Toldot: Bechor (Firstborn) and Beracha (Blessing)

One and the Same?

Rabbi David Russo Shabbat morning, November 14, 2026 4th of Kislev, 5787

First Appearance of Bechor: Animal in Sibling Conflict (Genesis 4:4)

וְהֶ֖בֶל הֵבִ֣יא גַם־ה֑וּא **מִבְּכֹרֹ֥ת** צֹאנ֖וֹ וּמֵחֶלְבֵהֶ֑ן וַיִּ֤שַׁע יְהוָה֙ אֶל־הֶ֔בֶל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתֽוֹ׃	and Abel, for his part, brought the **choicest** of the firstlings of his flock. GOD paid heed to Abel and his offering…

Second Appearance of Bechor: Genealogy (Genesis 10:15)

וּכְנַ֗עַן יָלַ֛ד אֶת־צִידֹ֥ן **בְּכֹר֖וֹ** וְאֶת־חֵֽת׃	Canaan begot Sidon, his **first-born**, and Heth;

Genesis 22:21, 25:13: "bechor" appears in genealogy

Repeated Appearance of Bechor (Genesis 25:29-34)

Hebrew	JPS	Dr. Everett Fox
וַיָּ֥זֶד יַעֲקֹ֖ב נָזִ֑יד וַיָּבֹ֥א עֵשָׂ֛ו מִן־הַשָּׂדֶ֖ה וְהֽוּא־עָיֵֽף׃	29. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished.	29 Once Yaakov was boiling boiled-stew, when Esav came in from the field, and he was weary.
וַיֹּ֤אמֶר עֵשָׂו֙ אֶל־יַעֲקֹ֔ב הַלְעִיטֵ֥נִי נָ֖א מִן־הָאָדֹ֣ם הָאָדֹ֑ם הַזֶּ֕ה כִּ֥י עָיֵ֖ף אָנֹ֑כִי עַל־כֵּ֥ן קָרָֽא־שְׁמ֖וֹ אֱדֽוֹם׃	30. And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished"—which is why he was named Edom.	30 Esav said to Yaakov: Pray give me a gulp of the red-stuff, that red-stuff, for I am so weary! Therefore they called his name: Edom/Red-One.
וַיֹּ֥אמֶר יַעֲקֹ֖ב מִכְרָ֣ה כַיּ֑וֹם אֶת־**בְּכֹרָתְךָ֖** לִֽי׃	31. Jacob said, "First sell me your **birthright**."	31 Yaakov said: Sell me your **firstborn-right** here-and-now.
וַיֹּ֣אמֶר עֵשָׂ֗ו הִנֵּ֤ה אָנֹכִי֙ הוֹלֵ֣ךְ לָמ֔וּת וְלָמָּה־זֶּ֥ה לִ֖י **בְּכֹרָ֑ה**׃	32. And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my **birthright** to me?"	32 Esav said: Here, I am on my way to dying, so what good to me is a **firstborn-right**?
וַיֹּ֥אמֶר יַעֲקֹ֖ב הִשָּׁבְעָ֣ה לִ֑י כַּיּ֕וֹם וַיִּשָּׁבַ֥ע לוֹ֖ וַיִּמְכֹּ֥ר אֶת־**בְּכֹרָתֽוֹ** לְיַעֲקֹֽב׃	33. But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his **birthright** to Jacob.	33 Yaakov said: Swear to me here-and-now. He swore to him and sold his **firstborn-right** to Yaakov.
וְיַעֲקֹ֞ב נָתַ֤ן לְעֵשָׂו֙ לֶ֣חֶם וּנְזִ֣יד עֲדָשִׁ֔ים וַיֹּ֥אכַל וַיֵּ֖שְׁתְּ וַיָּ֑קָם וַיֵּ֣לֶךְ וַיִּבֶ֔ז עֵשָׂ֖ו אֶת־**הַבְּכֹרָֽה**׃	34. Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the **birthright**.	34 Yaakov gave Esav bread and boiled lentils; he ate and drank and arose and went off. Thus did Esav despise the **firstborn-right**.

THE SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT (vv. 27–34): JPS Torah commentary, pages 180-181

The **struggle for seniority** between the twins, which **commenced inside the womb**, **continues into adulthood**. Jacob now seizes an opportunity to inveigle Esau into transferring the birthright to him. His desperate endeavors to obtain this end by means fair or foul can only be understood in terms of a specific psychological situation, the elements of which were certain complex sacred realities.

The **first-born son** along with the **first fruits of the soil** and the **male firstlings** of the **herd** and the flock were considered to be possessed of a **unique sanctity**. They all **belonged to God**.

