



TORAH ACADEMY
of Bergen County

קול תורה

Parashat Toledot

2 Kislev 5779

November 10th, 2018

Vol. 28 No. 8

Food for Thought

by *Rabbi Shaya First*

Can a steak dinner really be so important? In the midst of Parashat Toledot, Yitzchak makes an ostensibly strange request of Eisav before blessing him. Yitzchak Avinu first asks him to go out to the field, and hunt for some game. Then *"Va'Asei Li Mat'amim Ka'Asher Ahavti VeHavi'ah Li VeOcheilah Ba'Avur Tevarechecha Nafshi BeTerem Amut,"* *"And [use that game] to make for me cooked delicacies in the style that I love, and bring them to me for me to eat, in order that my soul should bless you before I die."* (Bereishit 27:4) Why does Yitzchak find it so critical to make a request for expensive meat in this context? To compound the question, Radak (ibid.) comments that Yitzchak, who most commentators (save for Ibn Ezra) assume was affluent, asked for wild meat, because he felt that he would enjoy it more (and not because he could not afford his own meat). Why was it so critical that this meal be so tasty? Is this request for such a specific and luxurious type of steak connected to the historic Berachot that Yitzchak was soon going to deliver? A close look at the Mefarshim on our Parashah reveal a number of distinct answers to this burning question. Most authorities explain Yitzchak desired to ensure that the Berachot were transferred to his son in the most ideal manner possible. One approach, advanced by the sixteenth century Turkish commentator Rav Moshe Alshich, argues that Yitzchak attempted to ensure Eisav was deserving of the blessing, by providing him with the opportunity of performing the paramount Mitzvah of honoring his parents. By hunting and preparing the precise dish that Yitzchak was craving, Eisav's benefit from the Berachah would be guaranteed. The Alshich notes that since the blessing Yitzchak wanted to bestow upon Eisav was on focused on material benefit aplenty, Eisav's implementation of food from the physical world for a Mitzvah, was very fitting.

Malbim (ad loc.; see also HaEtav VeHaKabalah there), however, takes a different approach. He argues that the purpose of the lavish dinner was to establish a firm connection between Eisav and Yitzchak during the Berachah. Malbim writes that a Berachah is optimized when the person giving the blessing and the recipient feel very connected. Since Eisav went out of his way to prepare a meal for Yitzchak that he greatly enjoyed, Yitzchak felt a deep level of connection and appreciation for Eisav that

would otherwise have been unachievable. This broke down any remaining metaphysical separation between them, and maximized the effectiveness of the Berachah from Yitzchak to Eisav.

Rabbeinu Bachya, similar to the Malbim, emphasizes how the strength of a blessing could be enhanced through a meal, yet differs in his focus of specifically how such a meal would improve a blessing. He maintains that the Berachot transferred in our Parashah were in essence a subcategory of prophecy, as they pertained to the future of Eisav's descendants. In general, there are guidelines for the requisite mental state for someone to receive a prophecy. There is a principle that Ein HaShechina Shoreh Elah MiToch Simcha, that for the Divine presence to rest upon a person, they must be in a state of happiness. The paradigm of this concept can be found in Sefer Melachim, where the prophet Elisha, before prophesying, asked to a musician to play pleasant music for him so that he would be in a positive state of mind. By indulging in a delicious meal before blessing Eisav, Yitzchak ensured that he was in the ideal mental state for a Divine prophetic blessing, a true state of Simchah.

According to each of these approaches, Yitzchak's motive in asking for this delicious meal was not just to fill his stomach, but for a much more noble and spiritual purpose. Regardless of whether it was to give Eisav a chance to perform Kibbud Av Ve'Eim and be worthy of blessing, to form a strong bond with Eisav, or to enable Yitzchak Avinu to be in a joyful and focused state of mind to form a powerful connection with the Divine, this certainly was not a standard dinner. Rather, it was a meal eaten for a purpose.

