Asking Bigger Questions: Bereshit

Toldot Gen. 25:19-28:9

Toldot 5781: How do we know?

Chapter 27 of the Book of Genesis, which forms the dramatic bulk of Parshat Toldot, serves as something of a lynchpin between the lives of Isaac and Jacob. A great theme of Isaac's life is that, to a great extent, he is acted upon by others. This intersects with a great theme of Jacob's life: deception. Just as happened during the Akedah, Isaac is the victim of the actions of others. And just as Jacob will be the victim of deception on his wedding night and later at the hand of his sons, in this parasha Jacob is the one who perpetrates deception on his father.

As the Latin phrase attributed to Sir Francis Bacon puts it, *Scientia potentia est,* Knowledge is power. This is something of an underpinning assumption for much of Western thought. Yet the story of Parshat Toldot invites us to reflect on what we mean by knowledge, and the true source of our power. How do we know what we think we know? Can we bring greater awareness to our assumptions, to the biases and limitations in our knowing minds? How might that point us to ways of knowing beyond the highly intellectualized conception we often call knowledge? And, how might that help us know ourselves, and our lived lives, better?

Sensing Doubt

The contemporary mindfulness teacher Ruth King offers us a starting point. King offers this description of how perception, thought, and belief interact with one another:

> We perceive something through our senses. There is a sense organ and a sense object—eyes see, ears hear, nose smells, body feels, tongue tastes, and mind thinks. Once we perceive, the mind habitually jumps to thoughts and feelings about what is being perceived; these thoughts and feelings are rooted in past experiences, past conditioning. Thoughts and feelings then influence the mood of our mind. When perceptions, thoughts, and feelings are repeated or imprinted through experiences, they solidify into view or belief. View then reinforces perception. This cycle becomes the way in which we experience and respond to the world.

King's description resonates with what we encounter in the parasha as Isaac and Jacob engage in a multisensory encounter involving sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. "Come closer that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not," Isaac says in verse 21. And in the next verse, "So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.'" Over and over again, the text emphasizes Isaac's uncertainty of his conscious knowing, of not trusting the conflicting inputs of his senses, and perhaps his own intuition.

We can feel Isaac's discomfort in the narrative, a discomfort that King helpfully describes:

> Essentially, we think we know something, and then we are off and running—all based on past experiences, preferences, and beliefs. And usually, but not always, it's all in our minds or, at a minimum, worthy of questioning. When we perceive and when thoughts and emotions are simultaneously activated, those thoughts and emotions proliferate, creating a state of fear and anxiety driven by what the mind is believing in that moment. In such moments, we are removed from presence; we vacate the premises of body and mind and are fixated on view.[1]

In Isaac's case, the rising tension of his encounter with Jacob finally spills over when he realizes he has been deceived: "Isaac was seized with very violent trembling" (v. 33). The trauma of the encounter touches Esau: "When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing" (v. 34). And that trauma

[1] Ruth King, *Mindful of Race,* Sounds True Press 2018, 106-7.

gives way to a threat of violence that will hover over the brothers' relationship for decades to come: "Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, 'Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob'" (v. 41).

The spiraling collateral damage is rooted deeper in prior moments of unknowing. The whole of this drama is set in motion when Rebecca, overhearing Isaac instruct Esau to bring him a cooked dish in order to help him enter a state in which he could pronounce blessing, pushes her son Jacob to intercede in deception. But note: Isaac prefaces the entire conversation by saying, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die" (v. 2). This state of uncertainty, doubt, question—this is the mood of the entire chapter.

Unknowing Knowing: *As If*

The problematics of this passage have long been front and center for rabbinic commentators. What would it mean that the Divine blessing was given to Jacob through an act of subterfuge? Would it call into question the Jewish people's claim to our special relationship with YHVH? And what would it say about Jacob, the ancestor from whom the entire people springs, that he engaged in such deception? Would the blessing he received be truly a blessing if it came about not through the knowing bestowal by Isaac, but by an unwitting mistake? The stakes are high – for us, as recipients of this legacy, and for our self-understanding as intentional agents in the world.

For our purposes, which focus more on how we might understand this passage in terms of mindfulness practice, Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein (1737-1814), the Maggid of Kozhnitz, offers a tantalizing idea:

> אע״פ שיצחק לא ידע על בוריו שזה הוא יעקב בנו, עכ״ז יצאו הדברים מפיו ברוח הקודש כאילו יודע.
>
> "Even though Isaac did not know for certain that this was Jacob his son, nevertheless the words came from his mouth through the Divine spirit as if he knew." (*Avodat Yisrael* on *Toldot)*

The Maggid begins with the same assumption as much of rabbinic literature: it would indeed be a problem if Isaac offered the blessing to Jacob under something

less than full awareness. And yet he gracefully elides the problem of Jacob's subterfuge through the invocation of the Hebrew word *k'ilu*, "as if." Even though Isaac had his well-founded doubts about Jacob's identity, somehow in the moment the blessing came out *as if* Isaac was fully aware that this was not in fact Esau before him, but Jacob.

The liminal space of *as if* consciousness, in which we are aware of our less-than-perfect knowledge, is what I understand Ruth King to describe in the passage read above. In our practice of meditation and mindfulness, we bring our attention to the fact that our knowledge is inherently imperfect, that unintended self-deception impedes us from ascertaining hidden dimensions of truth. In this, we cultivate the potential to both interrupt the process of *perceiving-judging-feeling*, and begin a fraught process of living in a more indeterminate space.

