**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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**Parashat Toledot:**

**“And There Was a Famine in the Land**

**Introduction**

And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham;

And Yitzchak went to Avimelekh, king of the Pelishtim, to Gerar.

And the Lord appeared to him, and said: Go not down to Egypt; dwell (*shekhon*) in the land which I shall tell you of.

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these lands;

And I will establish the oath which I swore to Avraham your father.

And I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands,

And by your seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves.

Because that Avraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws. (*Bereishit* 26:1-5)

The collection of *derashot* that deals with the famine in the days of Yitzchak consists of three *petichtot* followed by one long *derasha*.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this *shiur,* we will examine the *petichtot*.

(I)

"And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine [that was in the days of Avraham]."

It is written: "The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted (*temimim*), [and their inheritance shall be forever]" (*Tehillim* 37:18).

"The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted" — this refers to Yitzchak.

"And their inheritance shall be forever" — "Sojourn in this land."

"They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil" (*Tehillim* 37:19) — in the time of the evil of Avimelekh.

"And in the days of famine they shall be satisfied" (ibid.) — "And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine [that was in the days of Avraham]."[[2]](#footnote-2) (*Bereishit Rabba* 64, 2, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 700)

The first part of the first *petichta* relates to God's command to Yitzchak not to go down to Egypt in the wake of the famine. The first verse brought for the purpose of the exposition: "The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted *(temimim)*, and their inheritance shall be forever" (*Tehillim* 37:18), characterizes Yitzchak as wholehearted, on account of which he is commanded not to leave the country. Accordingly, the words "And their inheritance shall be forever" are given tangible meaning as a prohibition cast upon Yitzchak never to leave his Eretz Israel.

The second part of the *petichta* addresses the contrast between the beginning of the story, "And there was a famine in the land," and its continuation, which tells of prosperity and abundance, as if there were no famine (*Bereishit* 26:12-13):

And Yitzchak sowed in that land, and found in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. And the man waxed great, and grew more and more until he became very great.

The verse, "They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil, and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied," refers to the double difficulty faced by Yitzchak in Gerar — the trouble of Rivka’s being taken by Avimelekh and the trouble of the famine. The expression "the evil of Avimelekh" in this *derasha* is understood as pertaining to the evil **thought** of Avimelekhregarding Rivka.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This interpretation is implied also by the wording of the second *petichta* on the verse, "And there was a famine in the land," which also relates to these two matters, while clearly pointing to Avimelekh as an evil person:

(II)

"The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish" (*Mishlei* 10:3) — this refers to Yitzchak, as it is stated: "Sojourn in this land."

"But the desire (*ve-havat*)of the wicked He thrusts away" (ibid.) — this refers to Avimelekh.[[4]](#footnote-4) (*Bereishit Rabba*, ibid.)

At first glance, the two *petichtot* appear to be very similar, and the message emerging from them seems to be the same. However, the verse cited from *Ketuvim* for each *derasha* creates a different frame of reference. Whereas the first *petichta* draws a connection between Yitzchak's wholeheartedness and his remaining in Eretz Israel during the famine, the second *petichta* deals with God's concern about each and every righteous person in every situation.

**Yitzchak’s Wholeheartedness and His Remaining In Eretz Israel**

Let us go back to discuss the first *petichta.* The nature of Yitzchak's wholeheartedness is not explicit in the first *petichta.* We are all familiar with Rashi's interpretation of God's command:

"Go not down to Egypt" (*Bereishit* 26:2) — because he thought of going down to Egypt as his father had done in time of famine, He said to him: Go not down to Egypt, for you are a burnt-offering without blemish (*ola temima*), and residence outside the Holy Land is not befitting you.