Finally, the Chizkuni presents a unique understanding of the urgency of Yitzchak's Berachah. He notes that Yitzchak's dinner provides a fascinating contrast with Eisav's meal of lentils that he ate in exchange for his firstborn rights. That meal was eaten out in a barbarian and gluttonous manner (some Midrashim record that Eisav literally asked Yaakov to pour lentils down his throat), solely to fill Eisav's stomach, and at the great spiritual cost of the Bechorah. Chizkuni writes that Yitzchak's true motive in asking Eisav to hunt and prepare a meal was to provide him with an opportunity to rectify the manner in which he had consumed his meal at the outset of the Parashah. Yitzchak saw this as a prerequisite for bestowing the Berachot upon his son.

The contrast between the role food plays in Yitzchak's and Eisav's minds is reminiscent of a comment of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. As recorded in his posthumous work Festival of Freedom that one of the Torah's main goals for humankind is elevating our natural human instincts and desires, including eating. Rav Soloveitchik writes there that channeling the physical instincts and human limitations towards the service of God is a primary goal of the Torah. That is why Judaism puts a great

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emphasis on utilizing our eating for the purposes of the divine. In the words of the Rav himself, "I will tell you frankly that it is easy to go into a synagogue and pray for an hour with sincerity and dedication. But it is difficult to discipline one's body. Nonetheless, Judaism is interested in taking physiological functions stemming from natural, spontaneous and primitive drives in man and converting them into a service of the Almighty, into Avodah. 'In all your ways, know Him. (Prov. 3:6)' Find him not only when you are in synagogue on Yom Kippur for Ne'ilah; find him when you are in your office, your dining room, your bedroom, in public and in private life." Elevating our eating, with regards to both manner and purpose, is one of the responsibilities of a Jew. Yitzchak Avinu knew this, but Eisav still had to internalize this idea.

WHAT MAKES YOU, YOU?

by Menachem Kravetz ('20)

Parashat Toledot begins, "*Ve'Eileh Toledot Yitzchak Ben Avraham, Avraham Holid Et Yitzchak*", "And these are the generations of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham, Avraham fathered Yitzchak" (BeReishit 25:19). The final clause of this Pasuk seems to be superfluous. What is the point of stating that Yitzchak was the son of Avraham, only to once again mention that Avraham fathered Yitzchak?

One answer, given by a variety of Meforshim, is that Yitzchak Avinu looked exactly like Avraham Avinu. Everyone was able to see that Yitzchak was truly the son of Avraham due to their similar facial features. (Some people may have believed Avraham could not be Yitzchak's father due to the age gap between them.)

But why is it important that Avraham and Yitzchak looked exactly the same? What is the Torah really coming to teach? Is there a deeper meaning behind this repetitive formulation?

The Radak answers that the repetitive clauses show that Yitzchak shared the same values and qualities as Avraham. The Torah shows that Yitzchak was not only Avraham's son in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense as well. He embodied the same qualities as Avraham and walked in the ways of G-d, just as his father did.

Physical characteristics of human beings are, to a large extent, genetically determined. They cannot be changed easily, and they are also what people will inevitably first see when they encounter another individual. It is these features that make people look different, and, in a physical sense, make each person unique.

However, when someone interacts with another person, one delves deeper into the latter's psyche. They discover that one is not merely as shallow as their physical features, but also that the individual holds a set of values. These features reveal what influenced a person's development, and what makes the person unique on a spiritual level. Anyone is able to choose what kind of a

person they want to be, how to act in society, and how to behave in front of G-d. These values are always changing for the better, as people work on their Ahavat and Yirat Hashem, enhancing their own integrity through their continued spiritual development.

It is widely known that the Torah does not waste words--each word is important, and serves a purpose. The Radak reveals that physical features do not define an individual, but it is rather an individual's set of values that determine their personal identity. Everyone always has to work on their values, trying to become a better person. A person who strives to become the best person they can possibly be is truly able to gain a substantial identity. The Torah's seemingly repetitive formulation conveys this message.

