YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**A Righteous Son of a Righteous Man**

**I. Avraham begot Yitzchak**

Our *parasha* opens with a surprising verse, that appears to repeat itself unnecessarily:

And these are the generations [or: descendants] of Yitzchak son of Avraham: Avraham begat Yitzchak. (*Bereishit* 25:19)

Why was it necessary to tell us twice that Yitzchak was the son of Avraham? Many of the commentators were troubled by this question. Many are all familiar with Rashi’s explanation, based on a *midrash* (*Tanchuma Toldot* 3):

Because the cynics of the generation said that Sara conceived from Avimelekh, for she had lived for many years with Avraham without conceiving from him. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He formed Yitzchak's facial features similar to those of Avraham’s, so that everyone attested that “Avraham begat Yitzchak.” This is [the meaning of] what is written here: “Yitzchak son of Avraham,” for there is evidence that “Avraham begat Yitzchak.” (*Rashi*, *Bereishit* 25:19)

While this *midrash* is novel and creative, it has no real basis in the plain meaning of the text. The Rashbam, who prefers to explain in accordance with the plain sense of Scripture, suggests that the verse comes to emphasize that Yitzchak is the primary element of Avraham's descendants.[[1]](#footnote-1) He offers proof from a verse in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, where we find a similar redundancy:

According to the plain meaning of the text, [this was necessary] because it was stated earlier about Yishmael son of Avraham, "whom Hagar the Egyptian bore to Avraham" (25:12). But here, Yitzchak is Avraham's principle son, for he begot Yitzchak from his full-fledged wife, as it is written: "for in Yitzchak, shall seed be called to you."

And similarly in I *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, after it is written that the sons of Avraham were Yitzchak and Yishmael (1:28), and the sons of Ketura (32-33), it is written once again simply: "And Avraham begat Yitzchak" (34). (Rashbam, *Bereishit* 29:19)

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, in his typically original way, offers eight different explanations. We will focus on three of them, which revolve around a fundamental and fascinating question regarding the service of God.

**II. A *tzaddik,* son of a *tzaddik***

As an introduction to our discussion, let us examine the exposition in *Midrash Bereishit Rabba* on our verse:

"These are the generations of Yitzchak son of Avraham."

"The father of the righteous will exult with happiness [*gil yagil*], and the begetter of the wise will rejoice in him" (*Mishlei* 23:24) – happiness after happiness, when a righteous man (*tzaddik*)is born…. Rabbi Levi said: From where do you say that anyone who has a son who diligently engages in Torah study, that he becomes filled with benevolence upon him? The verse states: "My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will rejoice" (*Mishlei* 23:15). Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya says: I have derived only the heart of his father of flesh and blood. From where is it derived that even the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes filled with mercy upon him when he diligently engages in Torah study? Therefore, the verse states: "My heart too will rejoice." Happiness after happiness – when he is a righteous man, son of a righteous man. "And these are the generations of Yitzchak son of Avraham." (*Bereishit Rabba* 63, 1)

The *midrash* relates that the birth of a son who is a *tzaddik* (righteous) to a righteous father brings happiness both to his father in this world and to God in the upper worlds. It also seems to imply, without saying so explicitly, that the verse comes to emphasize the fact that Yitzchak was in fact a *tzaddik*, son of a *tzaddik*.

The significance of this fact may be familiar from the well-known passage in tractate *Yevamot,* which differentiates between the prayer of a righteous child of a righteous parent and that of a righteous child of a wicked person, with respect to the prayers of Yitzchak and Rivka:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: Our father Yitzchak was barren, for it is stated: "And Yitzchak entreated the Lord opposite [*le-nokhach*] his wife" (*Bereishit* 25:21). It does not say: "for [*al*] his wife," but "opposite his wife." This teaches that both were barren. If so, "And the Lord let Himself be entreated of him" (ibid.) should have read: "And the Lord let Himself be entreated of them"! Because the prayer of a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik* is not like the prayer of a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a wicked man (*rasha*). (*Yevamot* 64a)

According to Rabbi Yitzchak, it was specifically Yitzchak's prayer that God answered, because he was a righteous son of a righteous man and his prayer was therefore superior to the prayer offered by Rivka, who was righteous herself but whose father was wicked.