Rashi's comment is taken from a *derasha* of Rabbi Hoshaya that appears later in *Bereishit Rabba* (64, 3):

Rabbi Hoshaya said: You are a burnt-offering without blemish. Just as a burnt-offering without blemish, if it goes outside the enclosures of the Temple, it becomes disqualified; so too you, if you go outside the Holy Land, you will become disqualified.[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to Rashi, the quality of wholeheartedness is attributed to Yitzchak's readiness to be sacrificed as a burnt-offering at the time of the *Akeida*, and this is the reason that he is commanded not leave Eretz Israel. But is this what the author of the *petichta* had in mind when he expounds the verse, "The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted" as referring to Yitzchak?[[6]](#footnote-6)

In order to clarify the matter, let us trace additional appearances of this verse in the Midrash in reference to the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. This verse is expounded three times in *Bereishit Rabba* on *Parashot Chayei Sara-Toledot*, in connection with the figures of Sara, Avraham and Yitzchak:

"The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted, [and their inheritance shall be forever]" (*Tehillim* 37:18).

When she was twenty, she was as beautiful as she was when she was seven; and when she was a hundred, she was as a woman of twenty as regards sin.

Another explanation: "The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted" — this refers to Sara.

"And their inheritance shall be forever" — "the years of the life of Sara" (*Bereishit* 23:1). (*Bereishit Rabba* 58, 1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 618-619)

"And these are the days of the years of Avraham's life" (*Bereishit* 25:7).

"The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted" — this refers to Avraham.

"And their inheritance shall be forever" — "And these are the days of the years of Avraham's life." (*Bereishit Rabba* 62, 1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 670)

In the *derashot* that relate the verse to Sara and Avraham, they are presented as wholehearted, on account of which they merit God's closeness ("The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted"). In these *derashot,* the trait of wholeheartedness is certainly not connected specifically to the *Akeida*. According to this, would it not be correct to read the *derasha* relating to Yitzchak's wholeheartedness in the same way, as relating to some general characteristic of his, and not specifically to the *Akeida*?

We find a reference to Yitzchak's wholeheartedness elsewhere in *Bereishit Rabba* as well, in connection to Eliezer's conversation with Rivka's family about taking her to Eretz Israel to be married to Yitzchak:

"And her brother and mother said: Let the girl abide with us” (*Bereishit* 24:55). And where was Betuel? He tried to stop it and he was smitten at night. This is what is stated: “The righteousness of the wholehearted shall make straight his way” (*Mishlei* 11:5). “The righteousness of the wholehearted” — this refers to Yitzchak; “shall make straight his way” — of Eliezer. (*Bereishit Rabba* 60, 12).

Here, too, there is no connection to the *Akeida*, and Yitzchak's wholeheartedness finds expression in his full faith in Eliezer's mission to bring him back a fitting wife.

Avraham and Ya’akov — "a wholehearted man (*ish tam*) living in tents," *Bereishit* 25:27— go down to Egypt on account of a famine, despite their wholeheartedness. Why is Yitzchak commanded to remain in Eretz Israel? Rabbi Hoshaya's answer, that Yitzchak's leaving the boundaries of Eretz Israel would have been a desecration of his elevated status, offers a clear and logical explanation of the connection made in the *petichta* between Yitzchak's wholeheartedness and the command to remain in Eretz Israel during the time of the famine. But what is the meaning of this connection according to our approach? To answer this question, let us examine how the second half of the verse from *Tehillim,* "And their inheritance shall be forever," which is expounded in reference to Avraham and Sara:

"And their inheritance shall be forever" — "the years of the life of Sara."

"And their inheritance shall be forever" — "And these are the days of the years of the life of Avraham."

What is the meaning of this *derasha*? In the print editions of the *midrash* concerning Avraham, there is an addition: "For the Holy One, blessed be He, cherished the years of the righteous and recorded them in the Torah so that the inheritance of their days be remembered forever." This addition explains the *derasha*: the Torah records the summation of "the years of the lives" of Avraham and Sara so that it will be known to all. This is the meaning of "And their inheritance shall be forever." However, this addition does not appear in the main manuscripts of *Bereishit Rabba*, and therefore it cannot be accepted as the original reading of the *midrash*. What, then, is the meaning of the *derasha*?

