**S.A.L.T. - PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Toldot of the struggles Yitzchak encountered during his sojourn in the Philistine region of Gerar, and then subsequently, when he was forced to leave. Yitzchak’s great success in farming despite the drought conditions evoked the jealousy and enmity of the local population, to the point where the ruler in Gerar, Avimelekh, told him to leave. After Yitzchak left, his servants twice dug wells, which the Philistine shepherds falsely claimed as theirs. His servants then dug a third well, which was not contested. After having given the first two wells names associated with fighting and strife, Yitzchak named this third well “*Rechovot*,” commemorating his proclamation, “*Ata hirchiv Hashem lanu u-farinu ba-aretz*” – “Now the Lord has given us space, and we have been fruitful in the land” (26:22).

The Ramban (26:20) famously comments that the Torah elaborated on these wells to allude to future events – specifically, the three *Batei Mikdash*. Yitzchak’s first two wells, which became the cause of strife and anguish, symbolize the first two Temples, which were both eventually burned to the ground during fierce battles against enemy nations. The third well, which brought peace and prosperity, represents the future *Beit Ha-mikdash* which will be built in the Messianic Era.

*Keli Yakar* adds an insightful remark to the Ramban’s symbolic reading of this section, offering an explanation of Yitzchak’s pronouncement, “Now the Lord has given us space, and we have been fruitful in the land.” The periods of the First and Second Commonwealth were characterized, to a large extent, by in-fighting, internal discord. In just one generation after the construction of the First Temple, the nation split into two kingdoms, which waged war against one another on several occasions during the ensuing centuries until the exile of the Northern Kingdom. And the Second Temple, of course, was destroyed due to the ill of *sin’at chinam* (baseless hatred), as the Gemara famously establishes in Masekhet Yoma (9b), with the people dividing into numerous different factions that disliked and struggled against one another. This in-fighting, *Keli Yakar* explains, is represented by the fights waged by the Philistine shepherds after Yitzchak’s servants dug the first two wells. The period of the third *Beit Ha-mikdash*, by contrast, will be characterized by the experience of “*hirchiv Hashem lanu u-farinu ba-aretz*” – a feeling of spaciousness (“*hirchiv Hashem lanu*”) and population growth (“*u-farinu ba-aretz*”). When people do not get along, *Keli Yakar* writes, they will fight even over a large area with more than enough space for all of them. Conversely, when people are committed to living and working together peacefully, then they will enjoy friendly relations even with limited space and resources. In the Messianic Era, *Keli Yakar* explains, we will experience the blessing of fertility and population growth, but we will also enjoy the feeling of “*hirchiv Hashem lanu*,” of space and comfort. Whereas large numbers of people sharing the same limited space can easily trigger friction and competition, the population growth in the future will lead to a sense of “*hirchiv Hashem lanu*,” of peace and serenity. In a redeemed world, people live amicably and productively together even in crowded conditions, even when limited space and commodities need to be shared. When we learn to live with sensitivity, consideration and graciousness, the blessing of “*u-farinu ba-aretz*” can be enjoyed together with the blessing of “*hirchiv Hashem lanu*,” as even when our numbers grow, we can live happily and peacefully together.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Toldot the story of Yaakov’s purchase of the birthright from his older twin, Eisav. Eisav had come home famished from the fields, and asked Yaakov to feed him some of the stew he was preparing. Yaakov agreed after Eisav swore on oath to relinquish to him his rights as firstborn.

[Rav Yaakov Yisrael Stahl](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/249_06_80.pdf) cites a reference to this incident in a little-known liturgical poem which was composed as a supplement to the *Azkir Sela Zikhron Ma’asim* prayer recited by some communities on Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat before Purim (as part of the *Yotzerot* hymns). In this hymn, the author speaks of Haman plotting the annihilation of the Jews without remembering how their ancestor, Yaakov, fed his ancestor, Eisav. He writes: “…*ve-lo zakhar melach nezid edesh*” – “…and he did not remember the salt of lentil stew,” referring to the “*nezid adashim*” (lentil stew) which Yaakov had prepared and shared with Eisav (25:34). Haman harbored hatred towards the Jewish People, overlooking their ancestor’s having fed his ancestor.