*Chazal* use this idea, of the superiority of a righteous son of a righteous man, to answer one of the greatest questions arising in Jewish thought – a question posed by none other than Moshe to God:

He [Moshe] asked that He should show him the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him. For it is stated: "Show me now Your ways" (*Shemot* 33:13). Moshe said before Him: Lord of the Universe**,** *why is it that some righteous men prosper and others suffer, some wicked men prosper and others suffer*? He replied to him: Moshe, the *tzaddik* who prospers is the *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik*; the *tzaddik* who suffers is a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *rasha* (wicked man). The *rasha* who prospers is a *rasha* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik*; the *rasha* who suffers is a *rasha* [who is] the son of a *rasha*. (*Berakhot* 7a)

The idea that seems to emerge from these *midrashim*, that a person is treated preferentially based on his lineage, raises a difficult spiritual-moral question: Why is a person measured not only by his own actions but also by the actions of his ancestors? After all, the Torah states explicitly:

The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin. (*Devarim* 24:16)

Why should it be different here, when it comes to prayer or spiritual punishments?!

The distinction between a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* and a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha* underlies three explanations that the *Or Ha-Chaim* proposes for our verse. Each explanation sheds additional light on the relationship between the two types of righteous people and leads us to a more precise understanding.

**III. Wholly righteous or penitent?**

In the first explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* follows the Gemara in *Yevamot* that we just mentioned. He suggests that the generations of Yitzchak are ascribed to Avraham because if it were not for Avraham, God would not have answered Yitzchak's prayer and given him children:

It further wishes to say, along the lines of what they said (*Yevamot* 64a): "And the Lord let Himself be entreated of him" – because the prayer of a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* is not like [the prayer of a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha].* Thus you learn that because of his having a righteous father, God let Himself be entreated of him and gave him sons. This is what it says: "Avraham begat [Yitzchak]," meaning, *by means of the merit of Avraham* begetting [Yitzchak]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 25:19)

This explanation does not take a position regarding the superiority of the righteous son of a *tzaddik* himself over the righteous son of a *rasha*, and therefore it does not add very much to the discussion in the Gemara. In the next two explanations, however, the *Or Ha-Chaim* takes a clear, albeit somewhat contradictory, position.

The next explanation implies that it is actually a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *wicked* man who enjoys superiority:

It is further alluded in the words, "Avraham begat Yitzchak," that even though Yitzchak's “generations of good” matched those of Avraham, as is hinted to by the words, "and these" [*ve-eleh*],with the addition of a *vav* ("and") – nevertheless, his standing does not compare to that of Avraham, because he, the father, transferred goodness to him. This is what it says: "Avraham begat Yitzchak" – the attribute of goodness in him came from his procreator. This was not the case with Avraham, whose father was an idolater, and he strengthened himself to comprehend his Creator, and [therefore] Avraham's standing is exalted. For this reason, he is called (*Yeshayahu* 41:8), "Avraham, who loved Me." That is to say, *he initiated love towards his Creator; before God shed the light of His love for him upon him, he pursued Him with amazing intensity – which was not the case with Yitzchak*, for Avraham instilled him with a love of the good, and as soon as he opened his eyes in the world, the spirit of God already rested upon him. (Ibid.)

Avraham did not grow up with a "religious education," but in the house of idolaters. In contrast, Yitzchak already came from a "good home," and was educated in the right way and in the right institutions. Therefore, argues the *Or Ha-Chaim,* even though the actions of Yitzchak and Avraham are similar, only about Avraham is it said that "he loved Me," because his love for God came from deep within him, without education and direction from his parents.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* highlights here the great virtue of a *tzaddik* who is born to a *rasha,* who successfully contends with his environment, with social pressure, and with the differences that distinguish him from those around him. Dealing with these things is not at all a simple task! According to this explanation, the Torah comes here to set Yitzchak apart from Avraham and say that despite all his righteousness, he would never reach Avraham's level.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, in his next explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* adopts an approach that at first glance appears to be the complete opposite:

It also alludes that the generations (descendants) of Yitzchak were loftier than the generations of Avraham, because a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik* is not like a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *rasha* (*Yevamot* 64a), like Avraham the son of Terach… The actions of a wicked father cast darkness on the spiritual light of the son, and in this sense, Yitzchak's actions are greater. This is what it says: "*And* these" – adding to what was before. And it offers a reason, saying: "Avraham begat Yitzchak." (Ibid.)

Here, suddenly, the son of a *tzaddik* is the superior type of *tzaddik*, and therefore Yitzchak is "more" righteous than Avraham. How can we hold the rope at both ends?