Often, the verse being expounded is not cited in full for technical reasons (for example, to save on parchment).[[7]](#footnote-7) The term *ve-go'* (*ve-gomer*) is used to advise the reader of the need to relate to the entire verse or the adjacent verses, even if they are not cited in the text. In the verses before us regarding the "years of the lives" of Avraham and Sara, their death is reported in brief, whereas their burial is described at length:

And the life of Sara was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sara. And Sara died in Kiryat Arba — the same is Chevron — in the land of Canaan; and Avraham came to mourn for Sara, and to weep for her… (*Bereishit* 23:1-2)[[8]](#footnote-8)

And these are the days of the years of Avraham's life which he lived, a hundred and seventy and five years. And Avraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people. And Yitzchak and Yishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Makhpeila, in the field of Efron the son of Tzochar the Chiti, which is before Mamrei; the field which Avraham purchased of the children of Chet; there was Avraham buried, and Sara his wife. )*Bereishit* 25:7-10)

The verse "The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted, and their inheritance shall be forever" relates, according to these *derashot*,to the burial of Avraham and Sara in Eretz Israel. Makhpeila Cave is the first place that Avraham owns in Eretz Israel and the beginning of the permanent acquisition of Eretz Israel for his descendants. God knows the wholeheartedness of the father and mother of the nation, who wander around Eretz Israel with a Divine promise concerning the land which goes unfulfilled in their lifetime and only begins to be actualized after their death. It is their faith that guarantees the continuation of the acquisition of that land for their descendants.

According to this approach, the *petichta* in our section continues the idea of the previous *derashot* relating to the verse in *Tehillim* and links Yitzchak's wholeheartedness to his meriting continuous residence in Eretz Israel. However, in contrast to Avraham and Sara who merit their "inheritance" in their death, Yitzchak must embody a different kind of connection to the land. Their wholeheartedness finds expression in their faith despite the fact that the promise relating to the land remains unfulfilled, whereas Yitzchak — owing to his wholeheartedness — is expected to dwell in the land inspite of all the hardships present. The promises he is given all relate to the long-term future:

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to Avraham your father; and I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands; and by your seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves. (*Bereishit* 26:3-4)

On the one hand, he is not promised food during the famine; but on the other hand, in Eretz Israel, he is promised a high level of God's support at all times and through all troubles.

Let us now return to our question as to why Yitzchak is commanded to remain in Eretz Israel. The *petichta's* answer is that Yitzchak in his wholeheartedness is supposed to serve as a model for holding on to the land even in times of famine — or, to be put differently: to serve as a model of total devotion to the settlement of Eretz Israel.

***Tehillim* 37**

In light of what we have suggested, let us examine *Tehillim* 37, which *Chazal* connect to *Parashot Chayei Sara-Toledot* by way of the verse "The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted, and their inheritance shall be forever":

[A Psalm] of David. Fret not yourself because of evil-doers, neither be you envious against them that work unrighteousness. For they shall soon wither like the grass, and fade as the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and cherish faithfulness. So shall you delight yourself in the Lord; and He shall give you the petitions of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass…

For evil-doers shall be cut off; but those that wait for the Lord, they shall inherit the land. And yet a little while, and the wicked is no more; you shall look well at his place, and he is not. But the humble shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in the abundance of peace…

The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted; and their inheritance shall be forever. They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil; and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. For the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs — they shall pass away in smoke, they shall pass away. The wicked borrows, and pays not; but the righteous deals graciously, and gives. For such as are blessed of Him shall inherit the land; and they that are cursed of Him shall be cut off…

I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread. All the day long he deals graciously, and lends; and his seed is blessed. Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forever. For the Lord loves justice, and forsakes not His saints; they are preserved forever; but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever. The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps slide. The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him. The Lord will not leave him in his hand, nor suffer him to be condemned when he is judged. Wait for the Lord, and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it….

