

Parshas Toldos

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1. Maintaining the Balance

We read at the beginning of the Portion, **“And these are the offspring of Yitzchak son of Avraham – Avraham fathered Yitzchak”**. The pasuk (verse) seems to be difficult. If Yitzchak is the son of Avraham then it is obvious that Avraham is the father of Yitzchak. What is the Torah telling us?

Rashi in his commentary cites the Midrash that explains that the deprecators of the generation were saying that Avimelech was the one who actually fathered Yitzchak. They said this because Sarah was Avraham’s wife for so many years and did not conceive from her husband yet after being sequestered one night with Avimelech (the King of the Philistines), she conceived. It would seem obvious that Avimelech was the one who actually fathered Yitzchak. How could this misconception be proven false? In order to counter such claims, Hashem made Yitzchak’s face identical to his father Avraham. Therefore, what the verse is stating is that it was known that he was the son of Avraham. This was evident to all because their facial features were identical.

The pedigree of a Jew is sacred. Sarah, our Matriarch, in terms of her spirituality, was even more advanced than Avraham (her husband). As Chazal tell us, she was even greater than Avraham in prophecy. We are not even able to relate or comprehend her dimension of person and holiness. If this the case – how could Hashem allow a woman so holy to be taken by a heathen who attempted to rape her? Another question – how could Hashem allow a woman of her holiness to be the subject of gossip by the deprecators of the generation? How is it possible that the pedigree of Yitzchak, the Patriarch of the Jewish should be in question? In order to dispel any question regarding the paternity of Yitzchak, Hashem performed a miracle, which caused Yitzchak to look identical to Avraham his father.

There is a fundamental principle that governs existence. G-d created man always to be in a position of free choice, to choose between right and wrong. If one’s choice would be eliminated, for good or for bad, man no longer has any purpose in existence. One is only deserving of reward or punishment only because he has the choice to do or not to do. Avraham our Patriarch was the representation of Godliness and spirituality to all existence. Avraham was recognized by the world as the father of all nations. He was the one to introduce monotheism into existence. He was a person who had the greatest renown and wealth and was revered by all humanity. Because of Avraham’s unique presence, he had the ability to commit a person to the position of monotheism without much difficulty.

If this is the case, what credit does one receive for being a monotheist if Avraham’s influence was so overwhelming that a person lost his ability to choose? The answer is- that there was a counterbalance to Avraham who was just as impressive and overwhelming in his representation of evil, as Avraham was in his representation of good. The counterbalance to Avraham was Nimrod (who had thrown Avraham into the fiery kiln in Kasdim). Nimrod was the antithesis of Avraham. The fact is that on the day that Avraham passed away, Esav killed Nimrod. The world cannot exist with a Nimrod if there is no Avraham to counter his influence.

Avraham’s heir apparent and successor was his son Yitzchak. He was the son of the man who was revered by all humanity because of all his special attributes and accomplishments. If this is the case, Yitzchak’s influence on humanity vis-à-vis spirituality would be unequalled by anyone in existence. Based on the purpose of existence – that man must be in a position to choose – this creates a serious problem. There is no one to counter the positive influence of Yitzchak. Because of this, Hashem created a serious doubt in the minds of all humanity regarding the paternity of Yitzchak. Is he the son of Avraham – the prince of G-d, the most esteemed individual in existence

– or is he the son of Avimelech the heathen, adulterer, and the Philistine King?

Why does a woman who has been barren for so many years conceive after being with Avimelech for one night? It must be that Avimelech fathered this child and not Avraham. Although Hashem performed a miracle, causing Yitzchak to resemble his father Avraham; nevertheless, because of the circumstantial evidence it would seem that Avraham might not have fathered Yitzchak. It is because of this question that Yitzchak's level of influence is diminished and Hashem is able to preserve the balance of free choice in the world. Despite Yitzchak's resemblance to his father, he is not as effective because the question of conception is still a question.

