

# PARASHAH TWENTY-THREE

Genesis 25:1–26:11; 2Samuel 5:17–6:1; Hebrews 12:14–29

notes by Tim Hegg

## *The Birthright & Divine Purpose*

The story before us in this *parashah* is familiar. The covenant which God made with Abraham has been passed on to the chosen son, Isaac, and in turn will be passed on to Isaac's son, Jacob. Once again we are confronted with the obvious fact that the Torah is not a history book, but a record of God's purpose to raise up His covenant people in order to bring redemption to the world. Throughout this familiar story, then, we are given an example of how God's all controlling providence interacts with man's choices. We are not so much told "why" as we are given an account of "how" all this comes to pass. In the end, God's purposes are worked out through the choices made by the major players in the narrative.

After Sarah dies, Abraham marries Keturah (the name may be related to the Hebrew for "incense" קְתוּרָה, *ketoret* or to the Aramaic word קְתוּרָה, *keturah*, "restrained"). In a fanciful (though impossible) midrashic interpretation, the Sages say this is Hagar, given a new name because she had remained chaste all of this time since she was removed from Sarah's oversight. That Abraham had children by Keturah in no way overturns that fact that Isaac's birth was miraculous. Sarah had ceased to menstruate, and was thus incapable of bearing children, yet God performed a miracle on her behalf.

Once again, the text is given in such a way as to single out Isaac and his line from those of Abraham's other children. God intends for us to understand that He had chosen Isaac to bear the covenant promises, not any of his brothers. Thus, in order to show this distinction, Abraham sends the sons of Keturah to the east. Some have suggested that they carried the beliefs of Abraham with them, and that Moses later would meet Yitro (Jethro), a priest of God Most High (the Midianites were related to Abraham through Keturah, 25:4; 1Chron 1:32)—proof that the truth about the one God of Abraham had been faithfully taught by his offspring. Ishmael, however, was not sent away, having assumed an important position as the first son of Abraham. Still, by God's own choosing, Isaac is the covenant bearer, for the text explicitly states (25:10) that God "blessed Isaac" after the death of Abraham.

The burial of Abraham in the Cave of Machpelah is also important, for it reminds the reader that this portion of the Land had been dutifully purchased by Abraham, and that it rightfully belonged to him and his family. The fact that in our own times the Cave of the Patriarchs is essentially "off-limits" to Jewish worshippers is a sad commentary on the present state of affairs. But it also reminds us how desperately we need the return of the Messiah, under Whose authority the Land will return to its rightful owners.

The final genealogy of Ishmael is given in our text, and an important note is attached: "They (Ishmael's descendants) dwelt from Havilah to Shur—which is near Egypt—toward Assyria; over all his brothers he dwelt." The mention of Assyria, Israel's later arch enemy, is connected with Ishmael, as is Egypt. The rivalry of conflicting siblings becomes a main theme in the story of Israel.

The *parashah* for this Shabbat concludes with the well-known story of the birth of Jacob and Esau. Rivka, like Sarah before, was barren. אֵל שַׁדַּי, *El Shaddai*, the Name of God that emphasizes His ability to give children, is entreated by Isaac and as a result, Rivka is able to conceive. Once again the text confronts our modern, scientific mindset with the reality that God is the One who causes conception, not merely natural forces. Even Rivka questions whether or not the thing is