To explain the relevance of this incident to Haman’s plot, Rav Stahl references the *Targum* to the verse in *Megilat Ester* (3:6) which tells of Haman’s decision to kill not only his nemesis, Mordekhai, but Mordekhai’s entire nation. The *Targum* explains, “They told him that Mordekhai descended from Yaakov, who seized from Eisav – Haman’s ancestor – the birthright and the blessing.” According to the *Targum*, it seems, Haman viewed Mordekhai’s refusal to bow to him within the broader context of the ancient struggle between Yaakov and Eisav. He thus set out to avenge what he perceived as his nation’s long-standing grievance against Yaakov, which began at the time when Yaakov “seized” the birthright from Eisav. With this background, Rav Stahl writes, we can perhaps explain the reference to Yaakov’s strew in the aforementioned hymn. In plotting the annihilation of the Jewish People, and thus avenging Yaakov’s “seizing” the birthright, Haman forgot that Yaakov received the birthright legitimately, in exchange for “*melach nezid edesh*,”

Rabbi Stahl explores in this context various possible approaches to explain the reference to salt in this clause – “***melach*** *nezid edesh*.” The Torah tells that Yaakov served Eisav bread and lentils, making no mention at all of salt. Yet, it appears that the anonymous author of this poem assumed that salt was included. One possibility, Rav Stahl suggests, is that Yaakov wanted to ensure the binding nature of this transaction, and to preclude the possibility of any future challenges to its validity, as evidenced by Yaakov’s insistence that Eisav take a vow (25:33). For this reason, Yaakov made a point of adding salt to season the lentils, as lentils are otherwise bland and tasteless. The poet emphasizes the point that Haman ignored Yaakov’s legitimate acquisition of the birthright, accusing Yaakov of unlawfully seizing these privileges, when in truth Yaakov did everything he could to ensure the validity of the transaction – including the addition of seasoning to the stew that he served Eisav.

Monday

We read in Parashat Toldot of the scheme devised by Rivka to have Yaakov, her younger son, receive the blessing which Yitzchak, who was blind, had intended to confer upon the older of the twins, Eisav. Rivka had Yaakov disguise as Eisav, and, in case Yitzchak would feel his smooth skin, she covered his arms and neck with goatskins so he would feel hairy like Eisav (27:16). When Yaakov approached his father and, pretending he was Eisav, requested the blessing, Yitzchak felt his arms, and kissed him. He then marveled at Yaakov’s pleasing “fragrance,” exclaiming, “See how my son’s fragrance is like the fragrance of a field blessed by the Lord!” (27:27).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65) questions why Yitzchak would find Yaakov’s smell pleasing, given that he had on him the skins of freshly-slaughtered goats, which emit an offensively foul odor. How did Yaakov emit a pleasant fragrance? The Midrash presents several answers, including one which rereads Yitzchak’s exclamation as an allusion to the future of Yaakov’s descendants. The phrase “*Re’ei rei’ach beni*” (“Look how my son’s fragrance”), the Midrash comments, alludes to the time when the *Beit Ha-mikdash* stood, and *Benei Yisrael* brought sacrifices, which, as the Torah states on numerous occasions (e.g. Vayikra 1:9), produce a “*rei’ach nichoach l-Hashem*” – “a pleasing fragrance to the Lord.” The Midrash explains the next phrase – “*ke-rei’ach sadeh*” (“like the fragrance of a field”) as referring to the period after the Temple’s destruction, when the prophecy of Mikha (3:12), “*Tizyon sadeh teichareish*” (“Zion will be plowed like a field”) was fulfilled. Finally, the concluding words of this verse, “*asher beiracho Hashem*” (“which the Lord has blessed”), alludes to the rebuilt *Beit Ha-mikdash*, which will be a source of eternal blessing, as the verse in Tehillim (133:3) promises, “For there the Lord has assigned blessing, eternal life.” According to the Midrash, then, when the Yitzchak expressed his pleasure over Yaakov’s “fragrance,” he was in fact foreseeing the three periods of the built Temple, the absence of the Temple, and the rebuilt Temple (in the Midrash’s words, “*Beit Ha-mikdash banui ve-chareiv u-banui*”).

How might we explain the connection drawn by the Midrash between Yaakov’s “fragrance” and these three periods of Jewish history?

The answer, perhaps, is that the Midrash teaches that we can emit a pleasing “fragrance” under all circumstances, even when conditions are far less than ideal. When the *Beit Ha-mikdash* stood, we had the opportunity to offer sacrifices and thereby produce a “*rei’ach nichoach l-Hashem*,” and we are promised that in the future, when the *Mikdash* will be rebuilt, we will again offer sacrifices, whose “fragrance” will bring great blessing to the earth. We might have assumed that in the interim period, when we do not have the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, we do not have the ability to produce a “fragrance.” The Midrash thus teaches that just as Yitzchak enjoyed his son’s smell even when he had with him malodorous goatskins, similarly, God finds us “fragrant” even when we are not our best, even under “malodourous” conditions, when we cannot serve Him the way we ideally should. Even when we find ourselves in a state of “*Tziyon sadeh teichareish*,” when we feel as though we are a desolate field, unable to bring pleasing “sacrifices,” we are still capable of producing a “fragrance,” of pleasing our Creator. The Midrash here teaches that we must strive to do the best we can under the current circumstances, no matter how far from ideal they may be, and never despair because we do not have the “*Mikdash*,” because we lack the ability to serve God in an ideal fashion. We are assured of the ability to produce a “*rei’ach nichoach l-Hashem*” at all times and under all conditions, as long as we are trying and working to do the best we can.