The first male issue of the human womb **had to be redeemed from his sacral state**. Originally he was accorded a privileged position in the cult. At a **later time the tribe of Levi displaced the first-born in Israel** and appropriated his cultic prerogatives.

Being the primary guarantor of the future of the family line and, hence, of the preservation of the ancestral heritage, the **first-born** naturally **ranked second only to the head of the family**, the paterfamilias, whose successor he would automatically become.

Isaac's blessing in 27:29 makes this quite clear. The **status of first-born** was bound up with **responsibilities** and obligations on the one hand **and** with rights, **privileges**, and prerogatives on the other.

Two other aspects of the story of Jacob and Esau have been illuminated by ancient Near Eastern documents. We now know that a **father** had the **right** to **disregard chronological considerations** in determining his heirs and that an heir was able to barter away his future inheritance.

The **hegemony of the older brother in the ancient world is widely attested**. The right of the first-born to a double share of the inheritance is documented at Mari and Nuzi, in the Middle Assyrian laws, and in biblical law (Deut. 21:17).

The provisions of Deuteronomy 21:15–17 establish that **at some period** it had been legally and socially **acceptable in Israel** for the **father** to **ignore seniority of birth**. We know also that Jacob deprived Reuben of his birthright, an event that is commemorated in the poem of Genesis 49:3–4 and explained in I Chronicles 5:1.

Further, Genesis 48:13 tells us that Jacob passed over Manasseh in favor of the younger Ephraim. Added to these examples is the documentation from Nuzi, Alalakh, and Ugarit, all confirming the same sociological situation. Finally, the possibility of the transfer of inheritance rights is illustrated by a Nuzi tablet that records how a man parted with his future inheritance share in return for three sheep received immediately from his brother.

Bechor: The Sanctity of the First Born

Exodus 13: 2, 11-12

קַדֶּשׁ־לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל־רֶחֶם בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה לִי הוּא:	2. Consecrate to Me every male first-born; human and animal, the first [male] issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine.
וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ כָל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם לַיהוָה וְכָל־פֶּטֶר ן שֶׁגֶר בְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לְךָ הַזְּכָרִים לַיהוָה: וְכָל־פֶּטֶר חֲמֹר תִּפְדֶּה בְשֶׂה וְאִם־לֹא תִפְדֶּה וַעֲרַפְתּוֹ וְכֹל בְּכוֹר אָדָם בְּבָנֶיךָ תִּפְדֶּה:	11. you shall set apart for GOD every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be GOD's. 12. But every firstling donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every male first-born among your children.

Bechor vs. Levites and Responsibility

Numbers 3:11-13

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה לָקַחְתִּי אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם: כִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה לִי יִהְיוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה:	GOD spoke to Moses, saying: I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the male first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine. For every such first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, human and animal, to Myself, to be Mine, GOD's.

Levites Supplant the Firstborn: Numbers Rabba 3:5

תַּחַת כָּל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (במדבר ג, י) בַּתְּחִלָּה הָיְתָה הָעֲבוֹדָה בַּבְּכוֹרוֹת, וּלְפִי שֶׁקִּלְקְלוּ בָּעֵגֶל זָכוּ לְוִיִּם עַל שֶׁלֹּא טָעוּ בָּעֵגֶל לְכָךְ נִס תַּחְתֵּיהֶם.	"In place of every firstborn, first issue of the womb from the children of Israel" – initially the service was performed by the firstborns. Because [the firstborns] sinned with the calf, the Levites merited to take their place because they did not err with the calf.

DAF YOMI: Daf Yomi is a worldwide Jewish learning initiative in which participants study one page (daf) of the Talmud each day, completing the entire Talmud in about seven and a half years. Rabbanit Michelle Cohen Farber of Hadran created a Daf Yomi podcast, along with many other resources, spreading the study of the Talmud, all while making Talmud study more accessible, insightful, and inclusive for thousands around the world. The conclusion of the seven and a half year cycle will take place this summer.

Masechet (Tractate Bekhorot) https://steinsaltz.org/daf/bekhorot/
Massekhet Bekhorot focuses on the laws related to "firstborns." Its placement immediately following *Massekhet Ḥullin* apparently stems from the relationship between the rules and regulations that apply to firstborn kosher animals – which are the core ideas discussed in this tractate – and the laws of kosher slaughter and priestly gifts that appear in *Ḥullin*.

The Torah (Shemot 13:12-13) presents three separate situations where the laws of the firstborn apply:

1. A firstborn male that must be redeemed by his father,
2. A firstborn male (kosher) animal that is sanctified from birth and is to be sacrificed,
3. A firstborn male donkey (not kosher animal) that must be exchanged for a lamb.

