Part 1: Two Delicacies: Inner Insight into Jacob’s theft of Isaac’s Blessing

Everyone knows the story of Jacob and Rebecca teaming up to trick Isaac out of the blessing intended for Eisav the firstborn. Isaac was blind, he sent Eisav off to hunt for a delicacy and in the meantime Rebecca prepared a delicacy at home and dressed Jacob with furs so that his arms would feel as hairy as Eisav. Isaac seems a little confused, he says, “The voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Eisav.” But he blesses him anyways.

That’s the simple basic version of the story. There are lots of questions. Was Isaac totally out of touch? Was he so oblivious to the reality to think that the wicked Eisav deserved the blessing more than Jacob did?

We know Isaac was suspicious. Just before blessing Jacob he observed, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Eisav." If he suspected something was amiss, why did he go ahead and bless him?

Another strange aspect of this whole story is the actual content of the blessing. Take a look at the blessing that Jacob stole. It's a blessing for prosperity and power. It speaks of grain and dew. Then skip to the end of this Torah portion, where Isaac blesses Jacob before he runs away from home. That blessing is much more appropriate and Jacob-like. That blessing includes the heritage of Abraham and the promise of the Land of Israel. That’s more like it. It seems like Isaac had planned a spiritual blessing for Jacob and a physical blessing for Esav. So why did Jacob have to go and steal Eisav's physical blessing?

Because of all these questions and more, the Chassidic explanation delves deeper than the simple literal meaning for a rich and beautiful interpretation that's relevant and applicable to our lives today.

Tanya 27 explains that the meaning of Jacob’s request, "Make me Delicacies so that I may bless you," is more than what Isaac told Eisav a few thousand years ago. This is a continuous call and charge of the Divine Presence to all of the Jewish People! G-d enjoys two types of delicacies - which is why the verse refers to it in plural.

a) Sweet foods that taste good from the start: A piece of cake, fresh fruit or a candy.

b) Sharp or spicy foods, that when properly prepared are delicious to a more mature palate. Think pickle or hot sauce.

This isn't just about food. It’s a metaphor for two ways that we can serve G-d. The first is with things like Tefillin or Torah study which is straight up good and holy, the second is with things that involve challenge and effort, they have some kick and tang and zest. G-d wants both! In the language of Chassidus it’s the difference between Iskafya and Ishapcha, the struggle of the Benoni versus the soaring spiritual heights of the Tzaddik. You can even think of it as the difference between a college age individual living in Jerusalem or Brooklyn versus being a student trying to do Judaism in XYZ College.

Isaac figured that Jacob was the spiritual type, studying Torah all day, sitting in the tent. He couldn't see Jacob making the spicy, zesty, challenge type of pleasure for G-d. So Isaac thought he'd give Jacob the spiritual blessing, but give Eisav the physical one. He hoped that Eisav would be up to the challenge to bring G-dliness to a physical world, to create that spicy and sharp type of pleasure for G-d, with a kick.
Rebecca saw it differently. She knew Eisav wouldn’t utilize the physical blessing toward a G-dly end. And she realized that Jacob had another side to him. By dressing him in fur, she demonstrated that Jacob can be both the voice of Jacob and the hands of Eisav. She saw his ability to prepare and produce both types of delicacies for G-d. When Isaac saw that, he went ahead and gave him the physical blessing too.

Remember the mission! Our task is to make both types of delicacies in our daily lives from which G-d derives great pleasure!

(If prepared ahead, you can try to match the two types of food in the meal to demonstrate this thought).

Part 2: Would Our Ancestors Recognize Us? Do We Look Familiar?

This Parsha opens with a repetitive phrase. Yitzchak was the son of Abraham, Abraham gave birth to Yitzchak.

Why the double language? Rashi quotes a Medrash. A nasty rumor was spreading that Yitzchak wasn’t Abraham’s son; perhaps he was born during the time that Sarah was with Pharaoh? There was no paternity test back in those days, so G-d made sure that Yitzchak and Avraham had strikingly similar features. They were two peas in a pod, they looked alike. There could be no mistake that Abraham was indeed Yitzchak’s father.

In Chabad, there is an old litmus test. Imagine if the Alter Rebbe, who founded Chabad in the late 1700’s, walked into this room tonight. How much would he recognize? Yes, we dress differently, speak a different language, and maybe have different foods. We have electricity and central heat, and modern architecture. But hopefully, there’s much here that would make the Alter Rebbe feel right at home!

We make the same Kiddush, make HaMotzee on Challah, sing Shalom Aleichem and eat a Shabbos meal. All of which he would have done on a Friday Night, 250 years ago in Russia. The idea of Jews of all backgrounds and varying levels of observance sitting and celebrating together is a physical embodiment of his Ahavas Yisrael teachings in Tanya chapter 32. The fact that we are doing this in XYZ location fulfills his vision of Dirah B’tachtonim, making an accessible and vibrant dwelling place for G-d, wherever and whenever.