from God, since when the children are active within her, she asks “If so, why am I thus?” If God has done this thing, why does it feel like something is wrong? But her faith is clearly shown as she seeks God for an answer. And He gives it to her: “Two nations are in your womb; two regimes from your insides shall be separated; the might shall pass from one regime to the other, and the elder shall serve the younger” (25:23). Now here we have Divine providence clearly laid out before us. Paul emphasizes the same thing (Rom 9:9-12), namely, that God’s sovereign providence is not based upon the acts of those concerned. Many like to “water down” the sovereignty of God’s providence (since it appears to negate the will of mankind) by saying that God looks ahead and simply makes His plans based upon what He sees individuals will choose. Besides the obvious fact that such an explanation effectively cancels the idea of providence, our story makes it clear that God does not make His plan based upon the good or evil acts of mankind. His choice of Jacob over Esau was a choice made entirely by His sovereign, free will, unencumbered by any external influence. Once again, the “why” is not given, only the “what.” Why should He choose Jacob? Was he really any “better” than Esau? No, and actually, in the course of the narrative one is sometimes drawn to the manliness of Esau as over against the “trickster” personality of Jacob. The story is clear that Jacob is not chosen because he is better. Rather, God’s choice is based upon His own will and carried out by His mysterious providence. Paul uses this metaphor: “The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? (Rom 9:20).” Indeed, before either of the twins were born, God had already decided their roles and that Jacob would be the one through whom the covenant promises would be realized.

This is an awesome concept to consider: our lives are in the hand of God. That we should, today, have hearts to bow before Him and accept His Torah as righteous and good, is the result of His working within us. In some unexplainable and mysterious way, His sovereign choosing of us does not overturn nor negate our responsibility to make righteous and holy choices, but it still remains true that had He not chosen to put His love upon us, we would all be like Esau, going our own way and doing all in our power to flee from Him.

The birth of the twins only confirmed the word which HaShem had given to Rivka. Esau (עֵשָׂו, *esav*, from עָשָׂה, “to do, make,” perhaps a play on the idea of “accomplished,” in that he was born with the hair of a grown man) came out red and hairy, perhaps a portend of the hunter/warrior he would become. Jacob (יַעֲקֹב, a play on the term for “heel” עֲקָב, which also came to mean “trickery,” “deceit”) came out holding on to the heel of Esau, again a foreshadowing of his desire to be first-born.

The story of the selling of the birthright is well-known, but I would emphasize just one thing from it. We should not excuse Jacob nor Rivka for getting the birthright via trickery. Deceit would be a thorn in the flesh for Jacob throughout his life, and would be passed on to his sons, who deceived him about Joseph. Yet, though we can never excuse the deceitful methods, the narrative clearly emphasizes the fact that Rivka, and apparently Jacob, sincerely desired the birthright, something Esau despised. Still, the end does not justify the means, and the deceit used to obtain the birthright will bear its rotten fruit. On the other hand, the text is clear that Esau despised the birthright, and in despising it, he likewise despised the covenant blessings which God had promised. 25:34 ends saying that Esau “despised” (בָּזָה, *bazah*) or “spurned” the birthright. It was not so much that he was tricked! He knew full well that he was selling the birthright, and he really didn’t care. He had no eye for the covenant which God had given—he did not care to be part of it. This was a choice he made, fully aware of what he was doing. And yet, it fit perfectly into the predetermined plan of God to cause the younger to rule the elder. Jacob sought for the eternal, Esau was satisfied with the temporal. Jacob longed for the spiritual, Esau was consumed by the flesh.

So what should we conclude? That God looked ahead in time and saw that Esau would be a lout and Jacob a nice guy? Hardly! In fact, when we read the story and the way that Isaac loved Esau, we are not quite sure if somehow God got the whole thing a little mixed up! Esau seems as good a candidate for the blessing of God as does Jacob. Yet the point of the narrative is that God chooses whom He wills to choose, and that it is His elective love that brings about the transformation of those He chooses. His choice is not based upon the goodness of those He elects. Rather, He purposes to sanctify those whom He chooses. Furthermore, the sanctifying work of God within the lives of His chosen ones is a process brought about through the events of life which He ordains. Once we have come to know and accept this, we face even the difficult times with an entirely new perspective (cf. Rom 5:3–5).

