

Birthright Why for a Bowl of Soup?!

A Pottage of Lentils

By Imanuel Ravad – עמנואל ראב"ד

For those of us who wish to know how it happened and for the people of the world who vilify and denigrate us even to the present, how was such a base and vile deed possible in Israel, a brother exploiting fatigue and hunger to extort

"the birthright, for a pottage of lentils?"

Our forefather Ya'akov, one of the three founding fathers of our people, the man of truth, the spiritual heir of our forefather Avraham, who serves as a symbol and model of warm hospitality, and during the seven days of mourning for Avraham, at which time, we are obligated, for the uplift of his soul, to walk in the path he blazed and engage, to the best of our ability, in the practice of hospitality that he set forth, how was it possible that Ya'akov behaves in utter contradiction, to rob distinguished guests of their most precious possessions?

Whence this cruelty?! His older brother, whom he is duty-bound to honor, returns from the field hungry and exhausted, and asks for a bowl of soup, which is anyhow ready to be served. Instead of offering it with joy and affability as his grandfather Avraham would have done; he rather exploits the fatigue and hunger of his brother, to extort from him one of the most precious possessions, which is the sole privilege of only one member in a family, the birthright? **And for the ridiculous price of a pottage of lentils?**

Is it possible that bold and fearless Esav, "the skillful hunter", will surrender to criminal extortion by his simple brother, "and Ya'akov was a simple person," and sell his birthright, one of his most precious possessions, for the ridiculous price of a pottage of lentils? And why? Only because of hunger and fatigue? After all, the episode took place at home, in their parents' house. Why didn't weary Esav lie down in his bed for rest? Why didn't hungry Esav go into the kitchen to take a bite? Why didn't he ask his mother Rivka, who like any devoted mother feeds her children, their

favorite food without expecting any recompense? Why rather ask food from a despised brother? And besides, what is the saintly Ya'akov doing in the kitchen?

The answer might be as follows:

1. The circumstances:

Our Forefather Avraham was taken by G-d, five years before his allotted time, in order to spare him the sorrow and anguish of seeing his grandson Esav becoming wicked and sinful. Yitzchak his son is sitting **Shiva mourning** at home. Ya'akov his grandson has returned from the Yeshiva of **Shem and Ever** for his grandfather's funeral. For the past two years since his **Bar Mitzvah**, he studied there. Ya'akov, is preoccupied with the Mitzvah of comforting the bereaved, and has prepared for his father Yitzchak a pottage of lentils, the traditional mourner's meal. Esav, in the midst of the **Shiva** week, has degenerated into the wickedness and sinfulness for which G-d took away our forefather Avraham five years before his time. On that same day he committed the three cardinal sins: **idolatry, adultery and bloodshed**, and therefore has returned home "**fatigued**" and emotionally spent. Ya'akov and Esav, the two brothers who are so diametrically opposed to each other in spirit and soul, once again find themselves together at home, under the same roof, but under different circumstances: weeping, mourning and comforting the bereaved, at a time when the spiritual legacy of the deceased and the earnest matters of life are the subject of discussion.

2. The conversation between Ya'akov and Esav: Ya'akov, crying: "Our grandfather, 'the spiritual father of many nations,' has passed away. 'The high priest of his brothers,' is no longer with us. Where can his like to be found? Who will henceforth sacrifice offerings? Who will plead with the Almighty for forgiveness and atonement even on behalf of the wicked, so that they, too, may be inscribed for life and not for death, for

satiety and for starvation? Esav, my dear brother and friend, 'the high priest is dead! Long live the high priest!' As you know, 'and as it is well known,' from the time of Creation and 'till the time of the sin of the Golden Calf,' the priestly service is the privilege of the firstborn only. Adam, the first man, served as a priest and sacrificed offerings. The Creator himself made for him the priestly garments. Our great and saintly father, who was offered as a 'perfect sacrifice' on Mount Mariah, who is also a firstborn, cannot assume the priesthood, because he is blind, a defect which disqualifies him. My dear brother, you are a firstborn, therefore, I plead with you, please assume the office of the priesthood."

Esav, abashedly, begins to weep: "My dear brother Ya'akov. O', if I would have heard these words of wisdom and truth from you a trifle earlier! Today it is too late! I would very much have wanted to be high priest. But, behold, I am returning from the field '**fatigued,**' perturbed and emotionally spent, because I have today committed the three cardinal sins. Only the most righteous man of the generation is worthy to be high priest. 'A drunk or dressed improperly and functioning as a priest, incurs the death penalty,' for it is a desecration of the divine name if the priest's soul is tainted with sin. If, 'a Torah scholar who has a spot on his garment may deserve death,' how much more so a priest with a spot on his soul! 'And as it is well known, in the days of the Second Temple, a new high priest was appointed almost every year. Those who were not pious, and gained the position only by bribing the Roman procurator, and yet had the audacity to enter the Holy of Holies, died before completing their year.' And I have today transgressed the three cardinal sins: **idolatry, adultery and bloodshed.** If I assume the priesthood, it will surely kill me. 'Behold, the priesthood is going to cause my death. What good is the privilege of the birthright to me?' My dear brother Ya'akov, **please have mercy on me and save me. Don't let the priesthood kill me.** Let the '**birthright - priesthood,**' be perpetuated through you, and you

become the third link in the patriarchal chain, of: '**the G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov.**'"

"And Ya'akov said:' My dear Esav, as a devoted brother, I will surely do all I can to save you from certain death. However, in order to accomplish this, we must assure that you can never renege on your commitment, which will again endanger your life, and also in order to protect my rights, that I will not be accused of having robbed or deceived you, we must arrange the transfer of the birthright in a sound legal manner and publicly attested to. Therefore, '**sell it as clear as the day,**' come let us make a sale agreement well-publicized **as the day,** according to the rules and regulations of nations and states."