Knowing and Unknowing: A Speaking Silence

Rabbi Yaakov Leiner (1828-1878) offers us another way of understanding this question of knowing by contrasting Isaac with Moses:

> **ויהי כי זקן יצחק ותכהין עיניו מראות.** אמר אאמו״ר זללה״ה (מי השלוח ח״א ד״ה ויהי כי זקן ובגליון אות יא) שענין יצחק שניתן לו כל טוב ארץ ישראל, כיון שלא הורשה לצאת ממנה, אך לראותה לא זכה בשלימות כי כהו עיניו. ומשה רבינו לא זכה ליכנס לארץ ישראל, ולראותה זכה. והענין בזה, יען כי יצחק היה מכוון שלא מדעתו לרצון השי״ת כמו שברך את יעקב שלא מדעתו, ובהסכמת השי״ת, ומשה רבינו ע״ה היה צריך לילך רק על פי חכמתו, ובאם לאו היה צריך לבירורים
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> *Beit Yaakov Toldot 35*
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> "Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see." Isaac was given all the goodness of the Land of Israel, for he was not permitted to depart it; yet he did not merit to see it in its fulness, because his eyes were dim. Moses [was the opposite]—he did not merit to enter the land of Israel, yet he did merit to see it. [N.B. As in Deuteronomy 3:27, where God tells Moses to look out over the land of Israel.] The idea here is that Isaac could intuit the Divine will without conscious awareness, as when he blessed Jacob in a state of unawareness but with God's concurrence. Yet Moses had to conduct himself according to his own assessment, and when his intellectual understanding failed him and he was uncertain, he required further clarification [from the Holy One].

The Beit Yaakov's comment invites us to question the assumption that what we think we know in the moment, self-assured knowledge of how things are, is all it's cracked up to be. Isaac here is presented as a different kind of knower—one who, perhaps, is able to access a different kind of truth by virtue of a different kind of mind. His attunement with the holy, represented in this passage by the Land of Israel from which he never departs, gives Isaac a different way of perceiving and relating to the world. He perhaps has a different way of understanding or knowing what is true, one that is less bound up with agency, mastery, language, and more animated by stillness, passivity, and quiet.

"What I know I could put into a pack," writes Mary Oliver, "as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it on one shoulder,

> important and honorable, but so small!
> While everything else continues, unexplained
>
> and unexplainable. How wonderful it is
> to follow a thought quietly
>
> to its logical end.
> I have done this a few times.
>
> But mostly I just stand in the dark field,
> in the middle of the world, breathing
>
> in and out. Life so far doesn't have any other name
> but breath and light, wind and rain.[2]

Isaac, who our tradition teaches established the late afternoon prayer as he "went out to meditate in the field toward evening" (Gen. 24:63), offers us an example of how we might enter into this kind of knowing gestured at by Oliver. This is a knowing that is less dependent on precisely articulated meanings and logical postulates, which, as King describes, can frequently be a knowledge that rests on a false consciousness. Rather, Isaac's knowing is more concerned with the knowledge that can appear when we become quiet, when we open ourselves

[2] Mary Oliver, "What is there Beyond Knowing?" in *New and Selected Poems,* Beacon Press 1993.

to the deeper forms of perception available to us through our bodies, our emotions, and the rest of our lives that include but transcend our intellect. This might be, as Oliver puts it another of her poems, "The silence in which another voice may speak."[3] Isaac's different way of knowing invites that other voice, one which the Hasidic masters identify as the voice of the Divine working through him to offer blessing.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. How do you understand the distinction the Beit Yaakov makes between Isaac and Moses and their ways of knowing? Do you find one or the other resonates with you more? Why?

2. When have you had an experience of "following a thought to its logical end," as Mary Oliver puts it? How did it feel? And how does it contrast with what she describes as her far more frequent experience of standing "in the dark field, in the middle of the world, breathing?" What do you learn from this distinction in your own experience?

3. What do you think the Maggid of Kozhnitz means by saying that Isaac acted as if he knew that the son standing before him was, in fact, Jacob? Have you ever had an experience where you acted as if you knew something (even if you did not know it in formed thoughts or clear ideas)? (Have ever *not* had an experience like that?) What does this question bring up for you? What does it suggest about the importance of mindfulness practice?

Ideas for Practice

1. In your meditation practice this week, try bringing your attention to a challenging event or story in your life involving another person. Allow yourself to notice what feelings or sensations are

[3] Ibid. "Praying" in *Thirst,* Beacon Press 2007.

triggered as you go toward the story in your mind. Then investigate without judgment: Are there assumptions or biases that might be affecting the way you are telling the story to yourself, and which, by consequence, are arousing these sensations? Notice how it feels to recognize your assumptions. Try out what it feels like to let go of them.

2. In prayer this week, consider focusing on the fourth blessing of the weekday *Amidah:*

אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת וּמְלַמֵּד לֶאֱנוֹשׁ בִּינָה׃
חָנֵּנוּ מֵאִתְּךָ דֵּעָה בִּינָה וְהַשְׂכֵּל׃
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה חוֹנֵן הַדָּעַת׃

> You grace humans with awareness and teach humankind understanding. Grant us knowledge, understanding and intellect from You. Blessed are You, YHVH, Grantor of perception.

Take time before reciting this blessing to quiet your mind, perhaps through meditation. As you say the words, allow yourself not to focus on their specific meaning, but rather see what comes up for you as you say them. What kind of awareness or knowledge do you become aware of? How might our learning this week help you expand or deepen your relationship with this prayer?