

# The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn



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## THE TWOFOLD BLESSING

Yitzchak began his blessing with a word that usually comes in the middle: the word *and*.

Addressing his son Yaakov, whom he thought was Eisav, he said: “*And* may Hashem give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth.”

Why did Yitzchak begin his blessing with a word that signifies continuation? Quoting the words “*And* may Hashem give you,” Rashi explains, “He will give, and give again.” Hashem’s act of giving expressed in this verse indeed follows a previous act of giving.

But why would Hashem give something twice? It’s one thing for a human to give twice. If we give someone a gift when our resources are limited, we may decide to supplement it later, when we have the means to do so. Hashem, of course, is unlimited. If He gives a blessing, it surely does not lack anything. Why give a second time?

### PRE-BLESSING VISION

What prompted Yitzchok to give these blessings? The previous verse tells that it was the scent of Yaakov’s clothing. Yitzchak smelled Yaakov’s garments and exclaimed, “Behold, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed!”

Interestingly, the Sifri explains this verse to mean that Yitzchok envisioned the Beis Hamikdash, in three stages. “Fragrance” alludes to the pleasant smell of the *korbanos* brought in the Beis Hamikdash. “My son,” בני, is similar to the word בני, hinting to the Beis Hamikdash as it was built. “Field” hints to the Beis Hamikdash when it was destroyed, which the Navi describes as a “plowed field.” Finally, “Hashem has blessed” refers to the Beis Hamikdash as it will ultimately be rebuilt again. It was this vision that inspired Yitzchak to give the *berachos*.

This is quite puzzling. What connection does the Beis Hamikdash have to these *berachos* and to Hashem’s double act of giving?

### THE IGNORANT SCHOLAR

To answer these questions, we will begin with a *meshal*.

There are two ways of teaching a student:

1. The teacher imparts the information with great skill, and the student understands it perfectly. However, he hasn’t taught the student *how* to learn. He cannot open up a Gemara and learn on his own, and he certainly cannot come up with independent insights.

2. The teacher does much more than just impart information: He shows the student *how* to learn. His thought-process changes, and he is now able to proceed independently.

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The first student is essentially an ignoramus carrying a scholar in his mind.

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Chassidus refers to these two types of interaction as *hamshachah milmaalah lematah* and *haalaah milmatah lemaalah*. *Hamshachah milmaalah lematah* means that something moves from above to below. In our case, the knowledge travels from the teacher, who is in a higher position (*lemaalah*), to the lower-placed student (*lematah*). The student may be able to share deep, novel insights, but they are not his own; he is merely repeating his teacher’s insights.

*Haalaah milmatah lemaalah* means that what is below ascends above. In our case, the teacher guides the

student so that *he* progresses to a higher academic level, until he can even formulate original ideas.

Which method is better? It depends if you’re looking at the *idea* or at the *person*.

You cannot compare the student’s ideas with those he heard from his teacher. The teacher is much wiser, and his insights are more profound and intellectually refined. However, the student’s thoughts are *his own*. He has advanced academically, unlike the first student, who’s essentially an ignoramus carrying a scholar in his mind.

### THE WELL AND THE STREAM

These two types of students are clearly described in Pirkei Avos.

When analyzing the students of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, the Mishnah states that R. Eliezer ben Hurcanus outweighed the rest of his colleagues. Abba Shaul goes on to say that R. Elazar ben Arach outweighed everyone, including R. Eliezer ben Hurcanus.

At first glance, these seem to be two opposing opinions. However, the commentators explain that both are true.

R. Eliezer is described as “a cemented well that doesn’t lose a drop”; he was unmatched in his ability to remember everything his teachers taught him. When comparing the knowledge he retained with the original ideas of his colleagues, he was superior, as his teachers were much wiser than their students.

R. Elazar, on the other hand, is defined as “a gushing stream.” Internalizing his teacher’s guidance, he continuously strived higher like an ever-increasing torrent of water, exceeding even R. Eliezer in his personal level of achievement.

