



Parshas Toldos

For the week ending 2 Kislev 5759
20 - 21 November 1998

Overview

After twenty years of marriage without children, Yitzchak's prayers are answered and Rivka conceives twins. The pregnancy is extremely painful. Hashem reveals to Rivka that the suffering is a microcosmic prelude to the world-wide conflict that will rage between the two great nations descended from these twins — Rome and Israel. Esav is born first, and then Yaakov holding onto Esav's heel. As they grow, the contrast between the twins becomes apparent: Esav is a hunter, a man of the field, of the physical world, whereas Yaakov sits in the tents of Torah developing his soul. On the day of their grandfather Avraham's funeral, Yaakov is cooking lentils, the traditional mourner's meal. Esav rushes in, ravenous from a hard day's hunting, and sells his birthright (and its concomitant spiritual responsibilities) for a bowl of lentils, clearly demonstrating his unworthiness for the position of the firstborn. Yitzchak tries to escape to Egypt when a famine strikes Canaan, but Hashem tells him that because of the *akeida* (where he was offered as a sacrifice) he has become holy and must remain in the Holy Land. He relocates to Gerar in the land of the Plishtim, where, to protect Rivka, he has to say that she is his sister. Yitzchak arouses jealousy when he becomes immensely wealthy, and Avimelech the king asks him to leave. Yitzchak re-digs three wells dug by his father, prophetically alluding to the three future Temples. Avimelech, seeing the blessings Hashem has bestowed on Yitzchak, makes a treaty with him. When Yitzchak senses the end of his days approaching, he summons Esav to give Esav his blessings. Rivka, acting on a prophetic command that the blessings must go to Yaakov, arranges for Yaakov to impersonate his brother and receive the blessings. When Esav in a rage of frustration complains to his father that his brother has bought his birthright, Yitzchak realizes that the birthright has been bestowed correctly on Yaakov who has valued its responsibilities rather than its privileges, and confirms the blessings he has given. Esav vows to kill his brother, so Rivka sends Yaakov to her brother Lavan where he may find a suitable wife.

Insights

THE BABY AND THE BATH WATER

“And Yitzchak loved Esav, as trapping was in his mouth, whereas Rivka loved Yaakov.” (25:28)

There's an old adage which runs: *Don't throw out the baby with the bath water.* Meaning, don't confuse the essential with the subordinate.

What does the Torah mean when it says “trapping” was in Esav's mouth? Rashi explains that Esav knew how to trap with his mouth, to deceive. He asked his father how to tithe salt and straw, things which don't require tithing. His father assumed from these questions that he was very pious.

Why did Esav choose to ask his question about salt and straw? Surely there were many other ways he could have paraded his “piety.” Why specifically did he chose salt and straw?

All things are not created equal. Some things are of the essence, others are subordinate. Every palace has an entrance hall. No one would confuse the importance of the entrance hall with the palace itself. The palace is the essence. The entrance hall has importance only because it is the only way into the palace.

Similarly, this world is not the be-all-and-end-all of existence. This world is merely an entrance hall to a great palace of light — the world to come. The world to come is the essence. *This* world is subordinate to it. This world derives its importance only from the fact that it is the only access to the world to come. By itself, it has no value.

In the realm of time, Shabbos is the essence. The six days of the week derive their importance because they lead to Shabbos. By themselves they are insignificant.

The spiritual is of the essence. The physical is subordinate to it. The physical is only significant to the

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extent that it provides a stage on which Man may grow in spiritual stature.

Yaakov represents the spiritual. Esav, the physical. The relationship between Yaakov and Esav was supposed to be that of essence and subordinate. As long as Yaakov remains pre-eminent, the world can reach its fruition, and Esav himself, while being the incarnation of the physical, can also achieve spirituality by supporting Yaakov. Esav, however, wasn't satisfied with his role. He wanted to be the star of the show. He wanted to be the essence of Creation.

Esav betrayed his true intentions, to star in Creation, when he asked his father how one tithes salt and straw. Salt has no intrinsic value. It finds its value as a condiment to other food. It is always subordinate. Straw, too, is subordinate to wheat. It is the vessel which carries the wheat, its support, its method of existence. But it is not the *essence*. The wheat is the essence. The Jewish People — Yaakov — are the "wheat of the world." The nations of the world are the "straw" — the means by which the Jewish People can fulfill their spiritual mission.

In the mind of Esav, however, straw and salt were of the essence. Thus, he could ask his father how to tithe them. Esav's question betrayed his true intentions. Esav was trying to overturn the Divine order of Creation. Esav was trying to turn the bath water into the baby.

MY SON, THE DOCTOR

"And these are the generations of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham; Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak." (25:19)

If a poor person has a rich relative, he will not hesitate to identify himself with his rich relative. "My cousin — the millionaire." The reverse, of course, is rarely true. No one exalts himself by saying "My cousin — the pauper."

The beginning of this week's Parsha is tautological: "*Yitzchak, the son of Avraham; Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak.*" If we know that Yitzchak was the son of Avraham, we don't need to be told that Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak.

Rather, when the Torah says that Yitzchak was "*the son of Avraham,*" it is telling us the greatness of Avraham; for Yitzchak is no more than the "son of Avraham" — my cousin the millionaire. In other words, Avraham was greater than Yitzchak.