So this is an important Jewish question. How much do we have in common Jewishly with our ancestors? If your grandparent’s grandparents were to walk into your dorm room, what would they recognize? What would make them feel at home? A Mezuzah would be a familiar sign, for sure, a Jewish book or poster, some Hebrew lettering, a charity box, maybe a Menorah or Tefillin or another Jewish object.

For this familiarity and commonality to work, it has to go both ways. Our ancestors would have to look beyond the context and externals to find similarities with us. And we have to retain some of what they cherished for anything to look familiar.

OK, even with all the technological advances, we are not doing time-travel anytime soon! But this isn’t a hypothetical question anymore. The world has become a smaller place, and especially in Israel or in larger Jewish communities, it’s likely that you will meet Jews from different cultures and backgrounds, Ashkenazi meets Sephardi, and Jews of the West Coast meet Jews of Yemen. What common denominators do we have with all Jews? What conversations can we have that would be understood across the spectrum of Jewish life? What core values do we all share, what objects and teachings and observances are something we can all relate to and connect with?

Look around your room tonight. How similar are we to Abraham and to our ancestors in Jewish history?
Part 2a: The Matzah Box Tombstone Story

Speaking of having Jewish things in our rooms that make us recognizable to Jews across the generations or around the world... here is a story:

In the 1920’s a Jewish businessman named Walter Galler settled in Namibia, then a German colony in Africa. When he died in 1939, his non-Jewish wife decided they would give him a Jewish burial. Knowing little of what a Jewish burial entailed, they engraved a Jewish Star with some Hebrew lettering on his tombstone.

The Jewish Star was easy enough, but Hebrew lettering in the distant colony was difficult to find – back in the days before internet access. So they went through the deceased’s belongings looking for some lettering. They came up with nothing, until someone found an old box in a cupboard, with Hebrew lettering.

They buried him under a tombstone with a Jewish Star, with Hebrew lettering that reads: “Kosher for Passover.” That was because the Hebrew lettering they found was on a box of Matzah. Walter Geller’s grave is in the Windhoek cemetery.

Our “stuff” tells a lot about who we are. Having Jewish books, ritual objects or even jewelry around enriches and enhances our identity. Of course, increased involvement or observance is a more significant step, yet even the mere possession of objects of our heritage are meaningful links and ties.

Hopefully, there is more to be found about our Jewish lives than a box of Matzah. Let’s make sure of that.

Part 3: The Shluchim Photo and The Rebbe’s Vision

Friends, let me share with you this picture. They call it the Where's Waldo picture. Every year, around this time, Chabad Shluchim from all over the world gather in Crown Heights for the Kinus, the annual conference. It’s usually a few thousand men sometime at the end of November, and the women have their conference in February. I am here with you this Shabbat, but many of my friends and colleagues are gathering this weekend in NY.

Every year they take this group photo. It doesn’t change much, aside for growing larger every year. It's always in front of the Rebbe's synagogue and office, 770 Eastern Parkway. All the men have black hats, dark suits, many wear glasses. Finding your Chabad Shliach is like finding a needle in a haystack.

Here’s a paradox. Everyone has the black hat, everyone has a beard. It looks like one big sea of sameness. But as anyone who has been to multiple Chabad Houses knows good and well how different we are. Yes, we share the same mission and dedication, but we each express it and develop it in our own way. So many of you have commented to me on the interesting differences between the Chabad Houses you’ve visited.

Chabad celebrates individuality, each Chabad House is unique, and it is not a cookie-cutter franchise. The Rebbe encouraged each Shliach to build on their own personal strengths, and on the strengths and needs of their particular community.

This concept is oft-repeated in the Rebbe's teachings; Klal and Prat, community and individual. In fact the Rebbe's very last farbrengen in 1992 was about this very subject (Vaykahel vs Pekudei). And the Waldo analogy is accurate, because Chabad shares the same message and life-lesson as the Waldo books: "You are never lost in the crowd!"
The Rebbe hardly spoke in terms of the Jewish people or Jewish community. Instead the Rebbe used language like Yeder Yid un Aleh Yidden, each and every Jew, Kol Echad vAchas MiYisroel... v'Atem Teluktu Echad Echad... etc.

Taking this photo is not a job for your iPhone. To properly make this huge image, in which every single face is in focus, Chabad retains the professional services of veteran photographer Don Holloway, a specialist in these types of pictures.

The Rebbe was this type of expert. He envisioned the huge spectrum of the Jewish people, the global picture, from Thailand to Toronto, Laos to Los Angeles etc... and yet was deeply concerned with each and every Jew, an incredible vision where each individual Jew is in sharp focus.

(There are so many different ways to go on with the theme, if a longer more in-depth thought is needed...)