

## Parshat Toldot

# Salt and Straw

Sponsored by Rabbi Shimon Markel in honor of the birthday of Rebbetzin Miriam Jacobs *shetichye* and the *yortzeit* of her beloved mother, Rebbetzin Pesya Gittel bas Eliezer Rosenfeld a”h.

*In describing Esav’s and Yaakov’s distinct personalities, the Torah describes Esav as “one who knows hunting.” Rashi’s precisely worded commentary on these words brings a new appreciation to Esav’s character.*

In Parshat Toldot the Torah describes the stark dissimilarity of Yitzchak’s two sons, Esav and Yaakov.

### Text 1

The lads grew up and Esav became one who knows hunting, a man of the field; but Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents.

*Bereishit 25:27*

Rashi explains the words, “one who knows hunting,” as referring to Esav’s skill of deception with which he attempted to deceive his father Yitzchak.

Rashi states:

### Text 2

[He knew how] to trap and to deceive his father with his mouth and ask him, “Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?” His father thereby thought that he was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments.

*Rashi, Ibid*

The commentators explain, that Esav specifically posed this question to Yitzchak, being that salt

and straw are materials which are exempt from the obligation to take *ma-aser*, tithes.

Esav, therefore, used this question in his attempt to show just how great his piety was—demonstrating his wish to perform the mitzvah of *ma-aser*, even from those materials that are exempt from the mitzvah.

### Esav’s question

Esav’s attempt to impress his father, though, seems counterintuitive. His queries regarding salt and straw, seemingly do more to show his ignorance than his piety.

Indeed, Esav did not actually separate a tithe from salt and straw—he merely inquired about it. Surely, displaying his ignorance is not the best way to illustrate scrupulousness.

Not only would Esav’s ruse be unsuccessful in convincing Yitzchak of his righteousness, it would instead portray Esav as an ignoramus, who wasn’t aware of Jewish law!

Furthermore, having grown up in the home of Yitzchak—were Esav to have truly been pious—he would have observed his father’s performance of mitzvot.

If he had done so, he would surely have known that *ma-aser* is not separated from salt and straw.

Therefore, this begs the question: how did Esav attempt to fool Yitzchak and demonstrate his

piety through questions regarding salt and straw which have done more to show his ignorance than his devoutness?

### Rashi's version

Another question on Rashi's explanation is the changes that he made in it from the actual language of the Medrash.

The idea of Esav questioning his father in regard to these laws is originally brought both by Medrash Tanchuma and Bereishit Rabba.

Tanchuma phrases Esav's question with a slight variation from the way that Rashi and Bereishit Raba pose the question.

According to Tanchuma, he was not asking *how* to separate *ma-aser* from salt and straw, but *whether* one must give a tithe from these products to begin with.

There, Esav's query is stated as follows:

### Text 3

When Esav would come from an excursion he would say to his father, "Father, what is the law concerning salt whether or not one must give *ma-aser* from it?" Yitzchak would be astounded and say, "Look at this son of mine, how scrupulous is he in the mitzvot!" His father would ask him, "Where were you today?" Esav would answer, "I was in the study house..."

*Medrash Tanchuma, Toldot 8*

According to Tanchuma, Esav's question was concerning the *very* obligation to separate salt and straw, not the *manner* in which it was to be separated.

In Bereishit Rabba though, this inquiry is formulated somewhat differently. There, the Medrash states that he asked *how* one makes

these products fit for consumption. The Medrash explains that Esav would ask the following:

### Text 4

*How* is salt rectified... *how* is straw rectified?

*Bereishit Rabba 63:10*

### Rashi's explanation?

The difference between the two ways in the Medrash is not merely stylistic, but they are each expressing a different question:

According to Tanchuma, Esav was not saying that one definitely gives *ma-aser* from salt and straw, rather, he was asking *if* one does.

In Bereishit Rabba though, the Medrash is sure that one does indeed need to rectify these produce, the only question is *how*.

Rashi, in his commentary, chose to formulate Esav's question in a similar manner to Bereishit Rabba.

He writes, "Father, *how* do we tithe salt and straw?" This version enunciates the certitude that there is indeed an obligation of *ma-aser* for these products.