On the other hand, when the Torah says that "*Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak*" — Avraham is defined as the person who gave birth to Yitzchak. Meaning that Avraham's status was no more than Yitzchak's progenitor. This implies that Yitzchak was greater than Avraham.

So which is it? Was Avraham greater than Yitzchak, or was Yitzchak greater than Avraham?

The answer is...both.

Avraham was greater than Yitzchak because Avraham, unlike Yitzchak, had no teacher. He alone came to a recognition of his Creator. There was no one to educate him in the ways of G-d. Yitzchak, however, had his father Avraham and his mother Sara. And they were the greatest of teachers.

On the other hand, Avraham turned his back on a world of evil to become the representative of truth in the world. A choice which is as clear as day and night. Yitzchak, however, changed from good — to good. A much more difficult achievement. It's always easier to follow in someone else's footsteps rather than to blaze one's own path on the spiritual road. Yitzchak was not content to duplicate his father's spiritual achievements. He wanted to use his own uniqueness to serve G-d.

It's more difficult to change from one good to another good, than from bad to good.

EXTREMITY AND MEDIOCRITY

"Yitzchak entreated opposite his wife because she was barren. Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated by him." (25:21)

Picture two worlds. A world of black and white, of extreme good and total evil. And a world of gray mediocrity. In which world would you prefer to live? Is true moral excellence worth the price of a concomitant great evil, or is it better that neither extreme should exist, at the price of great blandness?

When Rivka conceived, world history could have taken one of two paths: Rivka could give birth to twins — one the personification of good and truth and the other one evil and falsehood. Alternatively, she could give birth to one child who would be a synthesis of great good and great evil — a great blandness.

Yitzchak prayed that there should be two children. Rivka prayed that there should be only one.

"Hashem allowed himself to be entreated" by Yitzchak's prayer, meaning to the exclusion of Rivka's. Why did Hashem listen to Yitzchak and not to Rivka?

Yitzchak was a "tzaddik ben tzaddik," a righteous person descended from righteous parents, Avraham and Sara. Rivka was a "tzaddik ben rasha," a righteous person descended from evil parents. Rashi tells us that you can't compare the prayer of a righteous person who comes from righteous parents, to that of a righteous person whose parents were evil. That of a righteous person is heeded more.

Ostensibly one would think the reverse to be true: That the prayers of someone who is righteous in spite of their background would be more effective and

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reach higher in the Heavens. After all, someone coming from negative influences has to put more effort into making themselves into a good person. Their greater effort should make their supplications more powerful. Hashem, however, listened to Yitzchak's prayer and Rivka gave birth to twins, Yaakov and Esav.

Yitzchak was a righteous person who came from a background of holiness. He knew what moral excellence was. He had seen his father Avraham walk this planet. It was untenable for him to think that in the next generation there would be no one like his father in the world, no one of outstanding righteousness. Even if there would be a price to pay — that there would also be someone in the world of incomparable evil — the existence of superior good and truth would be worth it. Yitzchak thought this because he was a "tzaddik ben

tzaddik," a righteous person of righteous lineage. He knew, first hand, what true righteousness was.

Rivka, however, was a righteous person who came from evil parents, a "tzaddik ben rasha." She knew true evil first hand. It was untenable to her that there should be someone in the next generation of such evil. Infinitely preferable would be that evil should be diluted with good in one body. Better mediocrity than infamy.

Sources:

The Baby and The Bath Water - Shem MiShmuel

My Son, The Doctor - Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler as heard from Rabbi Yehoshua Bertram

Extremity and Mediocrity - Rav Mendel of Kotzk as heard from Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Haftorah: Malachi 1:1-2:7

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPORTING

"You say 'Behold! It is so burdensome!' and you sadden Him...and you bring stolen, lame and sick animals...for an offering..." (1:13)

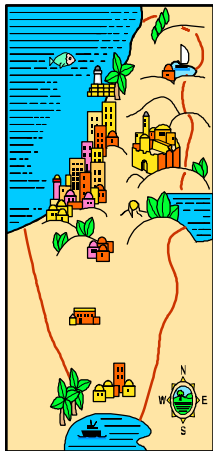
Things don't change. We lavish so much care and attention on our physical existence. Our clothes, cars, furniture and food. However when it comes to spending an extra thirty dollars on a first class mezuza...well the other one *is* kosher, isn't it?

The Rambam writes that beyond the requirement to offer only blemish-free animals on the *mizbe'ach* (holy altar), we are obliged to give our very best to Hashem. When *Bnei Yisrael* were righteous, they imported choice rams from Moav for offerings, special lambs from Chevron, as well as the best doves. When we import, let's make sure it's not just smoked salmon from Scotland to go on the *mizbe'ach* of our appetites!

Based on The Midrash Says

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



RECHOVOT

"They dug another well and did not quarrel over it, so he (Yitzchak) called it Rechovot (expanses) and he said: 'For now Hashem has made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land.'" (Bereishis 26:22)

After bitter disputes with the Philistines over the right to two wells Yitzchak's shepherds had dug, the third well is named Rechovot (expanses) to signify that this one was not contested.

The great Biblical commentaries, Nachmanides and Sforno, interpret the first two wells as symbols of the first two Temples, whose histories were marred by internal and external strife, while the third well represents the Third Temple which will be blessed with universal peace.

The name and its significance was adopted by Polish settlers in 1890 for the settlement which they established, and which has developed into one of Israel's major cities, Rechovot.