



Likkutei Sichos

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Investigating Blindness

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1.

THREE REASONS FOR BAD EYESIGHT

On the verse,¹ “And when Yitzchak had become old, his eyes dimmed from seeing,” Rashi bring three interpretations why Yitzchak’s eyes “dimmed”:

This happened through the smoke made by Eisav’s wives (for they would raise smoke and burn incense to idols).² Alternatively, when Yitzchak was bound upon the altar {at the *Akeidah*}, his father had wanted to slaughter him. At that time, the Heavens opened up, and the ministering angels saw and wept. Their tears dropped and fell upon Yitzchak’s eyes. Therefore, his eyes dimmed. Alternatively, {Yitzchak lost his eyesight} so that Yaakov could take the blessings.³

The following is unclear:

- a) Seemingly, the straightforward meaning of the verse provides the reason {why Yitzchak’s eyes dimmed} in the previous verse: “And when Yitzchak had become old.” As a result, “his eyes dimmed from seeing.” [This is like what was said regarding Yaakov:⁴ “And Yisrael’s were heavy with age.”] We see empirically that as a person ages, his eyesight worsens. Since Scripture itself records the reason that “his eyes dimmed,” why does Rashi need to look for other reasons?
- b) Whenever Rashi brings two or more interpretations, it is always because each has a difficulty that the other does not, and the order in which Rashi quotes these interpretations is precise: The difficulty with the second interpretation is greater than that of the first one; and similarly, the difficulty with the third is greater than that of the second.

¹ *Bereishis* 27:1.

² *Re'em* {Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi} explains that his eyesight was damaged because of the **anguish** that the smoke of **idolatry** gave him. *Tanchuma* says: And so the Holy One said (to Himself): I will *dim* his sight {so that he may no longer see what is transpiring and become even more disturbed. Therefore, *his eyes dimmed*}. From a simple reading of Rashi, however — “through the smoke” — his eyes were injured by the smoke itself (because it is normal for smoke to injure one’s eyes; cf. *Mishlei* 10:26).

³ {Scripture tells us that Yaakov dressed up as Eisav to secure the blessings of the firstborn.}

⁴ *Bereishis* 48:10.

We need to clarify what are the difficulties in all three interpretations; in what way the second is more difficult than the first; and in what way is the third the most problematic?

- c) As mentioned many times, when Rashi brings three interpretations (aside from the **particular** difficulty inherent in each **individual** interpretation that necessitates the other two), there is also a difficulty with each combination of two (of the three) interpretations together, which is why a third interpretation was necessary. Because by offering the third interpretation, this difficulty doesn't exist.⁵ (If all the difficulties would fall away by just offering two interpretations, Rashi would not bring a third).

In Rashi's commentary under consideration, we also need to find the common difficulty that arises when **any** two of the interpretations are combined, and how the third one resolves this issue.

2.

OLD AGE IS NO EXCUSE

The reason Rashi does not learn (simply) that “his eyes dimmed” because “Yitzchak became old” is that in the previous *parshah*,⁶ where it says, “Hashem blessed Yitzchak,” Rashi explains: “(Avraham) was afraid to bless Yitzchak.... Avraham said, ‘Let the Master of blessings come and bless....’ So the Holy One came and blessed Yitzchak.”

So the question arises: How could it be that “his eyes dimmed” after Hashem Himself had blessed Yitzchak? Poor eyesight causes people pain and anguish, so much so that Rashi says later⁷ that Yitzchak was considered “as if he were dead.” It's clear that since Hashem Himself, the Master of blessings, blessed Yitzchak, old age should not have harmed him to the extent that it was

⁵ Sometimes, the advantage of a third explanation is not because of **difficulties**, but it is closer to the **simple** reading of the text.

⁶ *Bereishis* 25:11.

⁷ *Bereishis* 28:13.

“as if he was dead” for 57 years (especially in those days when the age of 123 years⁸ was not considered so old)!

(The question is perplexing in particular since we don't find any mention {of poor eyesight} regarding a single person until now, although many people were much older than 123.)

Therefore, Rashi offers other reasons that “his eyes dimmed.” This means (in general, and especially) that because of the blessing that Hashem had given Yitzchak, had there not been other factors at play, Yitzchak’s eyes, in fact, would not have dimmed — like those of Moshe, concerning whom it says: “His eyes did not become dim.”⁹ Here, however, other factors were involved, and they were the cause that “his eyes dimmed.”

3.

THE VERSE SAYS IT

Since as soon as we encounter the verse, “his eyes dimmed from seeing,” the difficulty immediately arises — how could it be that Yitzchak, who was blessed by Hashem Himself, should suffer from blindness?¹⁰ — therefore, it makes sense to say that the answer is hinted at in the verses themselves. Since the verse, “his eyes dimmed from seeing,” follows the previous verse which speaks about how the wives of Eisav “tormented Yitzchak and to Rivkah” (because the wives were serving idols,)¹¹ it stands to reason that the juxtaposition of this verse hints at the reason “his eyes dimmed.”

Accordingly, Rashi offers the interpretation that “his eyes dimmed” because of the “smoke of these” immediately as the primary interpretation, because it is hinted at in the verses themselves. In contrast, according to the

⁸ That was the age of Yitzchak at this point; Rashi on *Bereishis* 27:2.

⁹ *Devarim* 34:7.

¹⁰ {In the Hebrew original, “כהו עיניו.”}

¹¹ Rashi on *Bereishis* 26:35.

other two interpretations, the reason that Yitzchak lost his eyesight is not hinted at in the straightforward meaning of the verses.

4.