Rashi specifically opted to pose Esav's query in a manner parallel to the Bereishit Rabba which amplifies:

A) Esav's ignorance of the basic laws of *ma-aser*. As he was *certain* that one does indeed separate *ma-aser* from these materials which are exempt from *ma-aser*, and B) his obliviousness that his father Yitzchak did not separate *ma-aser* from these products.

What is perhaps most astounding about Rashi's version of Esav's question, is that according to Rashi, Esav asked, "how do we *tithe* salt and

straw?” which is a question that doesn’t seem to make sense at all.

A tithe by its very definition is ten percent. What possibly could Esav have meant by asking such a ridiculous question, and how would asking it convince his father of his scrupulousness in mitzvot?

### **Rectifying vs. tithing**

Additionally, it should be noted, that though Bereishit Rabba and Rashi use a similar language, there is an important difference in their choice of words.

While Rashi formulates the question as, “How do we *tithe* salt and straw,” Bereishit Rabba says “How is salt *rectified*... *how* is straw *rectified*?”

Instead of formulating the question that Esav asked how to tithe salt, it states that Esav asked how to rectify it.

According to the Medrash, Esav knew that salt and straw were exempt from the obligation of *ma-aser*. His question was rather how one could *rectify* them.

For, while he knew that one need not give a tenth of these products as *ma-aser*, he assumed that there should be some amount that one should give.

He reckoned that since the purpose of *ma-aser* is to demonstrate that the world and all that is in it belongs to G-d,<sup>1</sup> one should exhibit in all products that in truth they belong to the Almighty.

So, while technically one is not responsible to give a *tenth* from these products; in an attempt to demonstrate his stringency with mitzvot, he asked how one could express G-d’s dominion over all that exists—even in the salt and straw.

He therefore questioned, “How is salt *rectified*... *how* is straw *rectified*?”

Meaning to say: which act should I perform that would establish that salt and straw belong to the Almighty?

Rashi, though, changes Esav’s question from one that is intelligent, to one that is completely incomprehensible.

Rashi chose to express Esav’s question as, “how do we *tithe* salt and straw,” not how it could be *rectified*.

Why did Rashi change the words of the Medrash in a way that makes Esav’s question unintelligible, when he could have sufficed with the explanation of the Medrash which seems to be better understood?

### ***Ma-aser from all***

The above question can be answered through appreciating the mandate of Rashi in his commentary on the Torah: to explain the *simple meaning* of the verse—even when it runs contrary to the other branches Torah understanding.

In Rashi’s own words:

#### **Text 5**

I did not come except [to explain] the simple meaning of the verse.

*Rashi, Bereishit 3:8*

Rashi is not concerned if his explanation runs contrary to Medrash or even *Halacha*—as long as it is sound in the straightforward explanation of the Torah.

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<sup>1</sup> Tehillim 24:1.

According to simple interpretation of the Torah, the patriarchs *did* indeed separate a tithe from all of their property—including salt and straw.

An illustration of this specific fashion of tithing that was done prior to the giving of the Torah, is acquired from the percentage that Avraham separated for G-d upon his victory over the four kings.

The verse states:

### Text 6

But Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of G-d, the Most High. He blessed him, saying: “Blessed is Avram of G-d, the Most High, Maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be G-d, the Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand”; and he gave him a tenth of everything.

*Bereishit 14:18-20*

The verse clearly states that “he gave him a tenth of *everything*.”

While the verse does not explicitly state whether Avraham gave the tithe to Malki-Tzedek or if Malki-Tzedek gave the tithe to Avraham, Rashi writes that it was Avraham who performed this act.

### Text 7

Avram [gave Malki-Tzedek] a tithe from all that was his because he was a priest.

*Rashi, Ibid*

It is understood, therefore, that:

- a) Avraham gave *ma-aser* to Malki-Tzedek, who, as the verse says was a *kohen*.

- b) The *ma-aser* was given from *everything that he owned*.

Being that Avraham was accustomed to giving tithes from *all that he had*, it is implicit that he gave a tithe even from things—which, according to *Halacha*—one need not give, such as salt and straw.

One can assume that Avraham taught this mode of separating *ma-aser* to his children, as the verse expresses:

### Text 8

For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice, in order that the Lord bring upon Avraham that which He spoke concerning him.

