

Parashat Toldot: Was Yitzchak Poor?

There is a lovely *machloket* (disagreement) between *Ibn Ezra* and the *Ramban* regarding Yitzchak's financial status. (You can find the discussion in ch.25 v.34).

The *Ibn Ezra* claims that Yitzchak was poor. He says:

"The proof is that Yitzchak loved Esav because he provided his basic needs. If food was plentiful in his father's home, then why would he have sold his birthright for soup? And if his father ate all sorts of delicacies, then why did he ask (Esav) to bring him fresh meat? And why did Yaakov not have elegant clothing? And why did his mother send him penniless when he went away, such that he asks God for "bread to eat and clothes to wear (28:20)?"

Some will comment about how Abraham was wealthy. In addition we read as to how Avraham bestowed his inheritance to Yitzchak (25:5). In addition ch.26 talks about Isaac as a wealthy farmer. *Ibn Ezra* responds:

"..As if one has never seen a man, wealthy in his youth who falls into poverty in his old age!"

Moreover:

"Those whose hearts are blind think that wealth is a great attribute of the righteous. Let Elijah refute that! And they continue to question: Why would God let Yitzchak be lacking in material wealth? Maybe they can answer why God allowed him to lose his eyesight!"

One senses that *Ibn Ezra* is worked up here. *Ibn Ezra* lead a particularly difficult life with many upheavals and travels. He certainly was not wealthy, and maybe – who knows – he identified with Yitzchak here. At the very least, he felt that (if I may quote *Tevye*...) it is no shame to be poor!

(The irony here is that of course, all the blessings of chapter 27 do invoke this-worldly material blessings:

- The agricultural – the dew of the heavens the fat of the land; abundant grain and wine.
- Power – Nations will be subservient to you; other People's will bow to you! - 27:28-9)

RAMBAN

The *Ramban* has a very different perspective:

"The text informs us that after his father's death 'God blessed Isaac his son.' (25:11) Now, where is his "blessing" if he lost all his father's wealth - 'And I will be with you, and I will bless you.' (26:3) (is there a Divine blessing) if he became rich but then became poor? If some of the righteous experience the financial legacy of the Evil (i.e. poverty), it

does not occur to those whom God has blessed... all the patriarchs were like kings, and foreign heads of State would come before them and make treaties with them¹... and if Isaac had bad luck and lost his father's wealth, how would they have said: 'We see evidently that God is with you!' (26:28)?"

The *Ramban* refuses to accept poverty in the case of Yitzchak or any of the Avot. God's blessings bestow material comfort, status and honour. *Ramban* also rejects as "laughable" the theory that Isaac had wealth (after Avraham's death) – then lost it (the birthright episode) – then gained wealth (ch.26 Yitzchak as a successful farmer) – and then lost it a second time (the Blessings episode.) "Who blinded his mind?" - he quips at *Ibn Ezra*!

For the *Ramban*, all the other details are resolved locally:

Esav sold his birthright for soup because it had no financial dimension, and his spiritually deaf personality failed to appreciate the role of the firstborn.

As for Yitzchak's love of hunted meat, the *Ramban* says "that barons and kings delight in this delicacy over all others. And regarding Yitzchak's request to Esav in particular that he should engage in the hunt, the *Ramban* remarks: "Esav would pander to his father by bringing him from the hunted food ... and (Yitzchak) wanted to benefit from it so that it would enhance the closeness between them."

Yaakov left home without wealth so that he could escape quickly and so that he would not become a target for attack as he travelled the highways.

And as regards Yaakov's lack of clothing, the *Ramban* answers that Yaakov lacked nothing! But he borrowed Esav's clothing as they had the smell of the "field," the camouflage that Yaakov needed in order to carry off the subterfuge of the Blessings.

IN SUMMARY

This is certainly a tough debate to settle. No side wins easily. But if we can return to the basic principles, it is certainly fascinating that the *Ramban* refuses to see a *Tzaddik* who is blessed by God, experiencing financial difficulties. The *Ramban* needs to see a correlation between the spiritual and the material. For the *Ibn Ezra*, the two are absolutely disconnected. A wanderer like *Eliyahu* who is given lodgings by a random stranger for years on end² can be the holiest person. There is no symmetry between the material fate of the Man of God and his spiritual status; they are two distinct realities.

¹ Each of the Avot are granted enormous respect by foreign Kings: Avraham with *Malkizedek* and *Avimelekh*. Yitzchak and *Avimelekh*. Yaakov and *Pharaoh*.

² The woman from *Tzafat Melachim* I 17:9,19-23.