The psalmist describes a situation in which the wicked prosper, but the righteous man continues in his righteousness and integrity. The righteous man is promised that the wicked will disappear, and that he will inherit the land. Throughout the psalm, the righteousness, faith and trust of the righteous is highlighted alongside the Divine protection that he merits. The motif of inheriting the land is mentioned no less than five times across the psalm, and the root *shakhan* (dwell) appears two more times in connection to the land: "Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and cherish faithfulness" (v. 3); "The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever" (v. 29). It appears once in between by itself: "Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forever" (v. 27). The psalm mentions two troubles: famine and harassment on the part of the wicked. The righteous man's adherence to the Torah is also mentioned: "The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps slide," as is the success of his seed which "is blessed." These features bring us back to the verses containing God's command to Yitzchak not to go down to Egypt:

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| *Bereishit* 26:1-5 | *Tehillim* 37 |
| And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham. | Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and cherish faithfulness. |
| And Yitzchak went to Avimelekh king of the Pelishtim to Gerar. | |  | | --- | | For evil-doers shall be cut off; but those that wait for the Lord, they shall inherit the land. | |  | |
| And the Lord appeared to him, and said: Go not down to Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of. | |  | | --- | | But the humble shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in the abundance of peace.  The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted; and their inheritance shall be forever.  They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil; and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. | | |  | | --- | |  | |  | | |
| Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to Avraham your father. | |  |  | | --- | --- | | For such as are blessed of Him shall inherit the land; and they that are cursed of Him shall be cut off.  I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.  All the day long he deals graciously, and lends; and his seed is blessed. Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forever.   |  | | --- | |  | | |  | |
| And I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands; and by your seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves. | For the Lord loves justice, and forsakes not His saints; they are preserved forever; but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off.  The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever. |
| Because that Avraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws. | The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice.  The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps slide. |
|  | The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him.  The Lord will not leave him in his hand, nor suffer him to be condemned when he is judged.   |  | | --- | | Wait for the Lord, and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it. | |  | |

We suggest that *Chazal* read this psalm in relation to God's commands and promise to Yitzchak: "Dwell in the land… and I will be with you."Like the tip of an iceberg, *Bereishit Rabba* reveals that this psalm is built on the wording of the Torah. By way of the *petichta*, we can go back and read the psalm through the eyes and hearts of the Sages.

This reading of the psalm raises another possible way to answer the question: Why is Yitzchak commanded not to leave Eretz Israel? Yitzchak is a second-generation member of the "wholehearted" who remained firm in their faith, and therefore he merits not only on his own account, but also on account of his parents, and he merits that which his father Avraham does not merit — Divine protection during a period of famine.[[9]](#footnote-9) "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread."

The people of Israel across the generations, or at least since Rashi's generation, have been brought up on the words of Rabbi Hoshaya, that the reason for Yitzchak's not leaving Eretz Israel lies in his being an unblemished burnt-offering. It seems that in a generation in which a great portion of the nation dwell in their land, at a time when it is possible to live in material abundance outside of Eretz Israel, the challenge of holding on to the land despite all the difficulties involved is an existential challenge for many. From this perspective, our reading of the story of Yitzchak shares a contact point with the reading of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel.

**Yitzchak as an Educational Model**

Another layer in *Chazal's* reading of *Tehillim* 37 as an abstraction and expansion of *Bereishit* 26is an educational layer for their contemporaries, the Jews living in Eretz Israel in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Jewish community in Eretz Israel faced severe poverty and heavy taxation by the Roman Empire, and it required a great deal of tenacity and faith to remain in Eretz Israel and not go off to live comfortably in Babylonia. *Chazal* see in Yitzchak, who is commanded not to leave the country but rather to hold on to it even in times of difficulty, an educational model for their own times. God's promise of protection, faith and wholeheartedness, the readiness to remain even when hardship prevails, holding on to the inherited land — all these things come together in a relevant, poignant and vital message for their flock.

In a similar manner, the third *petichta* relating to the famine in the days of Yitzchak touches upon another critical and existential issue pertaining to the lives and times of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel:

(III)

Rabbi Levi opened:

"When the wicked comes" (*Mishlei* 18:3) — this refers to the wicked Eisav.

"There comes also contempt" (ibid.) — for his disgrace came with him.

"And with ignominy reproach" (ibid.) — for he was accompanied by the ignominy of famine.

And there is no disgrace other than famine, as it is stated: That I will no more make you a reproach of famine (see *Yoel* 2:19).[[10]](#footnote-10)

"And there was a famine in the land." (*Bereishit Rabba* 64, 2, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 701-702)[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rabbi Levi expounds the juxtaposition of the section dealing with Eisav's selling of his birthright and that concerning the famine in the days of Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 25:34-26:1):

And Ya’akov gave Eisav bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. So Eisav despised his birthright.

