Eisav's heel, and he named him Yaakov. Now Yitzchak was sixty years old when she gave birth to them” (25:26)

Rashi said that Yaakov was given his name by either Hashem or Yitzchak as a description of how he was holding on to Eisav's heel when they were born. Why is the heel so significant that it became the origin of Yaakov's name? The heel is the bottom of the body and it thereby represents the end of something. Yaakov's legacy to his descendants was to always have the end in mind and to make choices in life based on what will be best for a person in the long run. A Jew always has the future in mind - the next generation, the next world, and the ultimate reward that he will receive. Unlike Eisav, who gives in to the temptation of each moment, we recognize that there are consequences to our actions and that there will one day be a reckoning for our choices. The heel symbolizes this foresight that is meant to be the hallmark of a Jew. It also represents the fact that Yaakov's descendants will remain standing at the end of history and their commitment to Hashem will ultimately be vindicated. No matter how much the world tries to destroy us, we will always be here.

“Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your offspring will I give all these lands, and establish the oath that I swore to Avraham your father” (26:3)

Rashi explains that the word **האל** is the same as the word **האלה** and both mean "these." Nevertheless, it is still a strange word. Why is the alternative form used in this context? The Torah uses a word which can also be read as the name of Hashem in connection with Eretz Yisrael. By referring to Eretz Yisrael as **האל הארצות**, the posuk alludes to the fact that Eretz Yisrael is the land of Hashem. When a person lives in Eretz Yisrael, he is closer to Hashem. There are special laws that only apply in Eretz Yisrael. Accordingly, the events and status of the Land should be on our mind and the welfare of its inhabitants should always be our concern. The Torah connects Hashem's name with Eretz Yisrael to teach us to value the Land and how important it must be to us.

“They said: We have seen clearly that Hashem has been with you, so we said: Please, let there be an oath between us, between us and you, and let us make a treaty with you” (26:28)

The story of Yitzchak's interactions with Pelishtim is very reminiscent of the relationship between Jews and the nations throughout history. As Yitzchak tells Avimelech, the rest of the world hates the Jews, but they still come to connect with us because they see that we are successful. Any desire for closer relations is merely out of self-interest. Avimelech says that “we have seen that Hashem has been with you.” How did he know this? In Parshas Vayeishev, the Torah describes how Potiphar recognized that Hashem was with Yosef. Rashi there comments that Potiphar heard Hashem's name on Yosef's lips all the time. The same can be applied to Yitzchak here. Despite his financial windfall, Yitzchak always attributed his wealth to the blessings of Hashem. When a pious person becomes a successful businessman, he gives the credit to Hashem. We should emulate Yitzchak and not be ashamed of our Jewishness when speaking to others. Rather than hide our beliefs, we should be proud of them and express our convictions that everything is in the hands of Hashem.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Praying For Redemption, Big And Small

By Rabbi Moshe Hauer

The inevitable Jewish experience of antisemitism, the longest hatred, has returned with a vengeance. It has expressed itself in a multi-front war against Israel, in innumerable political and legal forums, and in frightening acts of hatred everywhere from Abu Dhabi to Amsterdam to the streets of America.

The images of the heroic and beautiful soldiers of *Tzahal* killed in recent battles, along with the recently confirmed shocking murder of UAE Chabad *shliach*, Rabbi Zvi Kogan, are deeply painful reminders of the ongoing price we pay for this plague. We hope and pray that their families find strength and comfort.

“For it was not only one who intended to destroy us, but rather in each and every generation they attempt to destroy us and the Holy One, Baruch Hu, saves us from their hands.” The continuity of this plague has its roots in the Torah readings of these weeks, where Yishmael’s claim to our land combines with Eisav’s opposition to our existence denies us peace. Yet we pray at every opportunity: in every *Amidah* and every time we *bentsch* after meals for the ultimate joy of complete redemption. That final stage is symbolized in this week’s *parashah* by Yaakov’s grand entrance into the world while gripping Eisav’s heel, indicating that while Eisav will initially be the one to dominate the world, Yaakov’s descendants will eventually prevail, fulfilling our mission to uplift mankind with the knowledge and way of G-d, delivering peace to the world and appreciation of our people.

Yet, even as we eagerly await the ultimate redemption, we must deploy our prayers in the here and now in the face of our daily challenges, as praying for redemption is not limited to pleas for the complete *geulah*, for the times of *Mashiach*. As we learn in the *parashah*, for Yaakov and his descendants the voice raised in prayer, the *Kol Yaakov*, is our counterpart to the hands and material efforts of others, the *yedei Eisav*, such that anything we work to achieve must also be pursued with meaningful prayer. Our work to combat the antisemitism that is endemic to our non-redeemed world includes everything from the IDF’s heroics to political lobbying, to security cameras, training volunteers, and hiring guards, but does not start or stop there. We need to *daven*, to seek G-d’s help.

And we do. Three times each day we ask Hashem to take note of our suffering and join us in our struggles. *Re’eh na b’anyeynu v’riva riveinu*. And while in this blessing we ask the Redeemer of Israel to speedily redeem us, this is not a request for *geulah* writ large, for the ultimate and complete redemption, but, as Rashi teaches us (Megillah 17b), it is a plea for little bits and rays of *geulah*, for protection and relief from the daily afflictions and struggles endemic to our unredeemed world.