To a great extent, this contradiction in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* is reminiscent of the famous dispute in tractate *Berakhot* regarding who is better – a *tzaddik gamur* (a wholly righteous person) or a penitent (i.e., one who was not always righteous):

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: All the prophets prophesied only on behalf of penitents; **but as for the wholly righteous: "No eye has seen, O God, except You" (*Yeshayahu* 64:3)."** He differs in this from Rabbi Abahu. For Rabbi Abahu said: **In the place where penitents stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand**, as it is stated: "Peace, peace to him that was far and to him that is near" (*Yeshayahu* 57:19) – to him that was far first, and then to him that is near. (*Berakhot* 34b)

On the one hand, the rank of the *tzaddik gamur* is clear. When a person grows up in a bad home, despite all his desire and investment, something from the home and family sticks to him. On the other hand, it is clear that the process of repentance, which involves breaking away from one's home and family and heeding the call of "*lekh lekha*" that has accompanied the Jewish people since the days of Avraham, is much more difficult than continuing on the same path in which one’s ancestors walked.

It seems, then, that each side has a certain superiority. Let us try to be more precise.

**IV. Who do we choose to pray?**

The relationship between the two types of *tzaddikim* is not only a philosophical or ethical issue; it has practical ramifications. We can clarify the virtues found in each type of *tzaddik* by examining a halakhic discussion in this context*.*

In *Responsa Ha-Rosh*, the Rosh was asked about the prayer customs in a certain place, after the questioner became angry that a cantor of inferior lineage was asked to lead services. The Rosh answered that he too was angry about the cantors in that area, but for a different reason:

From the day of my arrival here, I too have been annoyed about the cantors in this land; but my annoyance was not the same as yours, seeing that you have hung the matter on family lineage. It is not so in the eyes of God; of what advantage is lineage before God? If he comes from a non-Jewish family, but is righteous – peace, peace to him that is near from the seed of those that are far. But I am annoyed about the fact that the cantors in this land are appointed for their pleasure, to hear a sweet voice. Even if he is absolutely wicked, they are not concerned – he should only be a good singer. And the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "She has uttered her voice against Me; therefore have I hated her" (*Yirmeyahu* 12:8). (*Responsa Ha-Rosh*, *kelal* 4, no. 22)

The Rosh maintains that a person's pedigree has no implications in matters of prayer. But is this really the case? After all, we have just seen the Gemara in *Yevamot* state that God answered Yitzchak's prayer because of his lineage – is this not an advantage? The Maharshal addresses this issue with a distinction between personal prayer and communal prayer:

But you must say that the son of a *tzaddik* has an advantage over the son of a *rasha* only concerning personal prayer, regarding which the merit of his ancestors helps him. But one who prays on behalf of others, and there is no injustice or deceit in him – on the contrary, [the son of a wicked man] is more esteemed before God, for he abandoned the actions of his ancestors, and walks in the ways of God, and about him it is stated: "Peace, peace to him that was far and to him that is near." (*Maharshal*, *Yam shel Shlomo*, *Chullin* 7, 17)

These words provoked disagreement among the *Acharonim* regarding practical law. The *Magen Avraham* (OC 53:8) writes in the name of the *Bach* that it is preferable to seek a cantor who is a *tzaddik* and is the son of a *tzaddik*. In contrast, the *Taz* (ibid., no. 3) disagrees and cites the words of the Rosh, though he explains them differently than the Maharshal.[[3]](#footnote-3) In his understanding of the Rosh, the son of the *rasha* is given preference because his appointment to serve as a cantor will bring him closer to the service of God. The Maharshal, as opposed to the *Taz*, relates more to the actions of the penitent and his spiritual capabilities. So also writes Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, author of the *Torah Temima*, relating precisely to the special virtues of a *tzaddik* whose father is a *rasha*:

But it seems to me that one who is of particularly good character, even if he is the son of a *rasha*, is to be preferred over a son of a *tzaddik* who does not have the good qualities of the son of the *rasha*. (*Torah Temima*, *Bereishit* 25, note 14)

Rabbi Epstein also adduces proof for his position from the Gemara in *Ta'anit*:

We see proof for this in *Ta'anit* 25b, where it is related that Rabbi Eliezer descended before the ark and rain did not fall, and [then] Rabbi Akiva descended, and it rained. When the Rabbis began to murmur about Rabbi Eliezer, that his prayers were not answered, a Divine Voice issued forth, saying: It is not that this one [Rabbi Akiva] is greater than that one [Rabbi Eliezer], but that this one is forgiving [Rabbi Akiva] and that one [Rabbi Eliezer] is not. Now, we know that Rabbi Akiva was the son of converts, and thus Rabbi Eliezer in relation to him was a righteous man the son of a righteous man – and nevertheless, Rabbi Akiva was answered, because of a good quality that he had in excess of Rabbi Eliezer. (Ibid.)

