



When Yaakov comes before his father disguised as his brother, Esav, with the purpose of seizing the blessing intended for Esav, Yitzchak smells "the fragrance of his garments" and exclaims, "Look – the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field blessed by God!" (27:27).

The Talmud, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (37a; see also *Bereishit Rabba* 65), cites a homiletic reading of this verse, whereby the word *begadav* – "his garments" – is taken to read *bogedav* – "his rebellious ones." According to this reading, Yitzchak here prophetically lauds the piety of even "his rebellious ones," the wicked among Yaakov's descendants. Even these disloyal members of the Jewish nation, Yitzchak exclaims, are "fragrant" in the eyes of God. This comment in the Talmud is preceded by the more famous Rabbinic adage, "Even the empty ones among you [Israel] are filled with *mitzvot* like a pomegranate." It seems that the Sages here seek to emphasize that even the sinners of Israel perform many *mitzvot* and are worthy of admiration for the good deeds.

Maimonides, however, appears to have understood this passage differently. He makes reference to the Talmud's remark in his famous *Iggeret Ha-shemad*, an epistle he wrote at the age of twenty-four to the communities suffering under the oppressive rule of the Almohads, who forced their Jewish subjects to either outwardly embrace Islam or face expulsion. While Maimonides' family fled (leaving behind all their possessions), scores of other Jews chose to conduct themselves as Moslems and be allowed to remain. Maimonides authored this treatise in response to a pronouncement by a major rabbinic figure of the time – who did not live in the affected regions – condemning the Jews who surrendered to the persecutors and avowed allegiance to Islam, branding them heretics and sinners. In his response, Maimonides advances a more sensitive and understanding approach, insisting that these victims of persecution remain beloved children of the Almighty, despite their having buckled under the Almohad pressure.

Maimonides writes in the second chapter of this treatise:

They did not rebel against the Almighty seeking comfort and pleasure; they did not abandon the faith and distance themselves from it to achieve prominence and the delights of the time...This man [who had condemned the communities who embraced Islam] did not realize that those who do not sin willingly – the Almighty will never leave them or abandon them...as they [the Sages], of blessed memory, said: "He smelled the fragrance of *begadav* – do not read it *begadav*, but rather *bogedav*."

It appears that Maimonides interpreted the Gemara as referring to "rebellious ones" who "rebelled" in response to the pressures of religious persecution, who in the inner recesses of their spirits remained loyal to God and His law, but succumbed to the threats of the anti-Semitic tyrants.

According to Maimonides' reading of this passage, it would seem that the Talmud interpreted this verse in light of the symbolic image of Yaakov standing before his father dressed as Esav. This image foresees the time when Yaakov's descendants will be pressured into donning the garments of Esav, outwardly embracing foreign beliefs while inwardly remaining faithful and devoted to the traditions of Avraham and Yitzchak ("the voice is the voice of Yaakov, yet the hands are the hands of Esav"). Even under these unfortunate circumstances, God "smells" the "fragrance" of these "garments" (*begadav*), the "rebels" of Israel. The story of Yaakov's disguise is thus intended to provide hope and encouragement for those who have found themselves donning the garments of Esav due to the pressures of persecution, reminding them of God's love for them despite their "disguise," and urging them to return to the path of Torah observance and divest themselves once and for all of the "garments" of Esav.