Typically, it is the requests for health and wealth (*Refa’einu* and *Barech Aleinu*) found in the daily *Amidah* that command much of our attention, consistent with our investment of effort in these two areas of life here and now. We would do well to similarly elevate the attention we focus on the preceding blessing of *Re’eh na b’anyeynu*...

Study it. Dwell on it. Share with G-d our angst and our struggles. Pray for those bits and rays of redemption from the ongoing cuts and bruises of our *galus*. And never stop praying for the ultimate *geulah*.

Torah Jews Are People Too

By Dr. Sheldon Stern

I befriended Dr. Seymour Syna in the late 80's. He was in his fifties at the time and had recently become a "Baal Tshuvah" after a remarkable Yad Hashem story. I put quotation marks around Baal Tshuvah because Dr. Syna, he had a PhD in English and History, described himself as a modern-day Karaite who rejected all Rabbinic teachings. He said, "All I need to understand the Torah is my Hertz Chumash." It was Shabbos Parshas Toldos and we were together at the Stanton St. Synagogue when Syna offered, "Eisav got a raw deal. He was a wonderful son to his father, his mother abused him and his brother stole his rights. How can you blame him for hating Yaakov?." Sans Gemoras and Midrashim that's probably a reasonable spin, but I'd like to stand up for my namesake.

The Gemara says that the Jewish community in Alexandria Egypt was sued for mega-drachmas. The Torah relates that Hashem instructed Moshe to "ask" the people to "borrow" valuables from their former masters. Of course, they were never returned; and now the Egyptian descendants wanted reparations. A clever Jew stepped up, "If we accept your claim then you must accept our counter-claim, millions of Jews who worked as slaves for 210 years with no recompense." That argument won the day, but still, one might ask, "Why did Hashem instruct the Jews to borrow these goods?" They could've marched right in and demanded everything. They even knew where these precious items were hidden, having seen them during the "Plague of Darkness." Their former taskmasters were in no position nor frame of mind to protest." Rabbi Zelikowitz answered this question with a word from the Vilna Gaon. The Egyptians used the word "borrow" to prove Jewish mendacity. "See those Shylocks, they knew that they had no intention of giving back what they took." So the Gaon set the record straight. The Israelites didn't become slaves conventionally, i.e. they weren't purchased, but rather Pharaoh and his ministers tricked them into servitude by appealing to innate Jewish civic pride. They gave our Zeides the "opportunity" to prove their loyalty to the Fatherland by building Pisom and Ramses. As the Midrash teaches this was just a trap to ensnare them. Therefore, it was fitting for Hashem to match tit-for-tat and tell his children to use an ambiguous term in dealing with their tormentors.

So now we return to our Parsha. Eisav realized that Yaakov had been given the much-coveted blessings and lashed out,(Gen 27:36) "My brother was aptly named because he cheated me (Vayakiveini) these two times." On another Shabbos Toldos at Stanton St., some other fellow spoke at the Kiddush and he tapped into his inner Syna, "I found the Parsha very nice, but Jacob should have found a way to get the blessings without lying." So we use Rabbi Z's example as a model. Eisav plays the aggrieved son and brother but not so fast. Yitzchok, who had already ceded the Brochos to Yaakov thinking he was Eisav, now asked Eisav for his identity. He proudly answered, "I'm Eisav your Bechor." But this wasn't true, at least not as far as his father was concerned. The blessings that Yitzchok intended for Eisav were predicated on the notion that his elder son would carry on the family legacy ie that Eisav still held the birthright. So our poor, little Eisav was not above pulling the wool over his father's eyes. Sorry Syna, save your pity for those who are truly deserving.

There are two points that we can extrapolate. First, we recognize the perfection of Hashem's justice. We're told that during "Makkos Bechoros" there was no house without death. Seemingly that's hyperbole. There must have been homes without a Bchor. So the Midrash tells us that there was no mistake. The Midrash says that the Egyptians were steeped in lewdness and so many children died who were only known by their mothers as being firstborns. But it's the second point that I'd like to focus on. Why are there so many Synas who are so quick to cast aspersions on Yaakov? Let's consider the fellow who took exception to Yaakov's "deception." Why didn't he look at the whole picture? There's a tendency, particularly among the non-observant to hold the Orthodox to a higher standard. Surely, we have to understand that we represent Hashem and His Torah but that doesn't give others the right to judge us unfairly.

Let me share a story. In 1995 I was a mentor in the Partners -In-Torah Program on the LES. One week the Rabbi in charge couldn't attend so he asked me to speak in his place. I spoke about Shabbos and said that the day was special, so much so, that the Gemara says if a gentile keeps Shabbos he's Chayav Misah. One lady in the audience laced into me, "Do you think that's fair?" I repeated this to the Rabbi the following week and he assailed me for being insensitive, i.e. that woman was married to a Goy(I didn't know this at the time but months later I met the couple at, you guessed it the Stanton St. Synagogue). I understand that we have to tread lightly with the disenfranchised, but there are limits. It's not uncommon to hear irreligious Jews use our frumkeit against us, "I'm not religious so I can say or do that but what's your excuse?" First off, the fact that they're not observant isn't a Heter to sin, and all too often since they aren't familiar with Halacha their accusations are unwarranted. Yes, we have to always try to make a Kiddush Hashem but sometimes we need to be cut some slack. "Wonderama" (Google it.)would end its Sunday morning program with the song, "Kids Are People Too." I would add, "Torah Jews Are People Too."