We see this in our *parashah*, in the story of Isaac’s sojourning in Gerar. Note carefully how God had given to Isaac clear revelation and reiterated the promises of the covenant to him (Gen 26:2–5). He tells him to dwell in the land of the Gerarites in order to survive the famine which had come upon the land. He promised His presence and His blessing! What more could a person ask for? Yet Isaac, with the covenant fully renewed to him by God Himself, feels it necessary to lie to the men of the place about His beautiful Rivka because apparently he did not believe God would care for him as He had promised. Just like the story of Abraham before, who, after receiving the promises of the covenant, descends to Egypt to try to save his own neck, and ends up lying about Sarah, so Isaac, the story tells us, is also weak in faith when it comes to trusting God for his well-being among foreign powers. He too is feeble in his fear and fails to rely upon God as he should. But why is the story told in this fashion? Why is it put together this way? To show us that God’s choice of Isaac was not due to his sterling character, but because of God’s sovereign choice alone. It is God’s work that changes us into the people we are supposed to be, not our righteousness which, like a magnet, draws God’s favor to us! We, apart from God’s work, would be as much His enemies as any other lost soul. Let us never forget that our position before Him as His children is due to His gracious and loving work, not ours!

The *haftarah* chosen for this Torah portion in the triennial cycle finds its link in the mention of the Philistines. Isaac sojourns in the land of the Gerarites who are later connected with the Philistines and views them as his enemy who, he feared, would take his life in order to have Rivka. Of course, the liberal commentators presume that we have a doublet—a story told twice, only reframed to fit Isaac. But that is not the case, for the narrative wishes to emphasize that like Abraham before him, Isaac is blessed as a result of God’s determination to be faithful to the covenant. In spite of the failings of the patriarchs, the covenant remains in place. Moreover, the central issue of the covenant is the promised seed to which the covenant would be renewed and maintained. Thus, the matter of offspring is of utmost importance. In each case, when the patriarch (whether Abraham or Isaac) is in harm’s way, and it appears that the wife through whom the seed would come might be taken, God intervenes—in spite of the lack of faith displayed by Abraham and Isaac. The purposes of God will not be thwarted by man’s inabilities or even by his sin, failings, or lack of faith.

The Hebrews *parashah* which we have attached to the Torah reading today highlights another important truth: that in the community of the faithful there can be those who are like Esau, whom the writer to the Messianic Jews (Epistle of Hebrews) identifies as a “root of bitterness.” In this text note that a root of bitterness is not identified as an attitude, but as a person. Esau himself was a “root of bitterness” because the lives he touched he infected with the same bitterness. It was by Esau, himself a root of bitterness, that many were defiled. Unchecked bitterness can be a cancer within a community by which many are made spiritually sick. The Hebrews text identifies it as

“godless.”

What exactly is “bitterness?” The word itself is a metaphor of taste which we naturally reject as unpleasant. Moreover, most poisonous substances are bitter. A bitter spirit is one that has been overcome by hurt and anger, and is therefore unpleasant, difficult to accept, and may negatively affect others. Bitterness is characterized by negativism, itself a lack of thankfulness. When a person has been overcome with bitterness, it is because they have neglected the important duty of giving thanks for the many blessings God has given. Even in the darkest of hours, there are still many blessings for which each of us should be constantly thankful. The habit of giving thanks for the good things of life is a powerful antidote to bitterness.

But perhaps the most important way in which we may overcome bitterness is to engage in the spiritual practice of forgiving those who hurt us or sin against us. Nothing plants the seeds of bitterness more deeply than an unforgiving heart. But note that forgiveness is a spiritual endeavor—it cannot be manufactured by one’s own strength. Rather, it is the Spirit of God, applying the word of God to our hearts and lives, and one’s willingness to submit to the urgings of the Spirit, that enables one to forgive as God intends.

Ephesians 4:31–32 offers the Apostle Paul’s direct teaching on the subject:

31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Messiah also has forgiven you.