In many countries, in order for a gift or the transfer of property from one person to another be legally valid, there is a condition, that the giver of the gift or the one who transfers his property, must receive a compensation, even if just a symbolic one. Therefore, all contracts start with a uniform formula: "For a consideration of **One Dollar** received... I transfer... or bestow the gift... ."

As the symbolic recompense for transferring the birthright, Esav requested: "Feed me this red, red pottage," which Ya'akov had prepared for Yitzchak, and which was standing on the table ready to be served. Esav, as a hunter, likes the color of blood, which is also symbolic of **adultery and murder.** "Therefore, his name was called **Edom = Red,**" because the red color suits his personality and behavior.

Ya'akov is not ready to receive the birthright free of charge. Like grandfather Avraham, who refused to receive the cemetery plot, Me'arat Ha'mach'pela, gratis, and paid for it more than the full prize, Ya'akov, the grandson, too, is demanding: "**sell your birthright, as clear as the day... .**" Besides the symbolic recompense of "**a pottage of lentils,**" Ya'akov gave Esav a **big treasure, in return for the birthright.** But, Ya'akov was unable to extract from Esav, the '**clear as the day,**' publication condition. "Ya'akov said: 'swear to me **as clear as the day**' - and he swore to him." "'Sell your birthright to me, **as clear as the day,**' - and he sold his birthright to

Ya'akov." But, the expression "*as clear as the day*," is not mentioned in Esav's response.

Esav does not possess the guts and the integrity to admit publicly - "*as clear as the day*" - his moral failing and spiritual degeneration which **necessitated** the transfer of the birthright. He conceals it from all, and especially from his father Yitzchak. Had Yitzchak known, Rivka, Ya'akov and the children of Israel, throughout history, would have been spared many hardships and miseries. Yitzchak would have blessed Ya'akov to begin with, and not *post-factor* - "**may he be blessed.**" Esav does not surrender to life's realities, and lives in a world of falsehood and mendacity. Despite the sale, he complains about Ya'akov's filching from him both the birthright and the blessings, which are written in Hebrew with identical and only 2 interchanged letters:

לקח ברכתי - ברכתי לקח. And despite the fact that Esav well knows that the **blessings** - ברכה - were designated to the owner of the **birthright** - בכרה. Esav, till the end of his life, continues to play the game of the birthright, although he has sold it and it is no longer his; even until the burial of Ya'akov. Esav's descendants too, continue to play this game, and will play it till the days of the **Mashiach**, when "saviors will ascend Mount-Tzion to judge and punish Mount-Esav, and the kingdom will be of Hashem." Even at Yitzchak's funeral procession, Esav precipitates himself before Ya'akov, as it is written: "Esav and Ya'akov his sons buried him." In stark contrast to Yishmael, who repented and allowed his younger brother Yitzchak to lead the procession of their father Avraham's funeral, as it is written: "Yitzchak and Yishmael his sons buried him".

Ya'akov faces yet another problem. In the future Esav might contend: "Ya'akov has cheated me. He exploited my hunger and '**fatigue.**' to defraud me of my birthright. Therefore, I hereby solemnly declare: 'I did not know what I was doing. My brother Ya'akov succeeded in deceiving me at a moment of confusion and temporary derangement. Therefore, the transaction is null and void. My oath is invalid and the sale is not legal.'"

In order to counter this contention, as the first stage, "**Ya'akov gave Esav bread,**" to **assuage his hunger and exhaustion**, and only afterwards did he give Esav "**a pottage of lentils**" to confirm and validate the sale.

Thank G-d, a firstborn was finally found, who was suitable for the high priesthood, to continue the divine service and to fill the position made vacant by the demise of our forefather. Esav was duty-bound to remain at Ya'akov's side, to confirm and publicize the transfer of the birthright. But, shame and hatred burn within him and Esav is unable to do it. Therefore, "**he ate and drank**" and immediately afterwards "**he rose up and left, and Esav debased the birthright.**" Esav **degrades** the birthright, not only in his heart but also in deed.

Ya'akov did not take the birthright from Esav by deceit. It was Esav who pleaded with Ya'akov to take the birthright from him. By doing that, Ya'akov not only saved Esav from certain death, but also paid him more than the full price. "**A pottage of lentils,**" was only the symbolic validation and confirmation of the sale.

The transfer of the birthright to Ya'akov was a **dire necessity**, and we need not feel any guilt. The Creator of the world Himself testifies his consent and approval of the need and propriety of transferring the birthright from Esav to Ya'akov by declaring: "**Yisrael = (Ya'akov) - is my first born son.**" (Shmot 4:22) The **birthright as a form of priesthood, could not be fulfilled by Esav**, because his thoughts and deeds **debase and degrade** the birthright. The **stately and noble conduct of Ya'akov**, whose visage is engraved under the throne of glory, as a sage who dwells in the tents of Torah, **is the virtue that upraises and bestows honor and reverence to the birthright.**

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