And there was a famine in the land…

Connecting the famine to Eisav is exceedingly relevant to the Amoraim of Eretz Israel: Under Christian Rome, the Jews of Eretz Israel suffer from famine. Their period is, in a sense, a reversal of what is reported in *Bereishit* 25 — there Eisav is the famished party, and Ya’akov "exploits" his hunger and weakness. In the third century, Eisav (identified by *Chazal* with Rome) is the sated party, and the descendants of Ya’akov who are living in their land suffer poverty and deprivation at the hands of the descendants of Eisav, who abuse them with land and head taxes. The inhabitants of Eretz Israel during the Amoraic period conduct themselves like Yitzchak and do not leave the country despite the great economic hardship. The Amoraim, leaders of the people, echo God's promise to Yitzchak:

And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham. And Yitzchak went to Avimelekh, king of the Pelishtim, to Gerar. And the Lord appeared to him, and said: Go not down to Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you. (*Bereishit* 26:1-3)

The manner in which the Amoraim of Eretz Israel read the stories of the patriarchs is a sign of their absolute involvement in the destiny of their people. We, too, must experience contemporary events with a renewed awareness of the actions of our ancestors as they are taught to us in the Torah. If we experience the challenges that face us in this manner, not only will we meet those challenges and merit heavenly assistance, but we will become fully connected to the full stature of our true essence, as the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. A *petichta* is a circular *derasha* in which a verse from the *parasha* is expounded by way of a differet verse, most often from *Ketuvim*. For further discussion, see our *shiur* for *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, text at note 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This verse is also expounded in connection with Sara's death. See *Bereishit Rabba* 58, 3:

   "And the life of Sara” (*Bereishit* 23:1). “The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted, and their inheritance shall be forever” (*Tehilim* 37:18). Just as they are whole, so their years are whole (*temimim*). When she was twenty, she was as beautiful as she was when she was seven; and when she was a hundred, she was as a woman of twenty as regards sin.

   Another explanation: “The Lord knows the days of them that are wholehearted” — this refers to Sara. “And their inheritance shall be forever” — “And the years of the life of Sara.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is how the *derasha* is understood by the *Yefei To'ar*: "And God saw to it that he was not ashamed on account of the evil of Avimelekh, and also that he was satisfied during the famine.” The *Mattenot Kehuna* (ad loc.) understands hese words differently, as relating to some other trouble that befalls Avimelekh. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The word *havat* means calamity, misfortune. See Radak, *Mikha* 7:3; Malbim, *Mishlei* 10:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The phrase "unblemished burnt-offering" with regard to Yitzchak is found in Rabbinic literature only here in *Bereishit Rabba* and once again in a late *midrash* (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is the way the commentators on the Midrash (ad loc.) understand the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Contractions and abbreviations are common for this reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The matter of the purchase of Makhpeila Cave is described at great length throughout the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In connection with this idea, see *Yerushalmi Kiddushin* 1:7:

   We have learned: A father merits for his son beauty, strength, wealth, wisdom and years… Wealth — “I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.”

   Also see *Bereishit Rabba* 19, 7:

   Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: Originally the *Shekhina* was in the lower world. When Adam sinned it departed… And countering them stood seven righteous men: Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya’akov, Levi, Kehat, Amram and Moshe, and they lowered it to the earth. Avraham from the seventh to the sixth, Yitzchak from the sixth to the fifth… Rabbi Yitzchak said: It is written: “The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever” (*Tehilim* 37:29). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The verse that is cited does not exist in the Bible. Close to it is *Yoel* 2:19: "And the Lord answered and said to His people: Behold, I will send you corn, and wine, and oil, and you shall be satisfied therewith; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations." That the reproach in the verse refers to the reproach of famine accords with the first half of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The connection between the phenomenon of famine and the figure of Esav in Rabbi Levi's *derasha* by way of the verse in *Mishlei* appears already in *Bereishit Rabba* 63, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)