Note carefully that there are both negative and positive aspects to the spiritual practice of forgiveness. The first is detailed in the Apostle’s admonition to “put away” the attitudes of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander. “Wrath” probably focuses on the quick flare-up, the loss of temper, the quick, unguarded word of contempt. “Anger” may deal more with harboring inner feelings against someone, a kind of “slow burn” that eats away at the soul. “Clamor” is that constant “clanging” of negative speech. “Slander” is actually the word “blasphemy,” which, in this case, deals with constantly bringing up those people who have wronged you, and often involves *lashon hara* (evil speech or gossip). Paul ends the list with “malice,” a catch-all word that embraces all manner of bad thoughts and speech.

These, Paul says, should be put away. These kinds of attitudes should find no welcomed lodging in the heart and mind of the believer. If God, in Messiah, has forgiven us of our many sins, then surely we should forgive others. Harboring the negative and sinful attitudes of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander are sure roadblocks to forgiveness. These are the root from which grows a life of unforgiveness, and produces a “root of bitterness.”

The positive part of Paul’s exhortation is: “and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other.” Forgiveness flows from a heart of kindness. The Greek word (χρήτος, *chretos*, “kind”) has the sense of “that which is comfortable,” or “loving, benevolent, and kind.” A person who is kind is easy to be with. This is further described by “tender-hearted,” which means a willingness to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, allowing more leniency than stringency. Finally, the word “forgiveness” (χαρίζομαι, *charizomai*) is related to the Greek word for “grace,” (χάρις, *charis*). Forgiving means showing grace to the one who has hurt us or sinned against us. At its most basic sense, forgiving someone is treating them with a kindness they do not necessarily deserve.

But the most powerful point the Apostle makes in this text is the pattern for our forgiving someone who has hurt us: “just as God in Messiah has forgiven you.” In the same manner that

God forgave us, we are to forgive others. God forgave us before we asked to be forgiven; God forgave us fully, and He continues to forgive us when we sin again. Peter asked the Master, “how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Seven times?” (Matt 18:21). Yeshua’s answer is: “seventy times seven,” meaning, there is no end to forgiveness. This highlights the fact that the ability to forgive as God intends is a spiritual ability, for it requires the unending supply of God’s grace in our own lives. As we feast upon the goodness of God to us in Messiah, we are enabled to constantly give thanks, to rejoice always, and to forgive those who sin against us. It is in this life of grace that we guard our hearts from the debilitating sin of bitterness, and produce the fruit of the Spirit.

Thus, our Torah *parashah* shows the kindness of God to the patriarchs, a kindness that is anchored in His covenant promises. And if He has drawn us into His family, giving us faith to believe, and endowing us with the indwelling Spirit, then we are of all people most fortunate! As we read of the faithfulness of God to the patriarchs, and realize that we have likewise become covenant members within the chosen people of God, such knowledge should produce a heart and life of humble worship and service. It should create in us a desire to do His bidding, and to rejoice to be His servants. And it should cause us to deal quickly with bitterness and unforgiveness lest it be allowed to take root in our hearts and sin against God and our neighbor.

Thus, our motivation to forgive others begins with our own sincere appreciation for how God has forgiven us in Messiah. Anyone who has truly come to understand the unspeakable riches of God’s grace in forgiving all their sins will be willing to extend the same kind of forgiveness to those who sin against them. This is explicitly taught by Yeshua:

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.  
(Matt 6:14–15)

Yeshua is not teaching that God forgives us on the basis of our works, as though we earn His forgiveness by doing what is right in forgiving others. Rather, His point in the context of the Disciples’ Prayer is that one who experiences God’s forgiveness will naturally extend the same kind of grace to others. Conversely, if a person claims to know God and to have accepted His Son, Yeshua, as their Lord and Savior, yet that person’s life is characterized by bitterness and unforgiveness, there exists an obvious and apparent contradiction. As James notes, a spring does not give forth both fresh and bitter water (James 3:11). In reality, the heart that is won over by the love of God is itself characterized by love (cp. Lk 7:36–47).

In the end, a growing awareness of God’s grace to each of us will cause us to love Him more and to focus our life’s attention upon Him and His will for us. Ultimately, it is this life of faith that is used by God to conform us more and more into the image of His Son, Yeshua.

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Rom 8:34)