The Gemara in Tractate Yoma tells us that if a Talmud Chacham (Torah Sage) does not pay his bill on time it is considered a Chilul Hashem (Desecration of G-d's Name). Rav says that if he did not pay his meat bill to the butcher on time it would be considered a Chilul Hashem. Rashi explains that it is because the butcher will say that if the rabbi is permitted to steal, then he is permitted to steal. Although Rav's delayed payment is not considered stealing because he is only withholding payment of a debt that is owed (and stealing is when one takes something that is not rightfully his) nevertheless, it is considered a Chilul Hashem not because of reality but rather by perception. Since the butcher perceives the withholding of payment as stealing, (although it is completely unfounded), it is considered a Chilul Hashem.

Similarly, Reb Yochanan says that if he walked four cubits without wearing tefillin or studying the Torah it would be considered a Chilul Hashem. If a person were to see him without tefillin or not studying Torah, he could also justify not wearing tefillin or studying Torah. Regardless of how baseless a remark may be, if a person perceives the Talmud Chacham in a negative light, then it is considered a Chilul Hashem.

When one causes a question to be asked because of one's actions or behavior the answer may not necessarily resolve the question. Because people perceive things as they choose to, one must behave in a manner that is above reproach.

2. Why Does a Tzaddik Pray?

The Torah tells us that Yitzchak prayed for Rivka to be able to have a child because she was barren. Regarding Yitzchak's *tefillah* (prayer), the Torah uses the term "*vayetar*," which is a powerful expression of prayer. The Gemara in *Tractate Succah* tells us that the *tefillah* of tzaddikim is compared to a pitchfork (which is referred to as *atar*). This is because just as the pitchfork is used to move wheat from one corner of a silo to another, so too does the prayer of tzaddikim overturn Hashem's attribute of cruelty and establishes the Attribute of Mercy.

The difficulty with the terminology used representing the negative by the Gemara is that Hashem has no "attribute of cruelty". It should have said that the Attribute of Judgment is overturned and the Attribute of Mercy is established. A similar difficulty arises regarding the term "*vayashkeefu - to gaze*" which is found in the Portion of Vayeira ("they gazed (the angels) upon Sodom.") Rashi cites Chazal who explain that whenever the Torah uses the term "*vayashkeefu - gaze*" it indicates something sinister, or destructive, except when it is used within the context of the distribution of tithes to the poor. In the case of the angels gazing upon Sodom, the term *vayashkeefu* is used in the context of destruction. When the same term is used regarding the distribution of tithes, it is within a context of Hashem gazing from his heavenly abode to rain blessing and bounty upon the Jewish people. The expression, which is cited by Rashi, is that the merit of giving tithes to the poor will overturn the "attribute of anger" into the Attribute of Mercy (Midas HaRachamim). The difficulty is - Hashem does not have an attribute of "anger". Chazal should have said that the merit overturns the Attribute of Judgment into the Attribute of Mercy. How do we understand this?

The answer is that when the Midrash and the Gemara refer to the attribute of "cruelty" or "anger" it is in fact referring to the Attribute of Judgment. However because of the limited perception of man and one's belief in his own worthiness the Attribute of Justice is viewed as "cruelty". Meaning that one does not understand why G-d has to be "so harsh" when the failing does not seem to be

that serious. It is only because of one's lack of understanding of spiritual failing that he sees G-d's retribution as "cruel" or "angry". Because of this, very often when one prays to Hashem to alleviate his plight and He does not respond, the individual views this as cruelty rather than understanding that he is unworthy of Hashem's Mercy. If one views Hashem's lack of response as cruelty, this is a Chilul Hashem (a desecration of the Name of G-d) because He is the True and Just Judge – there is no iniquity in his Justice. This is the reason one recites the *bracha* (blessing) "Dayan HaEmmes – Blessed is the True Judge" when hearing tragic news.