Firstborn rights = Blessing? Midrash Tehillim 1:1

מהו (שם יב ב) והיה ברכה.	What is the meaning of "you shall be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2)?
אמר רב נחמן שמסר לו את הברכות ואמר לו עד כאן הייתי זקוק לברך את עולמי מכאן ואילך הרי הברכות מסורות לך ולמאן דאת יהיב ליה ברכה בריך.	Rav Nachman said: [God] passed the blessings over to [Abraham] and told him, "Until now, I was required to bless my world, but from now on, the blessings are passed over to you, and whoever you bless will be blessed."
כיון שעמד יצחק ברכו. מה כתיב (שם כה ה) ויתן אברהם את כל אשר לו ליצחק.	When Isaac arose, [Abraham] blessed him. What [does it mean when it is] written, "And he gave all that he had to Isaac" (Genesis 25:5)?
מה נתן לו. ר' יהודה ור' נחמיה ורבנן (אמרי):	What did [Abraham] give to [Yitzchak]? [There is a three-way debate about this between] Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Nechemia, and the Rabbis.
רבי יהודה אומר זו בכורה.	Rabbi Yehuda said, [he gave him the **entitlements** of] the **first born**.
ור' נחמיה אמר זו ברכה.	Rabbi Nechemia said it was a **blessing**.
ורבנן אמרי זו קבורה ודיאתיקי (שטר ירושה).	And the Rabbis said that it was **burial [rights] and a document of inheritance** [for the cemetery in Hebron].

Genesis 27:28-41

The Five Senses and Deception (Dr. Everett Fox, pg. 122)
"Despite the fact that the story line is a simple one, involving deception and the 'taking' of the blessing, the text is imbued with great subtlety. Most striking is the sensuality it invokes: seven times we hear of 'game,' six of the 'delicacy' (or 'tasty-dish'), and three times Yitzchak 'feels' Yaakov (who 'comes close' four times). In fact the story makes use of all five of the senses. One sense – that of sight – is defective, and on that deficiency will turn the action of the story. Yet another level of meaning is apparent: 'to see' in ancient Israel, as in many cultures, was a term connected to prophetic powers… So here, ironically, Yitzhak's blindness leads to both deception and to the proper transferal of the blessing."

Innermost Blessing (Dr. Nachum Sarna, JPS Torah commentary, pg. 190, Genesis 27:4)
"*my innermost blessing:* Literally, "that my being (Heb. nefesh) may bless you." This formulation, which appears again three times, is clearly of great importance to the understanding of the blessing. We see from verse 28 that the source and sanction of the blessing is not man but God. Isaac summons from the very depths of his own soul all the vitality and energy at his command in order to invoke God's blessing upon his son. He communicates the blessing to his offspring by virtue of his own special relationship with God and by dint of his power and authority as patriarch."

Isaac and Esau's Terror (Dr. Everett Fox Pg. 126, verse 33-34)
Movingly, the father's terror and the son's anguish mirror one another via use of the same phrase (Hebrew *ad me'od*, which is rare).

Blessings as Irrevocable (Dr. Nachum Sarna, JPS Torah commentary, pg. 193 Genesis 27:33)
"*Now he must remain blessed*: Isaac is overwhelmed with consternation but then realizes that, irrespective of the circumstances, the blessing he has uttered is beyond recall. According to the conception of the times, it now has a potency and dynamism all its own, and the destiny that has been solemnly conferred upon his younger son is irreversible (v. 37). For this reason, Esau does not ask his father to rescind the blessing, only to bless him as well."

Only Two People Can Be in a Conversation (Dr. Robert Alter, pg. 139, Genesis 27:5)
"According to convention of biblical narrative, there can be only two interlocutors in a dialogue (as in Aeschylean tragedy), though one of them may be a collective presence – e.g., a person addressing a crowd and receiving its collective response. Within the limits of this convention, the writer has woven an artful chain. The story, preponderantly in dialogue, is made up of seven interlocking scenes: Isaac-Esau, Rebekah-Jacob, Jacob-Isaac, Isaac-Esau, Rebekah-Jacob, Rebekah-Isaac, Isaac-Jacob. The first two pairs set out the father and his favorite son, then the mother and her favorite son, in opposing tracks. Husband and wife are kept apart until the penultimate scene; there is no dialogue at all between the two

brothers, or between Rebekah and Esau. Although one must always guard against the excesses of numerological exegesis, it is surely not accidental that there are just seven scenes, and that the key word 'blessing' (*berakhah*) is repeated seven times."