When the Torah introduces Yitzchak, it does not just describe his physical features, but actually prioritizes his spiritual values. The Torah shows that Yitzchak Avinu had the same values as Avraham Avinu: he was a Tzaddik, he was Yashar, and he walked in the ways of G-d. The Torah prioritizes the values of people, and how important they are in defining a person in regards to their interactions with those around them and in their relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

YEVARECHECHA - WHO STARTS? A PLETHORA OF SEPHARDIC PRACTICES

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

One would think that if the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch rule in a specific manner, that it would be obvious that all Sephardic Jews would follow their ruling. Correct? Not necessarily, and not always. Sephardic Halachah is far more complex and nuanced. A prime example of this is the variety of Sephardic practices regarding whether the Kohanim or the Chazan begins Birkat Kohanim through the recitation of the word Yevarechecha.

Universal practice¹ among all Jews is for the Chazan to prompt the Kohanim with the words of the Birkat Kohanim. The simple explanation of this practice is that it helps the Kohanim stay on track and say the proper words (similar to the Ashkenazic practice for someone to prompt the Shofar blower with the note he is about to sound).

¹ *The Beit Yosef O.C. 128 s.v. V'Ha D'Amrinan insists that this is a custom and not a Torah requirement. The source of this Minhag, the Beit Yosef explains, is that the Torah instructs (BeMidbar 6:23) "Amor Lahem", tell the Kohanim to bless. The Beit Yosef explains that, on a Torah level, the words Amor Lahem teach that we prompt the Kohanim to bless by the pre-Birkat Kohanim announcement "Kohanim." This triggers the obligation for the Kohanim to recite their Berachah. The Minhag is that, in addition, the Chazan prompts the Kohanim with their blessing word by word.*

A Dispute between Maran and Rama

Both the Rambam² (Hilchot Tefilah 14:3) and Maran Rav Yosef Karo in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 128:13) rule that the Kohanim should recite Yevarechecha without waiting for the Chazan's prompt. The most straightforward explanation (as noted by the Beit Yosef O.C. 128, s.v. U'Shalaih Tzibbur and Mishnah Berurah 128:48) is that the Kohanim do not need to be kept on track for the first word. A second explanation of this approach is that it enables the Kohanim to begin the recitation of Birkat Kohanim as soon as possible after they complete reciting the blessing of "Levareich Et Amo Yisrael Be'Ahavah."

The Rama, however, notes that the Ran (Megillah 15b in the pages of the Rif, s.v. Ein HaKohanim) and the Tur (O.C. 128) disagree and rule that the Chazan should prompt even the word Yevarechecha. A beautiful mystical explanation for this opinion is presented by Rabeinu Bahayei and Kli Yakar to BeMidbar 6:23 which we summarize as follows:

The Chazan serves as an intermediary to trigger the flow of abundant heavenly blessings through the "divine pipeline". The blessings will first rest on the Kohanim in order that they serve as a vessel filled with Hashem's blessings. The Kohanim subsequently transfer this blessing to the congregation. The Kohanim act as a full vessel pouring out its content to an empty vessel. Were it not for the Chazan prompting the Kohanim, the Kohanim would not be blessed and they would not be able to transfer the Berachah to the assembled.

According to this approach, the Chazan must prompt the Kohanim even with the word Yevarechecha.

A Stunning Change in Practice - Ben Ish Chai

The Rama notes that the universal practice among Ashkenazic Jews is for the Chazan to prompt the Kohanim even with the word Yevarechecha. This continues to be the unchallenged and universal practice among Ashkenazic Jews. The Beit Yosef (O.C. 128 s.v. U'Shaliah Tzibbur) in turn notes that the practice throughout Eretz Yisrael and Egypt is for the Kohanim and not the Chazan to begin the word Yevarechecha.