The Maharshal distinguishes between a righteous man's prayer for himself and his prayer for the community. One might ask: How is a prayer for one's personal needs different from a prayer for the community? If we pay close attention to the aforementioned words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* and his siding with each type of *tzaddik*, it is possible to understand more clearly.

A *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* is holy and pure; his sins are few, his merits are many, and he walks in the ways of his ancestors. Thus, when he prays for his personal needs, he comes with his merits and the merits of his ancestors. In contrast, a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha* has only his own merits. Therefore, the personal prayer of a righteous son of a righteous man is heard, since it comes with the force of two *tzaddikim*. On the other hand, when it comes to communal prayer, the cantor's main role is "that his heart be whole in prayer" (*Ta'anit* 15a).[[4]](#footnote-4) Wholeness of the heart in prayer is connected to the ability to repent, to step out of one's comfort zone and perform an act of turning to and drawing closer to Heaven. This is the characteristic of a penitent – a righteous person who grew up in a wicked environment and managed to rise above it.

**V. A *tzaddik*** **who suffers**

The above also connects to the Gemara in *Berakhot* (7a), where Moshe is answered that a *tzaddik* who suffers is a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha*. What was the *tzaddik*'s crime if his ancestors were wicked? On the contrary, he deserves greater reward for having successfully freed himself from the deeds of his ancestors! Rav Kook explains:

Good deeds are divided into two categories, some completely by choice and some implanted by nature. As for those implanted by nature, even though it is possible to change them by power of choice, nevertheless, in most cases a person is drawn to them. Therefore, the righteous son of a *tzaddik*, owing to the deeds instilled in him, does not have to be refined by way of afflictions, because his nature is inclined to goodness and he is usually wholly righteous; therefore, he prospers. And a righteous son of a *rasha,* since his nature is not [already] proper, even though he overcomes his [evil] inclination, therefore he needs to be refined through afflictions, and then he will be able to actualize his good will, and therefore he suffers. (*Ein Aya*, *Berakhot* 1, para. 73)

In the case of a righteous son of a *tzaddik*, good deeds are almost a part of his nature. In contrast, a righteous son of a *rasha* has undergone a process. He emerged from wickedness into a world of justice. In order to ensure that this will not be a transitory change, but permanent and solid, he must make a great investment and demonstrate readiness to sacrifice and bear suffering for the sake of God.

Rav Kook's words are clearly evident in the difference between Avraham and Yitzchak. Avraham was put through ten trials and considerable suffering, from the command to leave his home to the *Akeida* (*Avot* 5:3). In contrast, Yitzchak's life, was marked, more or less, by peace and quiet. He is portrayed not as a hero, but as one who continued the deeds of his ancestors.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Both of these *tzaddikim* are therefore deserving of great honor – each for his own virtue – "And Your people shall be all righteous" (*Yeshayahu* 60:21).

We will conclude with the apt words of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, who in his greatness explains to us that whatever we do today – whether we are righteous children of righteous men or of wicked men, whether we are wholly righteous or penitent – must only draw us closer to God's service:

A person should really not concern himself with this. A *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* should not concern himself with the merits of his ancestors, saying that the merits of his ancestors will stand for him, and therefore he need not exert himself in the service of the Creator. Rather, he needs great exertion and strength in his service of God. And the *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha* should not despair, saying that since he does not have the merit of his ancestors to help him, he cannot reach the service of the Creator. He should not say this, but rather he should serve God in truth, and he who comes to purify himself will be helped from Heaven.[[6]](#footnote-6) (*Noam Elimelekh*, *Parashat Lekh Lekha*)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. A similar explanation is offered by the *Chizkuni* and, with a slight variation, by the Ramban. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Similar to what we find regarding Noach, according to the view that he was "a righteous man in his generations." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For those interested in an expanded discussion, see also *Responsa Maharshal*, no. 20; *Mishna Berura* and *Elya Rabba* and *Zuta*, no. 53; *Teshuvot ve-Hanhagot*, vol. IV, no. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Ta'aniyot* 4:3. His words imply that only on fast days are we particular about the identity of the cantor. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Digging the wells that had been dug by Avraham's servants, going down to Gerar and behaving in a manner very similar to Avraham, and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Yoma* 38b. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)