Tuesday

Rashi, commenting to the first verse of Parashat Toldot, famously cites the Midrash as stating that after Yitzchak’s birth, cynics denied that Avraham had actually fathered a child at 100 years old. Denying this miracle, they claimed that Yitzchak was conceived when Sara was taken to Avimelekh’s palace and spent the night with the Philistine king. To dispel these rumors, God made Yitzchak’s appearance resemble Avraham’s, so there would be no question that Avraham had fathered Yitzchak.

[Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5770-toldot-kinship-and-difference/) suggested understanding this Midrashic passage in conjunction with the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sanhedrin (103b) that later, Avraham prayed to appear aged. Before Avraham’s time, the Gemara states, people did not show physical signs of aging. Avraham prayed to appear aged because he looked just like his son, Yitzchak, and people could not tell them apart. Once Avraham looked old, people could differentiate between him and his son.

It emerges, then, that God at first made Yitzchak appear like Avraham to demonstrate their kinship, but then needed to make them appear differently in order that they would not be mistaken for each other. Rabbi Sacks explains that in these two passages, “the rabbis told a profound psychological story” about the complex nature of the parent-child relationship, and of the transmission of tradition. He writes:

The close physical resemblance between Abraham and Isaac created unexpected difficulties. Both father and son suffered a loss of individuality…

Parents are not their children. Children are not replicas of their parents. We are each unique and have a unique purpose. That is why Abraham prayed to G-d that there be some clear and recognizable difference between father and son.

God had Yitzchak outwardly resemble Avraham to show that Yitzchak was a worthy heir of Avraham, loyally devoted to Avraham’s faith and teachings, and that he would grow to resemble Avraham’s commitment to God. However, the danger then became that they would be indistinguishable, that Yitzchak would grow to become a “carbon copy” of his father, without developing his distinctive traits and unique path in life and in the service of God. Taken together, these two passages reflect the tension that exists between following tradition, and establishing our individuality. On the one hand, we must aspire to resemble our forebears, to loyally follow the tradition and teachings they have bequeathed to us. But at the same time, we must forge our unique identity and chart our unique course, fulfilling the singular role and purpose for which we have come into the world.

Wednesday

Parashat Toldot begins with the story of the birth of Yaakov and Eisav, twin sons of Rivka, who conceived with her two sons after twenty years of infertility.

The Ritva, in his commentary to the *Haggadah* (*s.v. Va-etein le-Yitzchak et Yaakov*”), finds great significance in the fact that Yaakov and Eisav, who ended up following two opposite directions in life, were twins. He writes:

For this reason the wicked Eisav came out [of the womb] with, and was a twin of, Yaakov, in the same belly – so that the whole world would understand that Yaakov’s piety came to him from himself, not through the zodiacal system and not through the nature of the father and mother, or through any other force, for he and Eisav were born in the same belly, and Eisav left to a life of degeneracy, and Yaakov followed the path of the good.

God arranged that Yaakov and Eisav would be born and raised together to demonstrate that piety is achieved through one’s own efforts, and does not occur on its own. While we of course benefit from the positive influences to which we were exposed during our formative years, ultimately, the decision of which direction we follow in life is made only by us. Twins raised in the same environment, by the same parents, at the same time and under the same conditions can emerge as different as Yaakov and Eisav, because every person is given the ability to chart his course in life. We can never excuse ourselves from trying to grow and achieve with the claim that something in our background or upbringing hinders us, because the decision of whether to become Eisav and Yaakov is one which we are fully empowered to make, regardless of our past.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of Yitzchak’s relocation in the Philistine region of Gerar during a period of drought, where he enjoyed great success farming despite the harsh conditions. Rashi (26:13) cites the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 64:7) as commenting that Yitzchak’s agricultural efforts were so resoundingly successful that people would say, “[We prefer] the dung of Yitzchak’s mules over the silver and gold of Avimelekh [king of Gerar].” The “dung of Yitzchak’s mules” which fertilized the ground was deemed more valuable than the king’s riches.