This remained the accepted Sephardic standard until the Ben Ish Chai's revolution regarding this issue (Parashat Tetzaveh Yr. 1:1). He argues that those who say that the Chazan begins Yevarechecha believe that it is a requirement, but those who believe that the Kohanim begin Yevarechecha, hold that it is permissible for them to begin Yevarechecha (but it is not required of them to do so). Thus, we may abandon this practice if there is a compelling reason to do so. The Ben Ish Chai follows our first explanation of this opinion that the Chazan's prompts are merely to avoid confusion.³ Thus, the Chazan's prompt of the word

² As explained by the Beit Yosef O.C. 128 s.v. U'Shaliah Tzibbur.

³ However, according to our second explanation of this view, to minimize interruption between the Birkat HaMitzvah and the recitation of Birkat Kohanim it would seem to be a requirement and may not be abandoned.

Yevarechecha is not necessary, since the Kohanim will not be confused at the first word of their blessing.

The Ben Ish Chai continues to note that the Kabbalah⁴ strongly supports the Chazan's prompting the Kohanim even with the word Yevarechecha. He adds that this is the practice of the celebrated Sephardic Kabbalistic Yeshiva which exists until this day in the Old City of Jerusalem called Yeshivat Beit El. The Ben Ish Chai writes:

"A number of years ago Hashem helped me convince the community to change the practice in every Beit Keneset in our city of Baghdad for the Chazan to prompt the Kohanim even with the word Yevarechecha. This is what should be done in every community."

The Ben Ish Chai notes a Halachic advantage to adopting this practice. When the Kohanim initiate Yevarechecha, the Kohanim often begin Yevarechecha before the Tzibbur had a chance to answer Amen to their Berachah of Levareich Et Amo Yisrael B'Ahavah.

The Kaf HaChaim (O.C. 128:82) endorses the Ben Ish Chai's revolutionary approach. He notes that Tosafot (Berachot 34a s.v. Lo Ya'aneh) seems to endorse this view as well. In the wake of the rulings of the Ben Ish Chai and Kaf HaChaim, many Sephardic communities changed their centuries old practice of following the Rambam's and Beit Yosef's opinions, and began to have the Chazan prompt the Kohanim even with the word Yevarechecha.

However, many Sephardic communities continue to follow the ruling of the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch. Moroccan, Syrian and Yemenite Jews are among the Sephardic communities that retain the original practice. These communities would seem to prefer our second suggested explanation of Rambam and Maran (that we seek to minimize interruptions between the Birkat HaMitzvah and the recitation of the Birkat Kohanim). According to this approach, it is a requirement for the Kohanim to begin Yevarechecha, and therefore one does not have the option to abandon this practice.

Rav Ovadia Yosef's Surprising Endorsement of the Ben Ish Chai

One would expect Rav Ovadia Yosef to restore the original Sephardic practice. After all, in countless situations Chacham Ovadia overturns the ruling of the Ben Ish Chai in favor of HaChazarat Atarah LeYoshenah, restoring the crown to its original luster-- in other words, following the ruling of Maran Rav Yosef Karo. For example, although many or even most Sephardic women followed the ruling of the Ben Ish Chai and Kaf HaChaim to recite the Berachah on Shabbat candles after lighting, Rav Ovadia strongly advocates the return to the ruling of the Rambam to recite the Berachah before the lighting.

⁴ Kabbalistic thought exerts a profound influence on the Ben Ish Chai.



Despite this expectation, Rav Ovadia strongly advocates for the ruling of the Ben Ish Chai and Kaf HaChaim. In fact, he even records (Teshuvot Yehaveh Da'at 4:10 and Yalkut Yosef O.C. 128:42) that he convinced the Kehillah he led while serving as the Rav Ha'ir (municipal rabbi) of Tel Aviv to change their Minhag to that of the Ben Ish Chai and Kaf HaChaim.

Three reasons may be offered for why Chacham Ovadia did not restore the ruling of the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch regarding who begins Yevarechecha. One reason might be that the practice of the Yeshivat Beit El became the dominant practice in the synagogues of Yerushalayim. Minhag Yerushalayim plays a major role in Rav Ovadia's rulings. Second, is the Halachic disadvantage of the Kohanim rushing to say Yevarechecha before the congregation responds Amen to the Berachah of L'Varech Et Amo Yisrael B'Ahavah⁵. Third, is the argument that Rambam and Rav Karo permit but do not insist that the Kohanim begin Yevarechecha.

