

Parsha Encounters

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Parshas Toldos - Rabbi Yonason Serle

The Wise Purchase

"And Yaakov said to Esav, sell to me, this day, your birthright."

Several questions immediately come to mind: 1) Why did Yaakov so intensely desire to obtain Esav's birthright? 2) How can one ever acquire someone else's special rights as the firstborn of one's family?

To answer the first question, we note that the Midrash explains:

"Why did Yaakov desire the birthright? Because we have learned that until the Tabernacle was constructed, foreign altars were permitted and the sacrifices were performed by the firstborn. Said Yaakov, this wicked one (Esav) will arise and sacrifice?! Thus, Yaakov desired the birthright."

Rabbi Shalom Shwadron, of blessed memory, explains that we see from here the incredibly pure intentions of Yaakov in purchasing the birthright. Even though the possession of the birthright provided many other benefits, Yaakov's sole desire in the deal was for the sake of Heaven. For if Esav was allowed to remain the firstborn, he and his wicked descendants would offer sacrifices to Hashem on the altars. To prevent this disgrace from happening, Yaakov saw it as his duty to remove the birthright from Esav. Certainly, Yaakov benefited greatly from his purchase of the birthright, for later in the parsha he received the special firstborn blessings from his father. Nevertheless, the Midrash tells us that his only concern was for the sake of Heaven.

This leads us to the next question: How is it possible for one to "purchase" someone else's status as the firstborn?

The Sifsei Chachamim explains that the birthright was a legacy of priesthood that Hashem gave to Avrohom Avinu, to be passed down to his children and grandchildren for all time. Usually, the firstborn is the main progenitor of the father's legacy, and therefore Esav should have been the one through whom Avrohom and Yitzchak's legacy of priesthood and closeness to Hashem would continue. However, since he was unfit for this honor, Yaakov took his place as "firstborn" who would carry on the legacy and life-mission of his fathers. The "purchase" of the birthright from Esav was only a way to prevent any further claims of firstborn status which Esav might have presented in the future.

The message for us is that our privileged status as Jews also entails special responsibilities. Just as Yaakov Avinu was motivated to acquire the birthright only for the sake of Heaven and he was not distracted by the great blessings to come as a result, so too, we must try not to become distracted by the pleasures of life but to direct all of our actions for the sake of Heaven. Additionally, we must emulate Yaakov Avinu, who merited becoming the "firstborn" of Hashem by shunning Esav's lifestyle of moral turpitude and decadence, while forging his own unique path of faithful service to Hashem. By the same token, we too must forsake the crassness and vulgarity of the nations, and purify ourselves for the wholehearted service of our creator by intensifying our Mitzvah-observance and Torah study. By doing so, we will make ourselves truly worthy of all the blessings and happiness rightfully conferred onto the holy "firstborn-nation" of Hashem.

Rabbi Serle learns regularly at the Kollel.

Halacha Encounters

Ateres Z'kainim

Rabbi Henoch Plotnik

As we take temporary leave of the first group of parshiyos in Sefer Bereishis, we take note of the significant drop in life span from the people mentioned in Bereishis and Noach to the time of the Avos. Indeed, the Ramban (Bereishis 5:4) is at odds with the Rambam regarding the longevity of these individuals mentioned in the Chumash - were they the exception or the rule? The Rambam maintains that only those specifically identified in the Torah lived to the incredible old age of nine hundred years and beyond. This was due either to proper diet and lifestyle (!) or some miraculous occurrence. The Ramban disagrees strongly with the Rambam's suggestion that mere physical discipline could lengthen someone's life so long. Furthermore, if they indeed knew secrets of such long life, why would they not have shared it with future generations! Neither does the Rambam's suggestion of meriting miracles find favor in the Ramban's eyes, because we have no account of those individuals being significant men of righteousness or stature. The Ramban therefore opines that these people were a sampling of what was typical for the period. Due to physical changes in the world from the great Mabul and the Migdal Bavel, life spans shortened significantly to what we are accustomed to today, as the Posuk says in Tehillim "Our days are seventy years, and if we are strong, eighty years" (This chapter in Tehillim is attributed to Moshe Rabbeinu). This is why Paroh expressed such surprise when seeing Yaakov Avinu's old appearance; it was a rare sight indeed. As this week's parsha makes mention of Yitzchak Avinu's old age (123) before giving the brachos to his children, let us explore some halachos that pertain both to those in their elderly years and the people around them.

The Gemara relates that Rav Yosef made a Yom Tov for the Chachomim upon reaching his sixtieth year, which acknowledged his surpassing the age of chiyuv kores (premature punishment of death). The author of the T'rumas Hadeshan invited two elderly Talmidei Chachomim to his home for a siyum on the day he reached his sixtieth year. (Leket Yosher Y.D. p. 40). The Ben Ish Chai suggests donning new clothing or buying new fruit for the occasion, enabling the reciting of Shehechi-

yanu, and having in mind the joy of reaching sixty. (Parshas Re'eh #9). The Ponovezher Rov zt"l reported that the Chofetz Chaim summoned him and another friend upon turning seventy, and recited the Shehechyanu on new clothing. (See Pri Megadim 444 Teshuva M'ahava #239 who do not feel any such bracha is in order since it is not mentioned in Shas) In light of these opinions, one should either recite Shehechyanu without "Shem U'malchus" (Hagahos Chasam Sofer O.C. 225), or buy new clothing and say the brocho. (It is noteworthy to mention the opinion of the Bach, that unlike other brochos, Shehechyanu can be said even when in doubt. Thanking Hashem in this fashion is always in order).

The Chavos Ya'ir recommends making a seuda and darshening divrei Torah upon reaching seventy to give it the status of a seudas mitzvah. (#70). There is a discussion amongst the Poskim as to the recommended retirement age of a shochet out of concern for inaccuracy in the delicate procedure. (See Pischei Teshuva Y.D. 1:22 if the age is seventy or eighty and Darkei Teshuva 1:173).

The Shulchan Aruch obligates standing for someone beyond seventy, even if not learned, as the Mishna says, "Ben Shivim L'savo". According to Kabbala, one should stand up for a sixty year old even if he is not a Torah scholar (Birkei Yosef Y.D. 244 quoting the Arizal).

There is a dispute amongst the poskim to determine when a woman is considered "old" that if she lost her husband's post that age she is not considered a "katlonis", one who is liable to lose a husband and forbidden to remarry. (Otzar Haposkim 9:15 quoting various opinions of sixty, seventy, or eighty).

Once a person reaches a very ripe old age, the Gemara teaches us we can assume they will continue to do so indefinitely (Gittin 25A) Whether this age is eighty or one hundred is the subject of dispute in the Shulchan Aruch (Even Ho'ezer 141:68). Not that we need to prove the wisdom of the Chachmei HaTalmud, but modern studies have shown this to be true even today - once people reach the threshold of one hundred, they tend to live much longer. It is our tefillah that we all merit to see the prolonged life and good health of all our z'kainim from whom we have so much to learn. L'chaim!

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