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The Maimonides School Parsha Newsletter

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תולדות

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Choices

By Eitan Orkaby

ויהי רעב בארץ מלכד הרעב. אברהם. "And there was famine in the land, besides for the first famine that was in the days of אברהם. יצחק went to אבימלך, king of the פלשתים, גרר." "הראשון אשר היה בימי אברהם וילך יצחק אל אבימלך מלך פלשתים גרר." The way the פסוק phrases the famine, it seems that it was the second famine ever, the first in the time of אברהם. Why is there a famine right now? And what is the פסוק adding saying that the first famine was in the times of אברהם?

The בעל הטורים makes a connection between the famine and what just happened a פסוק ago, עשו selling his בכורה. According to the בעל הטורים, the famine was caused by עשו when he gave up his בכורה. It is a מדה כנגד מדה, עשו gives up his בכורה for food, and then there is a lack thereof.

The רמב"ן says that the reason the famine was compared to the first famine in the times of אברהם is because when אברהם went to מצרים, he became famous. יצחק wanted to immediately go to מצרים, to follow in his father's footsteps, but ה' had to tell him "אל תרד מצרימה". When אברהם went down to מצרים it was a hint to what was going to happen in the future, his children would go to מצרים. However, when יצחק went to אבימלך מלך פלשתים, it would hint towards the גלות of בבל, which would afflict the Jews much later in history. Additionally, when יצחק meets אבימלך, before anyone took רבקה, אבימלך commands his nation to not touch רבקה, which was a sign of great respect during that time. Later on, while יצחק dug up the wells of אברהם, the פלשתים suddenly go back on their word and begin covering up the wells. Finally, after fighting over multiple wells, יצחק makes a well which no one will conflict over. This connects to בבל because there was a famine, during which בבל tells בני ישראל to leave and go back to ישראל, but then don't let בני ישראל build the בית המקדש. Finally after many decades, בבל let בני ישראל build the בית המקדש. This shows the connection between גלות בבל and the second famine.

We learn from the consequences of these choices, that the voices may seem small in the moment, but are consequential for the future. עשו only thought about the present and didn't think about what would happen if he sold his בכורה. This מעשה led to another famine, which would, in turn, lead to גלות בבל. We also learn that what we do influences what our children do, which is the value of סימן לבנים. פרשת תולדות is all about choices that we make and the consequences of those choices. May ה' guide us to make the right choices, and may we be an אור לגויים, a light unto the nations.

Taking Advantage of Our Spiritual Opportunities

By Meira Banks

In פרשת תולדות, עשו comes home from the fields exhausted and famished. יעקב is cooking עדשים - red lentil soup. "וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל-יַעֲקֹב הֲלֵעִיטָנִי נָא מִן-הָאֲדָם הָאֲדָם הַזֶּה כִּי עֵיפִי." And עשו asks יעקב to give him the soup because he (עשו) is very tired (בראשית כ"ה:ל). יעקב asks עשו to sell him his rights as firstborn in exchange for the food and עשו agrees. Through this exchange, יעקב acquired עשו's birthright. עשו refers to this soup as "הָאֲדָם הָאֲדָם" "very red food." The תורה tells us that עשו acquired the name אדם as a result of this interaction. אדם is derived from the term אדום, עשו's term for the lentil soup. Of course, this raises a question. Why is this aspect of the interaction so crucial? Why does the תורה seek to memorialize עשו's reference to יעקב's soup as red?

One unique explanation is provided by the רמב"ן. He argues that, in fact, there is no specific significance to the color of יעקב's soup. The תורה does not intend to memorialize this detail of the incident. Instead, the תורה wishes to communicate an important message about עשו. עשו was not fit to be יצחק's spiritual heir. He was completely absorbed in the material world. This caused him to sell his birthright for a bowl of red lentils. In order to accomplish this objective, the תורה gives עשו a name that recalls this incident. The name, אדום, accomplishes this goal. This name is designed to recall this incident.

But why was עשו willing to sell his birthright to יעקב? רש"י offers an explanation. He explains that the birthright was essentially the right to become a כהן. Before יעקב disrespected ראובן in his time of mourning, the role of כהן would have gone to the firstborn children. עשו was not interested in this position. עשו recognized that becoming a כהן includes various restrictions. Violation of these restrictions is, in some instances, punished with death. עשו was not interested in this burden.

רמב"ן offers an alternate explanation. His explanation is based upon עשו's own words. עשו tells יעקב he will sell him the birthright. He explains that he is destined to die. Therefore, the birthright will not provide him any benefit. רמב"ן begins by explaining עשו's comment that he is destined to die. He infers that עשו lived a dangerous life. He constantly looked for thrills and placed himself in dangerous situations. This was the root of עשו's interest in hunting. עשו's personal goal was to maximize the intensity of pleasure and excitement in his life. He did not expect to live a long life. He didn't even expect to outlive his father. רמב"ן further explains that the birthright would only become significant with יצחק's death. Therefore, עשו did not expect to ever benefit from the birthright. עשו sold it to יעקב because it was of little value to him and because he was completely focused on his material existence. He was not at all concerned with eternal existence.

What we can take away from the actions of עשו is how we can feel about becoming 'ה's heir. עשו only cared about materialistic things and did not want to become a כהן. As בני ישראל we can learn from this to take every opportunity given to us to increase our spirituality and become closer to 'ה.

פרשה Lessons From This Week's

By Yakir Samuels

In this week's פרשה, פרשת תולדות, two nations are born: עשו and יעקב. We see them fight with each other throughout this whole פרשה. One day, עשו comes back from hunting and is starving. It happens to be that יעקב is cooking lentils and עשו asks if he could have some. יעקב says yes, under one condition, that עשו gives יעקב his birthright. "וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מִכֹּרָה כִּיּוֹם אֶת־בְּכֹרְתְךָ לִי:" "Yaakov said, "sell as this day your birthright to me"" (בראשית כ"ה:ל"א). Why does it say "this day"? Why not just "sell me your birthright"?

One answer is because it was אברהם's funeral that day. We know this since יעקב was serving lentils. רש"י explains that lentils are a mourner's food because they are round like a wheel, and mourning (sorrow) is a wheel that revolves in the world (it touches everyone sooner or later as a revolving wheel touches every spot in turn). עשו was the only one not at his grandfather's funeral because he was hunting in the field. How could someone be so insensitive to not show up to their own grandfather's funeral? That's why יעקב says "כיום", because he wanted the birthright on that very day, the day of אברהם's funeral. In addition to this insensitive act, he offers his birthright, one of the most valuable things that someone could have, in exchange for some soup. We can learn from this that we should be present for our family and not get distracted by materialistic things.

Later in the פרשה, there is a famine in the land and יצחק wants to go down to Egypt just as אברהם did in his time when there was a famine. ה' says "אַל־תֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִם שָׁכֵן בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ", "do not go down to Egypt; remain in the land which I tell you". ה' then blesses יצחק just as he did to אברהם. "וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ", "I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs" (בראשית כ"ו:ד)

It's interesting that when ה' says "as numerous as the stars", does He actually mean that? When you look up at the sky, only five thousand stars are visible to the naked eye. But all around the world, there are many more, so when ה' says this, He means the number of stars in the sky multiplied. On a more personal note, this past Tuesday I attended the Israel rally in DC. Everyone dropped what they were doing to come together in solidarity for Israel. That was the most Jews I've ever seen in one place. Jews from all around the world joined together to support Israel and to show everyone that we are present as the Jewish people. I recognized here that there truly were many more Jews than I could see visible stars in the sky. May we all continue to realize what's bigger than us at the personal level and come together and join on a national level.

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