Chazal tell us that the Patriarchs were barren because Hashem desires the tefillah (prayers) of tzaddikim. Hashem desired the prayers of Yitzchak and Rivka because of who they were. If a tzaddik is put in a difficult situation, he will pray at a more intense level than he would have had if he did not have that difficulty. The understanding of the average person vis-à-vis the tzaddik is something, which is perplexing. If the tzaddik is truly righteous, then why is Hashem denying him what he deserves. That question itself is a Chilul Hashem because the perception of man is that Hashem is treating the tzaddik unfairly. Therefore, the emphasis of the tzaddik's tefillah is not that Hashem should fill his own need, but rather to satisfy the tzaddik's need to avoid a Chilul Hashem.

When Yitzchak prayed "vayetar" to Hashem, he understood that the average person would not be able to understand why G-d is denying Rivka a child. Thus, Hashem is perceived as "cruel" (G-d forbid). Therefore the Gemara explains the term "vayetar" to express the intensity of Yitzchak's prayer, which as so intense that it overturns the attribute of cruelty (which is man's misconception of Hashem's true intent) to the Attribute of Mercy.

The fact that the Jews are in exile is in itself a Chilul Hashem. Because of our situation, we are perceived as a forsaken people – especially the length of our exile confirms it to a greater degree. Hashem promised the Jewish people that He would never forsake them. Therefore, this misperception of our exile is a Chilul Hashem.

When one prays for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Bais HaMikdash (the Temple), one should not only be pained that Hashem is pained that we are in exile, but also that the exile itself is a Chilul Hashem because of the world's misperception.

3. Having the Capacity to Receive Blessing

The Torah tells us that when Yitzchak decided to bless Esav he said to him, "**Now sharpen, if you please, your gear – your sword and your bow – and go out to the field and hunt game for me. Then make me delicacies such as I love and bring it to me and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.**" The question is – if Yitzchak decided to give the blessing to Esav, then why did he make the blessing contingent on his son's preparing delicacies for him? If Esav was worthy to receive the blessing as the bachor (first born), then why should he need to serve his father in this manner to receive the blessing?

Sforno explains that Yitzchak requested that Esav prepare delicacies for him because he understood that for a blessing to take effect one must have a certain degree of worthiness. Esav, although he was seen by his father as not being evil, he nevertheless was not sufficiently a tzaddik to be worthy of receiving the blessing in his own right. Therefore, Yitzchak, his father, wanted him to engage in the mitzvah of *Kibud Av – Honoring one's Father*, to be qualified to receive the blessing. Yitzchak believed that in the merit of performing this mitzvah Esav would become worthy to receive his blessing. Sforno comments that Yaakov on the other hand, was more spiritual than Esav and therefore was innately qualified to receive the blessing from his father Yitzchak without performing any particular mitzvah.

Chazal tell us that the Patriarchs themselves were the location for the Divine Presence in the world. They are referred to as the "merkavah – the chariot" of the Divine Presence. One would think that Yitzchak, being a Patriarch (and being so spiritualized), would be able to give blessings that were so powerful that they would take effect regardless of Esav's worthiness. Nevertheless,

we see, as Sforno explains, that despite the dimension of Yitzchak's blessing, Esav needed to perform the mitzvah of *Kibud Av* in order to merit the capacity to be the receptacle for the blessing.

We learn from this that if one receives a blessing and it does not take effect, it is not necessarily, because there was deficiency in the person who gave the blessing, but rather, it is a lack of worthiness on the part of the recipient.

The Torah states, **“Wherever you mention My Name I will come to you and bless you.”** Chazal tell us that in every generation that the Bais HaMikdash is not rebuilt, it is as if it was destroyed in that generation. This is because if the generation was truly worthy the Bais HaMikdash would have been rebuilt. The fact that it is not rebuilt is only an indication of the lack of worthiness of the generation. Therefore, it is considered as if the Temple was destroyed in that generation.