## A BAAL TESHUVAH'S ADVANTAGE

These two models are reflected in two distinct methods of serving Hashem: that of a *tzaddik* (i.e., someone who has never sinned) and of a *baal teshuvah*.

1. A *tzaddik* is like the receiving student. He learns Torah and does *mitzvos* exactly as Hashem desires, thereby drawing down *kedushah* from Above. His efforts are focused (not on changing himself, but) on receiving the divine energy initiated through his Torah observance.
2. By contrast, a *baal teshuvah* is like the growing student. His decision to repent doesn't come from Above but from *within*. He is bothered by how he lived life until now and is motivated to turn over a new leaf.

Who is greater? The Gemara records an argument on the matter, and the Shaloh comments that both opinions are correct. It depends what you're looking at: at the level of *kedushah* or at the person.

A *tzaddik* is holier than a *baal teshuvah*, no doubt. The *kedushah* evoked from Above is much greater than whatever we can hope to achieve on our own.

However, when analyzing the *person*, the *baal teshuvah* has undergone a tremendous self-transformation while the *tzaddik* has not. In this area, the *baal teshuvah* reigns supreme.

## TACKLING EISAV

To assist us in serving Hashem in these two ways, we were blessed with Yitzchak's *berachos*. But first, let's understand why Yitzchak wanted to bless Eisav.

Yitzchok was not oblivious to Eisav's true identity. Indeed, as Rashi explains, he was surprised when Yaakov mentioned Hashem's name, because he knew this was not typical of Eisav. So why bless him?

The answer is that Yitzchak wanted to bless Eisav specifically because of his evil character. His goal was to overwhelm him with the powerful spiritual energy contained within the *berachos*, so that he would be inspired to repent.

What Yitzchak did not realize was that Eisav was too low; even a giant push like that would not get him to change. Hashem therefore arranged for the *berachos* to be given to Yaakov. However, even then the *berachos* were not only for Yaakov's own benefit. The goal was that he would utilize them to elevate the sparks of *kedushah* hidden within Eisav.

How do we elevate Eisav? Not through the *avodah* of a *tzaddik*—regular

Torah and *mitzvah* observance—but through that of a *baal teshuvah*. When we take the courageous step to break free from the past and create a new future—and especially when we are motivated by love of Hashem, which transforms sins to merits—we elevate the element of Eisav.

It follows that Yitzchak's *berachos* had a twofold purpose: to help Yaakov in his own *avodah* as a *tzaddik*, and to assist him in elevating Eisav—the *avodah* of a *baal teshuvah*.

## EMPOWERED TO CHANGE

We can now understand why the *berachos* were preceded by a vision of the Beis Hamikdash.

First, Yitzchak perceived a standing Beis Hamikdash, at a time when the Jews were acting as they should. He then saw that the Beis Hamikdash would be destroyed as a result of our sins. However, it would not remain that way, *chas veshalom*. Ultimately we would do *teshuvah* and the Beis Hamikdash would be rebuilt once more.

This vision was an exact reflection of the *berachos* he then proceeded to give Yaakov. Yitzchak blessed Yaakov that Hashem should give us the energy to act as we should. But that is just the first gift. Hashem gives us a second gift, too: In the event that we do fall, He empowers us to stand up again on our own.

That last line seems to be an oxymoron. If *teshuvah* involves our own efforts, how does supernal assistance fit into the picture?

Looking back at the two types of students, even the innovative student is a *student*. It is the teacher's guidance that enables him to grow on his own. Indeed, R. Elazar ben Arach was also a student of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai.

Similarly, Hashem's *berachah* gives us twofold powers—to receive His *kedushah*, as well as to achieve self-transformation. In this way, we will achieve the last part of Yitzchak's vision, with the building of the third Beis Hamikdash.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 10, pp. 80ff.

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