Kids (i.e. Goats) As Instrument of Deception (Dr. Robert Alter, pg. 140, Genesis 27:9:
"*two choice kids*: Kids will again be an instrument of deception, turned on Jacob, when his sons bring him Joseph's tunic soaked in kid's blood. And in the immediately following episode (Genesis chapter 38), Judah, the engineer of the deception, will promise to send kids as payment to the woman he imagines is a roadside prostitute, and who is actually his daughter-in-law Tamar, using deception to obtain what is rightfully hers."

Phrase First Born (Dr. Robert Alter, pg. 141, Genesis 27:19):
"*I am Esau your firstborn*: He reserve the crucial term 'firstborn' for the end of his brief response. As Nahum Sarna notes, the narrator carefully avoids identifying Esau as firstborn, using instead 'elder son' (Genesis 27:1). The loaded term is introduced by Jacob to cinch his false claim, and it will again be used by Esau (verse 32) when he retusn from the hunt."

A Case of Blessings (or Spirit) Can Be Shared

<u>במדבר י"א</u> יא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' לָמָּה הֲרֵעֹתָ לְעַבְדֶּךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־מָצָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לָשׂוּם אֶת־מַשָּׂא כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלָי: יב הֶאָנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אָנֹכִי יְלִדְתִּיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שָׂאֵהוּ בְחֵיקֶךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאֹמֵן אֶת־הַיֹּנֵק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לַאֲבֹתָיו: יג מֵאַיִן לִי בָּשָׂר לָתֵת לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־יִבְכּוּ עָלַי לֵאמֹר תְּנָה־לָּנוּ בָשָׂר וְנֹאכֵלָה: יד לֹא־אוּכַל אָנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לָשֵׂאת אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּנִּי: טו וְאִם־כָּכָה	אַתְּ־עֹשֶׂה לִּי הָרְגֵנִי נָא הָרֹג אִם־מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאַל־אֶרְאֶה בְּרָעָתִי: טז וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֱסָפָה־לִּי שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָדַעְתָּ כִּי־הֵם זִקְנֵי הָעָם וְשֹׁטְרָיו וְלָקַחְתָּ אֹתָם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהִתְיַצְּבוּ שָׁם עִמָּךְ: יז וְיָרַדְתִּי וְדִבַּרְתִּי עִמְּךָ שָׁם וְאָצַלְתִּי **מִן־הָרוּחַ** אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיךָ וְשַׂמְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתְּךָ בְּמַשָּׂא הָעָם וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא אַתָּה לְבַדֶּךָ: ... כד וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־הָעָם אֶת דִּבְרֵי ה' וַיֶּאֱסֹף שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזִּקְנֵי הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֵד אֹתָם סְבִיבֹת הָאֹהֶל: כה וַיֵּרֶד ה'	בֶּעָנָן וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו **וַיָּאצֶל מִן־הָרוּחַ** אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו **וַיִּתֵּן עַל־שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ הַזְּקֵנִים** וַיְהִי כְּנוֹחַ עֲלֵיהֶם הָרוּחַ וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יָסָפוּ:	**<u>Numbers 11</u>** 11 Moses said to God, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12 Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,’ to the land that you swore to give their fathers? 13 Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, ‘Give us meat, that we may eat.’ 14 I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. 15 If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” 16 Then God said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. 17 And I will come down and talk with you there. **And I will take some of the Spirit** that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone... 24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of God. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. 25 Then God came down in the cloud and spoke to him, **and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders**. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

Sharing the Spirit (Dr. Robert Alter, pg. 737, Numbers 11:17):
Holdback some of the spirit: The verb *atsal*, which Esau uses when he asks Isaac whether he has held in reserve some blessing for his real firstborn, suggests that a certain limited portion of the spirit vouchsafed for Moses is taken from him to be distributed among the elders. This is precisely what is involved in the delegation of authority.

(JPS Torah commentary, Dr. Jacob Milgrom, pg. 87, Numbers 11:17):
The divine spirit will either be drawn from Moses, thereby diminishing him, or the divine spirit that has been bestowed on Moses will now also rest on the elders. According to the latter explanation, the divine spirit, like wisdom or candlelight, can be given to others without any diminution of its source.

Sifrei Bamidbar 93

ואצלתי מן הרוח. למה משה דומה באותה שעה? לנר שמונח על גבי מנורה, ודלקו ממנו נרות הרבה ולא חסר אורו כלום; כך לא היתה חכמתו של משה חסרה כלום:	"And I shall increase from the spirit which is upon you, and I will place it upon them.": What was Moses like at that time? Like a lamp placed upon a menorah, from which many lamps are lighted without the first losing any of its light. So, the wisdom of Moses was in no way diminished thereby.