The nations of the world believe that the Jewish people do not have the Bais HaMikdash because they were forsaken by G-d. The fact is that Hashem has not forsaken them – He blesses them continuously. The problem is that His blessing does not taken effect because of our lack of worthiness and not because He is not Blessing us. This situation, as we discussed previously, is a Chilul Hashem because it is through our lack of worthiness that the nations of the world mistakenly believe that G-d has forsaken the Jewish people.

We need to have the capacity to be worthy of Hashem's blessing. The reason the Bais HaMikdash was destroyed was due to baseless hatred among the Jewish people. The fact that the Bais HaMikdash has not yet been rebuilt is an indication that we have not corrected that failing yet.

4. We are the Makers of Our Own Fate

The Torah says that Esav returned wearily from the field. Chazal tell us that the reason he was weary was because he had committed five cardinal sins on that day. The Yalkut tells us that when Esav returned from the field he found Yaakov, his brother, cooking lentils with his face smeared with soot. Esav asked Yaakov, “What happened?” Yaakov responded, “Our grandfather passed away.” After hearing this, Esav proclaimed, “If this is the case, there is no Judgment and there is no Judge!” This statement was a denial of G-d's existence. Esav knew that his grandfather would inevitably pass away, as all people do. In addition, Avraham had already lived 175 years. What caused Esav to have such an extreme reaction to this news – thus causing him to become a heretic?

Chazal tells us that each of the Patriarchs was meant to live 180 years. Yitzchak lived 180 years. Yaakov was supposed to live 180 years; however, he passed away after 147 years because Hashem deducted a year of his life for every word of his initial conversation with Pharaoh. Chazal teach us that Avraham was destined to live 180 years; however, Hashem deducted five years of his life because He promised Avraham that he would pass away in a “good old age”. If Avraham were to have witnessed the day that Esav committed the five cardinal sins, it would have contradicted Hashem's promise of passing away in a “good old age” because Avraham would have been anguished to know that his grandson had chosen the evil path.

Esav understood that his grandfather was supposed to live 180 years. When Avraham passed away at the age of 175, Esav questioned G-d's Justice. If there were justice and a judge in existence, how could Avraham be denied five years of his life? The irony is that the answer to Esav's question is found within himself.

Esav chose to be a *rasha* (an evil man). In essence, he was the cause of his grandfather's death. When he chose to live a life of evil by committing the five cardinal sins, Hashem was forced to take Avraham five years before his time because of Esav's behavior. Esav became a heretic and denounced G-d because he believed his grandfather died prematurely when in fact he was the cause of Avraham losing five years from his life. Esav essentially dug his own pit, jumped in, and blamed G-d. We can learn a valuable lesson vis-à-vis ourselves through this incident.

People often do not understand difficulties and complications, which come upon them in their lives. They believe that the suffering and the setbacks that they are experiencing is something that they do not deserve. It is only because they believe that they are deserving that they have difficulty understanding what is happening to them. If a person miscalculates himself and believes that he is more deserving than he really is, then if he does not receive what he believes that he is truly deserving of, he will feel denied. This ultimately may cause him to become disillusioned with G-d. Ironically, the basis for this disillusionment is only a result of the person's unwillingness to recognize who he really is. One is very often the cause of his own spiritual downfall. This is similar to what happened to Esav.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos states that if a person experiences difficulties in his life he must introspect and try to identify his spiritual failings. If that person did introspect and did not find any spiritual deficiencies, then he should attribute the cause of his difficulties to not studying Torah sufficiently. Our predicament in life is a byproduct of our choices. G-d is the True Judge and there is no happenstance. A person always receives what he deserves. One will only realize happiness when he understands who he truly is. If one believes that he is entitled then he will be disappointed. Esav's perspective was that he believed that he deserved it all. When Esav was informed that his grandfather passed away, he believed that he deserved another five years with his grandfather Avraham. Esav wondered – why was he deprived those five years with his grandfather? The answer is that it was only because of Esav's choices that Avraham passed away five years before his time.