THE STORY

However, there are two difficulties with the first interpretation:

- a) Clearly, the wives of Eisav did not live together with Yitzchak, but they had their own house (or houses) for themselves.¹² It is also clear that “they served idols” and would “raise smoke...” in **their own** (domain,) home. That’s why it’s hard to say that the “smoke of these” in **their own** home injured Yitzchak, who was in his home.

- b) Why did their “smoke” injure only Yitzchak and not Rivkah?

Because of these two difficulties with the first interpretation, Rashi offered other interpretations.

5.

THE STORY

The particular difficulties with each of the other two interpretations — (a) “when he was bound upon the altar... and their tears descended and fell on his eyes”; and (b) “so that Yaakov should take the blessings” [aside from the difficulty common to both interpretations — that there is no hint to these interpretations in the verse, as we mentioned]:

The second interpretation is difficult: The style of the interpretation (that “the heavens opened up, and the ministering angels saw, and were crying. Their

¹² See the *Tur HaAruch* and *Paneach Raza*.

tears descended... therefore his eyes dimmed”) is one of *drush*,¹³ and completely incompatible with the straightforward reading of the verse, which is Rashi’s approach in his Torah commentary.

There is an even greater difficulty with the third interpretation. How could it be that Hashem impaired Yitzchak's eyesight (for so many years) in order that **another person**, Yaakov, should receive the blessings? This difficulty is especially acute since Hashem has many ways of orchestrating things, and He certainly had another way by which Yaakov could have received the blessings.

This is a much greater difficulty (than the difficulty with the second interpretation) because dispensing hardship and the opposite of good to one person for the betterment of another person appears unfair, and it is **absolutely impossible** to say, G-d forbid, that Hashem is unjust. Therefore, Rashi brings this third explanation **after** the second one.

6.

THE NARRATIVE

We stated earlier that each of the three interpretations has an advantage over the other two. In other words, each of the two interpretations has the **same** difficulty, or wrinkle, which the third does not have.

The main advantage of the first interpretation over the other two is, as discussed above, that it is the only interpretation hinted at in the verse.

There is an advantage to the second interpretation over the first and third. According to all three, “his eyes dimmed” was the circumstance that made it possible for Yitzchak to give the blessing to Yaakov. According to the first and third interpretations, however, the wording, “his eyes dimmed” implies that it was by means of something negative. (According to the first interpretation, it

¹³ {*Drush* is an exegetical method of commentary in which the words of a verse are expounded to express a homiletical thought.}

came about because of the smoke of **idol worship**, and according to the third interpretation, it came about because Yitzchak wanted to bless **Eisav**.) So it turns out, something **shameful** and **negative** brought about... the **blessings**!

However, according to the second explanation, the opposite was the case: “His eyes dimmed” because of Yitzchak’s **virtue** — it was by virtue of the *Akeidah*.

Additionally, the third interpretation has an advantage over the first two.

According to the first two interpretations, it turns out that “his eyes dimmed from seeing” much before “Yitzchak had become old.” {According to the first interpretation, that his blindness was caused by Eisav’s wives — } when Eisav took Hittite wives (when he was “forty years old”),¹⁴ Yitzchak was one hundred years old (for when Eisav was born, Yitzchak was sixty years old¹⁵). And according to the second interpretation, that Yitzchak was blinded by the angels’ tears, he became blind even earlier, when he was thirty-seven years old.¹⁶

If so, why does it say, “when Yitzchak had become old” first, and only then, “his eyes dimmed”? According to the first two interpretations, these two events should have been recorded in the reverse order — the order in which they actually took place!

Because of this difficulty, Rashi brings a third interpretation — “so that Yaakov should take the blessings” — which makes the order of the verses much smoother. “And when Yitzchak had become old” — because he became old, Yitzchak wanted to give the blessings to Eisav; therefore, “His eyes dimmed...” in order for **Yaakov** to take the blessings.

¹⁴ *Bereishis* 26:34.

¹⁵ *Bereishis* 25:26.

¹⁶ Rashi on *Bereishis* 25:20.

THE STORY

From Rashi's third interpretation, we can learn a lesson on how careful we need to be with *lashon hara* — slander.

Seemingly, in order for Yaakov to take the blessings, Hashem had a simple solution. He could have revealed to Yitzchak that Eisav was wicked, and naturally, Yitzchak would have given the blessing to Yaakov.

This certainly would have been the case because Yitzchak already knew that Eisav's wives were serving idols.¹⁷ (Yitzchak, however, thought that Eisav was not responsible, and that he could not influence his wives.) Even regarding Eisav, Yitzchak knew that “something” was not completely right with him — “It wasn't the manner of Eisav to have the name of Heaven fluent in his mouth.”¹⁸ Since Yitzchak already suspected Eisav, Hashem could have revealed the complete story — that Eisav was wicked — and Yitzchak wouldn't need to lose his vision.

We see, therefore, how careful we must be with *lashon hara*. Yitzchak was “confined to his house,”¹⁹ and was considered “as if he was dead,” for 57 years, just to avoid speaking *lashon hara* about a Jew (even an apostate).²⁰

If this was true regarding Eisav, how much more so is this true regarding Jews after *Matan Torah* — after Hashem said to **every** Jew,²¹ “I am Hashem your L-rd.” For at that moment, “I am Hashem” became “your L-rd” — the strength and vitality of every Jew.²²

—Based on talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Toldos* and Shabbos *parshas Vayishlach*, 5728 (1967)

¹⁷ Rashi on *Bereishis* 26:35.

¹⁸ Rashi on *Bereishis* 27:21.

¹⁹ {Rashi on *Bereishis* 28:13.}

²⁰ See *Kiddushin* 18a.

²¹ In the singular; see Ramban on *Shemos* 20:2.

²² *Likkutei Torah*, “*Re'eh*.”