*Tosafot*, in Masekhet Bava Metzia (85a), cite this Midrash, but with one slight variation – mentioning the word “*beheimotav*” (“animals”) instead of “*pardotav*” (“mules”). Meaning, the people did not specify Yitzchak’s mules, but rather spoke generally about his animals. Rav Shammai Ginsburg (*Imrei Shammai*, Parashat Toldot) notes that these two versions likely reflect the two views in the Gemara (Pesachim 54a) as to whether mules were first produced in the times of Adam, or were discovered only later, during the time of Eisav’s descendant, Ana (as might be indicated in Bereishit 36:24). According to the view that Ana was the first to mate a donkey and a horse to produce a mule, Yitzchak quite obviously did not own mules, and this might explain *Tosefot*’s version of the Midrash, which mentions “animals” instead of “mules.” Alternatively, Rav Ginsburg cites the Tosafists’ remarks elsewhere, in *Moshav Zekeinim* (here in Parashat Toldot), stating that the word “*pered*” can be used in reference to young animals generally, and not necessarily to mules. If so, then even the version cited by Rashi might not refer specifically to mules.

Nevertheless, a number of writers – including Maharal, in his *Gur Aryeh*, and Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik Davar* – assumed that the Midrash indeed refers to mules, and found it significant that the Midrash speaks specifically of an animal that cannot reproduce. Even though a mule cannot be bred, the people regarded Yitzchak’s mules are more valuable than the king’s treasures because of the large amounts of produce yielded by the ground fertilized with their droppings.

If, indeed, the Midrash speaks of mules, then we might suggest a symbolic explanation of the depiction of the Philistines preferring the dung of Yitzchak’s mules over Avimelekh’s riches. Sometimes, we might feel like “mules,” as though we are “infertile,” incapable of producing, of contributing meaningfully to the world. The Midrash depicts Yitzchak’s sterile animals yielding enormous volumes of food by simply performing their bodily functions, to teach us that we must recognize our ability to produce and contribute over the course of our ordinary, day-to-day lives. We do not need “Avimelekh’s silver and gold,” extraordinary wealth or talents, to make an impact. The way we conduct ourselves during our simple, day-to-day affairs “fertilizes” the “ground,” producing long-term results. Even in our lowest moments, when we might begin questioning our value and worth, and in our minds we feel like “mules” performing their ordinary, bodily functions, we must remember that we plant precious seeds each and every day through our regular routine, by living in accordance with the Torah’s laws and values. We, the descendants of Yitzchak, must always recognize the precious value of our everyday properly-spoken words and good deeds which have a “fertilizing” effect that is worth far more than gold and silver.

Friday

Yesterday, we discussed the Midrash’s comment (*Bereishit Rabba* 64:7), cited by Rashi in Parashat Toldot (26:13), regarding Yitzchak’s success as a farmer in the Philistine region of Gerar during a period of drought. Yitzchak produced so much food, the Midrash tells, that the people would say, “[We prefer] the dung of Yitzchak’s mules over the silver and gold of Avimelekh [king of Gerar].” The dropping of Yitzchak’s animals, which fertilized the ground that then yielded vast amounts of produce despite the harsh drought conditions, were deemed more valuable than Avimelekh’s riches in the royal treasury.

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, explains the Midrash as seeking to teach us that the value of any possession we own is determined solely by the way we use it. The most precious commodities are rendered worthless, or destructive, if they are misused, as Shlomo famously writes in Kohelet (5:12), “*Yeish ra’a chola she-ra’iti tachat ha-shamesh, osher shamur li-v’alav le-ra’ato*” – “There is a grave evil which I have seen under the sun: wealth reserved for its owner, to cause him harm.” Wealth in the hands of a wicked man like Avimelekh has no value. By contrast, even the droppings of the animals of a righteous man attain immense value, because they are used for the benefit of humanity. The righteous live with the awareness that everything they have been given, including their assets, their talents, their strengths, and all their other blessings, are to be used in the service of God and to help improve the world. And thus the Midrash comments that the dung of Yitzchak’s animals was deemed more valuable than Avimelekh’s riches – because even the least valuable commodity owned by a righteous person is more precious than the great fortune of an evil person.

Many have suggested a similar insight to explain the Gemara’s famous but enigmatic remark in Masekhet Chulin (91a) regarding the background to the story of Yaakov’s wrestle with the angel, told later in Sefer Bereishit. The Torah tells that Yaakov was assaulted when he “remained alone” (32:25) after bringing his family and his belongings across the Yabok Stream along his journey back to Canaan. The Gemara remarks that after Yaakov brought his family and possessions across the stream, he then returned to the other side because he had left “small jugs” there which he wished to retrieve. Yaakov made a point of retrieving these small items, the Gemara comments, because “the righteous – their property is more beloved to them than their bodies.” As many writers have explained, the righteous view every possession they have been given as a vitally important asset for them in their quest to serve God. Even “small jugs,” simple items which are not valued in the marketplace, are deemed precious by those who see every possession as a gift to be used in the fulfillment of their mission here in this world. Seen through these lenses, the dung of one’s animals has no less value than gold and silver – because everything we are given in our lives is for us to use in the devoted service of God and for the advancement of the world.

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