5. How Does One Contend with the Influences of Exile?

The Torah states, **“Esav married Mahalas, the daughter of Ishmael, son of Avraham, sister of Nevoyos.”** Rashi cites the Gemara in Tractate Megillah, which explains that the Torah is telling us that when Esav took Mahalas, her father Ishmael had already passed away. The question is – why is it important for us to know that Ishmael had already passed away at this time?

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov received the blessing from his father Yitzchak, Esav vowed to kill him. Hearing this, Yaakov's mother Rivka advised him to flee his father's house and go to the home of her brother Lavan. The Torah states, **“So now, my son, heed my voice and arise; flee to my brother Lavan, to Charan, and remain with him a short while until your brother's wrath subsides.”** We find that Yaakov did not heed his mother's words to go to Lavan's house for only “a short while,” but rather he stayed away for many years. Chazal tell us that because Yaakov did not fulfill his obligation of *Kibud Av* (Respecting one's Father) for a period of twenty-two years, he was punished (measure for measure) and was denied his son Yosef's relationship for for twenty-two years.

Based on the fact that the Torah tells us that Ishmael had passed away by the time Esav married his daughter, the Gemara in Megillah calculates that Yaakov was actually away from his father's home for thirty-six years. The question is why was Yaakov only punished for not fulfilling his obligation of *Kibud Av* for twenty-two years, when the Gemara tells us that he was actually away from his father for thirty-six years? Why was Yaakov not punished for the additional fourteen years that he was away from Yitzchak?

Rashi cites the answer of Chazal that for fourteen years Yaakov studied Torah in the yeshiva of Shem V'Aver. Yaakov was not punished for these fourteen years in the merit of Torah.

Rivka had told Yaakov to stay at Lavan's house for only “a short while.” This absolved Yaakov of honoring his father for only a short while. Because Yaakov remained twenty-two years in the home of Lavan, which was contrary to his mother's wishes, it resulted in the punishment of being separated from Yosef for twenty-two years. Yaakov's mother told him to stay in the house of Lavan for only “a short while,” which means that he would be permitted to stay there for only a short while. However, the time preceding his arrival (when he was learning Torah) is not contrary to his mother's wishes. Therefore, there is no reason why he should be punished for the fourteen years with Shem V'Aver.

The Midrash tells us that the Patriarchs themselves were the location of the Shechina (The Divine Presence) in this world. Yaakov was insulated from the evils of the world because he was engulfed in holiness. However, because he took the blessing from his brother Esav, he was forced to flee to the house of Lavan. Lavan was a man who epitomized evil in a similar manner to his brother Esav. Yaakov, understanding that he was going to be exposed to the evil influences of Lavan and his community, had prepared himself for that encounter.

In order to make himself resilient to the evil influences of that society, Yaakov studied Torah in the yeshiva of Shem V'Aver. The Torah that Yaakov had learned until the age of sixty evidently was not sufficient to protect him from the evil of Lavan. Shem had experienced what transpired before the Great Flood and after the Great Flood. He was exposed to a level of evil that no longer existed in the world. Because of this, Shem had an understanding of this level of evil (and contended with it through the study of Torah). Therefore, he was able to communicate this to Yaakov and to teach him the Torah that was needed to protect him from the evils of Lavan and his community. Yaakov had to spend an additional fourteen years studying in the yeshiva of Shem V'Aver because it was an issue of *pikuach nefesh* (protection of his own life). Yaakov would not have been able to survive the house of Lavan without the fourteen-year preparation in Shem V'Aver.

The Torah tells us that before Yaakov went down to Egypt he sent his son Yehudah ahead of him. Rashi explains that Yehudah was sent ahead in order to establish a yeshiva so that Yaakov could be able to enter Egypt. Without the yeshiva, Yaakov would not go to Egypt. Yaakov is the Patriarch who represents *golus* - exile. Having spent twenty-two years in the house of Lavan, he understood deeply that one needs to protect himself against the evil influences of exile. Without a Torah environment, it is impossible to survive. The evil influences of exile are so intoxicating and overwhelming that one must continuously insulate himself against them.