



The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Toldot

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Listen to My Voice

By Aaron Kuperman

שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם (כְּתִיב גִּיִּים) בְּבֶטֶןְךָ וּשְׁנֵי לְאָמִים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֹאִם מִלֵּאִם יִצְאֻן גֵּרֵב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר

Two nations are (struggling) within you. Two separate peoples shall come from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other. And the older shall serve the younger (Bershit 25:23)

Parsha Toldot opens with Hashem explaining the prenatal discord between Yitzhak and Rivkah's twins, Esav and Yaakov. The bitter rivalry starts in utero and escalates to hatred when Yaakov tricks his father, Yitzhak, into giving him the blessings meant for Esav. Some sages, including Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, see this animosity as inevitable, comparing Esav's hatred of Yaakov to the relentless antisemitism the Jewish people have long endured.

Two themes—both presciently relevant to current events—stand out: First, is that conflicts faced by the Jewish people can lead to antisemitism. This is illustrated by the fraternal dispute that spirals into Esav's murderous intent and his plot to kill his brother Yaakov. Second is the motif of ‘voice’ (קוֹל), which recurs through the parsha as a potential solution to strife.

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם, *These are the generations of Yitzhak, son of Avraham* (25:19). So begins our parsha, setting the stage for the Jewish people's future. Yaakov, born second but clutching Esav's heel, will eventually ‘purchase’ the firstborn birthright from his brother Esav and usurp the blessings their father intended for his elder twin.

Amid their familial struggle, a famine afflicts Canaan. Hashem appears to Yitzhak, instructing him not to journey to Egypt but to stay in the land. Hashem will, in turn, bestow upon him blessings previously promised to Avraham because, amongst other deeds, *וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָהָם בְּקוֹלִי, Because Avraham listened to My voice* (26:5). (Yitzhak ends up staying close by, traveling to the area of Gerar, which is modern-day Gaza.)

Later, Yitzhak, now blind, instructs Esav to hunt game for him to eat, and in return, he will receive his father's “innermost” blessings. Rivkah overhears this and tells Yaakov, “Now, my son, listen to my voice.” She instructs him on how to deceive Yitzhak in order to receive the blessings himself. She assures him that no curse will befall him, repeating the words, *וְעַתָּה בְּנִי שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי, Listen to my voice* (27:8). Rivkah imparts these words three times in the parsha.

Her words, “my voice,” seem repetitive, as we would expect her to simply say, “listen to me.” Haamek Davar, an influential 19th-century commentator, explains that when Rivkah says “my voice” we are to understand that she is speaking on behalf of Hashem. This connection to ‘voice’ ties in perfectly with

Hashem's earlier blessings to Yitzhak and Avraham, *עָקַב אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַע אֶבְרָהָם בְּקוֹלִי*, *Because Avraham listened to My voice*. Now, examining Hashem's initial words to Rivkah about the warring nations within her womb, we can discern that Yaakov's path and Rivkah's role align with Hashem's plan.

But what can the Torah tell us about resolving this continuing conflict? Is there a solution to be found to the scourge of antisemitism? There may be a hint to us in the parsha.

Following Rivkah's instructions, Yaakov covers his hands and neck with animal skins so that he would feel hairy like his brother Esav. Although blind, Yitzhak is suspicious when his son returns so quickly with the food prepared and tries to deduce whether this is really his son Esav. As Yaakov draws closer to his father, Yitzhak feels him and wonders the famous words, *הֲקוֹל יַעֲקֹב וְהַיָּדִים יְדֵי עֵשָׂו*, *The voice (קוֹל) is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav (27:22)*.

According to Rabbi Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, it's from these words the midrash teaches that "As long as the voice of Yaakov is heard in houses of prayer and halls of study, the hands of Esav will not be able to destroy the Jewish people."

But how does the midrash derive this? Examining Yitzhak's words we see that the word 'voice' (קוֹל) appears again; it is used twice in this sentence. But something is strange. The first 'voice,' *הֲקוֹל*, is written without a vav, while the second קוֹל is written with a vav. This certainly requires an explanation.

Rabbi Mirvis cites the Vilna Gaon, who explains that, "Because the first word 'kol' is missing a vav, it is indicating that something is absent. The voice is not as loud as it might have been. 'Kol' has become 'kal'—light. The power of the voice has gone. It is in such circumstances, God forbid, that *יְדֵי עֵשָׂו*, *the hands of Esav*, can be powerful."

He explains that "time and again, we have needed to fight for our very survival on the battlefield, but in addition to doing that, there is another source of great Jewish strength. It lies in the kol Yaakov, the sound of Jacob." It is this Kol, the Jewish voice, that cannot be 'light' if we are to have true power and defeat the enemy of antisemitism. We need to make our voices heard not only at home and in shuls but also in public, on university campuses, in the halls of congress, online, and across the world.

In *Bereshit* Hashem creates the entire world with just his voice. The Jewish people also have a voice. While we now also thankfully have the protection of the defense forces of the State of Israel, Hashem is telling us that if we are to win the fight against antisemitism, we need to stand up and use our strong voices as well.

Aaron & Becky recently joined the YIS community along with their three children: Ben, Sabina & Sam. Although we are relatively new members, the kehilah has been so welcoming we feel like we have been here for years.

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