If Only One Kohein is Present

The Rambam and Shulchan Aruch do not distinguish whether one Kohein or more than one Kohein is present. It seems that they believe that the Kohein begins Yevarechecha even if only one Kohein is present. This is the practice of Yemenite Jews⁶ until today, as reported by Shaarei Orah member Josh Hosseinoff, who made Aliyah to Zichron Yaakov where he prays in a Yemenite synagogue. Teshuvot Pirhei Kohanim (O.C. 27, cited in the Yalkut Yosef) notes that this is the custom in Algeria⁷.

However, both the Kaf HaChaim and the Yalkut Yosef cite Teshuvot Maharam Mintz (No. 12) who rules that even the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch would agree that if only one Kohein is present that the Chazan should first recite Yevarechecha. The explanation is that only when more than one Kohein is present does the Chazan declare "Kohanim", a fulfillment of the requirement of "Amor Lahem", that the Chazan (on behalf of the community) initiates the Birkat Kohanim. However, when only one Kohein is present, the word Kohanim is not recited (Sotah 38a). Thus, when only one Kohein is present, the Chazan must say Yevarechecha in order to initiate Birkat Kohanim in the absence of the "Kohanim" declaration. The Kaf HaChaim concludes that the consensus of Acharonim concurs with the ruling of the Maharam Mintz (see, for example, Mishnah Berurah 128:47). Yalkut Yosef rules in accordance with this view as well.

⁵ Shaarei Orach member Chaim Tawil, who is of Syrian background, reports that the Syrian Rabbanim often repeat instructions to the Kohanim to pause and allow the Kahal to respond Amen before the Kohanim begin saying Yevarechecha.

⁶ Most Yemenite Jews, maintain a very strong fidelity to the rulings of the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch.

⁷ Shaarei Orach Algerian members Laurent Cohen and Gavriel Gozland were not sure if this remains the practice among Algerian Jews.

However, there are some Sephardic communities where the Chazan first recites Yevarechecha when two or more Kohanim are present and the Kohein begins Yevarechecha when only one Kohein is present. Shaarei Orah member Cesare Pinto reports that he saw this practiced in his Sephardic congregation when he lived in Milan, Italy. Shaarei Orah member Alberto Atar reports that this is the practice in Sephardic synagogues of Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires as well. Shaarei Orah member Shlomo Mizrahi reports that this is the custom in Egyptian Kehillot in Eretz Yisrael. Rav Shmuel Khoshkermann ruled that a Sephardic Kehillah that has such a practice is permitted to retain it.

There might be two explanations for this approach. First, it constitutes a gesture of respect to and reminder of the original practice of Sephardic Jews for the Kohein to begin Yevarechecha. Second, as noted by the Beit Yosef (O.C. 128 s.v. VeGam Kan) since the Pasuk states Amor Lahem, say to them, the practice to prompt the Kohanim word by word essentially applies only when there are two or more Kohanim. While, as the Beit Yosef notes, the practice has emerged to prompt even one Kohein word by word, the original practice applies only to two or more Kohanim. Thus, prompting the Kohanim with the word Yevarechecha when there are Kohanim, and not doing so when only one Kohein is present, serves to remind us of the original practice to prompt the Kohanim word by word only when two or more Kohanim are present.

Conclusion

The universal Ashkenazic practice is for the Chazan to always prompt the Kohanim with the word Yevarechecha. The original Sephardic practice was that the Kohanim always begin Yevarechecha. A few communities retain this practice in all circumstances. Syrian and Moroccan Jews retain this practice when there are two or more Kohanim. Some communities retain this practice when there is only one Kohein. The Ben Ish Chai, Kaf HaChaim and Rav Ovadia Yosef advocate that even Sephardic Jews should instruct the Chazan to prompt the Kohanim with the word Yevarechecha in all circumstances.

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