*Bereishit, 18:19*

It is understood, therefore, that Yitzchak also separated *ma-aser* from all that he had—including salt and straw.

Consequently, we can extrapolate that Esav too learned to fulfill the mitzvah in this manner, and therefore asked his father as to the specific way that one should tithe these materials.

### More than they appear

While Esav’s question sounds nonsensical, it is indeed rather clever. This is due to the specific nature of both salt and straw.

The commonality in both salt and straw is that they are both substances which have little value on their own, yet, when added to something else, their significance is multiplied.

This can be demonstrated, in that a minute amount of salt, of little value, greatly contributes

to the dish to which it is added. Without salt, the entire flavor of the dish is flavorless.

This idea is expressed in the statement made by Iyov:

### Text 9

Can bland food be eaten without salt, or is there a taste in the saliva of strong-tasting food?

*Iyov 6:6*

Without salt—Iyov says—the entire dish is inedible.

Straw also holds little worth on its own, when it is used to feed animals or when used for fire.

However, when it is utilized in the forming of bricks, it is very important, as it is the support of the entire building.

Accordingly, we can now appreciate that Esav was asking a reasonably astute query.

He was asking:

In which way should salt and straw be measured—by their worth, as they exist independently, or by their multiplied value when they are mixed with other substances?

We can now appreciate why this question caused Yitzchak to think that Esav was scrupulous with mitzvot.

Esav seemed to be so stringent in his observance that he was concerned not only *whether* one should separate a tenth, but the *manner* in which the tenth is to be defined.

Rashi's choice of the term "scrupulous" in Hebrew is "*midakdek*," which relates to the word calculation.

Esav was attempting to demonstrate that he was extremely calculating in the mitzvot, as he was concerned regarding the proper way to calculate the true tenth of the values of salt and straw.

It can now be understood why Rashi changes the question from the interpretation of the Medrash as it A) fits with the straightforward explanation of the Torah and is B) an indication of Esav's craftiness which is not apparent in the other explanations.

### Kabbalistic salt and straw

There is a well a spiritual lesson that can be learned from this exchange:

One can ask: why did Esav ask about these specific things? Aren't there other goods as well (e.g. spices) whose worth's are amplified when applied to other things?

This choice of the Medrash's use of these specific examples can be understood through prefacing with the reason that Yitzchak wanted to give the blessings to Esav, when he surely knew that he wasn't the *tzadik* that he made himself out to be.

When Yaakov entered Yitzchak's tent, Yitzchak tells him,

### Text 10

...Come close if you please, so I can feel you, my son, are you, indeed, my son Esav or not?

*Bereishit 27:21*

Rashi there comments that it was because Yaakov mentioned G-d's name—something that was uncharacteristic of Esav, and which made Yitzchak suspicious if this was truly his oldest son.

If Yitzchak knew that it was uncharacteristic of Esav to mention G-d, why then did he wish to give him these tremendous blessings?!

Chassidic thought elucidates<sup>2</sup>, that though Esav himself was not at all righteous, his divine root was from a very high level in holiness, similar to Yitzchak—from the G-dly expression of *Gevura* - severities.

Yitzchak saw the potential in Esav, even if Esav was not actually that person. He thought that through giving him blessings he can uplift him to his potential.

In truth, Yaakov was deserving of the blessings and the way to rectify Esav was not through blessing, but in a way analogous to salt and straw.

The attribute of salt as well is that of severity, with its harsh taste. This expresses that in order to “sweeten” something of strict nature, one must accomplish this with a second entity which is bitter—salt. Though salt has a harsh taste it adds flavor to other things that are harsh in nature.

Straw, too, expresses Esav’s character, for just as straw is the waste of a good stalk, so too, Esav represented the idea of *Klipa* - husks which conceal G-dliness.

The way to rectify straw is as the verse tells us, regarding the times of Moshiach:

### **Text 11**

The house of Yaakov will be fire, the house of Yosef a flame, the house of Esav for straw; and they will ignite them and devour them.

*Ovadya 1:18*

May this era come speedily, in our time!

*(Based on Likutei Sichot 25, Toldot 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel.*

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<sup>2</sup> See Torah Ohr 20b.