Dedicated in memory of Rachel Leah bat R' Chaim Tzvi

תורת אמך WOMEN'S TORAH WEEKLY

Volume 17 Number 37

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Parshat Toldot: Obstacles in the Path of G-d

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur on Chassidut by Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The struggle of Yaakov and Esav is understood by our Sages as the quintessential struggle throughout the centuries between the Jewish people and their enemies. Esav is specifically identified with the Roman Empire, since he was their ancestor. The Shem MiShmuel asks several questions. How did the wicked Esav emerge from such holy parents? Why was he given the ability to compete with Yaakov? Even if Yitzchak did not completely fathom Esav's profound wickedness, he certainly saw that Yaakov was greater. Why then did he wish to give the brachot to Esav?

The Shem MiShmuel explains that Hashem embedded within both the physical and spiritual worlds a system of ikar v'tafel – primary and secondary concepts. Our physical world is secondary. The primary world is Olam Haba – the World to Come. This world can be understood on two levels. Every soul goes to Olam Haba after death. Olam Haba also refers to the time when Mashiach will come and rectify the flaws of this world. Our sages say that our physical world serves only as an entranceway to Olam Haba, the palace. Our task is to prepare ourselves by completing the process of creation and developing our souls in this world so that we can eventually merit the next world, the primary purpose of creation.

The six days of the week are also a means of preparing ourselves for the focal point of the week, Shabbat. Our souls revel in the unique, holy spirituality of Shabbat. During the week we are harried and busy with the mundane physical aspects of living. Shabbat is the day to focus on the ikar – what's really important – Torah, prayer, and family.

As we go through life, we will constantly encounter ikar and tafel. Tafel is earning the salary to support our families. Ikar is spending time and learning with the family. Does it make sense to get upset over such tafels as losing a business deal or earning an average grade in school? Isn't it more important to be thankful to Hashem for all the real blessings He gives us?

Why did Yitzchak and Rivkah fail with Esav? The Avnei Nezer explains that gaavah – haughtiness – blocks a person from teshuva. The Zohar says it is similar to a thick black cloud that prevents the sun's rays from piercing through. Someone who is truly egotistical is so black that the most profound words of mussar and chassidut cannot penetrate his heart. Esav, who inherited the gevura, power, of Yitzchak, was amazingly talented and strong. But whereas Yitzchak channeled his strength for the good, Esav distorted it for evil.

The Shem MiShmuel writes that the key event in Yaakov and Esav's life was the sale of the bechora, the firstborn's birthright. When Esav heard that Avraham had died, he lost faith in Hashem's justice and sold the bechora. There was a tradition in the family that Avraham would live to 180, but he died at 175 in order to avoid seeing Esav descend to wickedness. Esav did not know this. He was haughty and claimed that Hashem had repaid Avraham's chesed with din. Therefore he exchanged the ikar for the tafel and sold the privilege of serving Hashem for a plate of lentils.

The mission of man is to combine this world with the next world, to meld the physical with the spiritual. Our world is finite, Olam Haba is infinity. The limited pleasures of this world do not compare with the beauty, wonder, and closeness to Hashem that we will experience in the next world. That is the world we should focus on.

Yaakov and Esav were both blessed with tremendous powers. Both were given free choice. The primary clash between the two was which world to focus on, which arena to focus their energies. Yaakov made the right choice and grasped onto the ikar – Olam Haba. Esav gave in to temptation in order to build empires in this world. He used the spiritual lessons of Avraham and Yitzchak for his own selfish ends. He would spend time learning with Yitzchak and pretend to be interested so that he would later receive the brachot and all the wealth belonging to Yitzchak. He perverted religion for self-advancement. The enemies of Israel continue to follow in the footsteps of Esav. Yet at the end of time it will be proven that Torah Jews who embrace the ikar personify truth.

Honorable Mentchen: The Evil of Lashon Hara

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoch Teller

Lashon hara by definition means something that is true. People sometimes mistakenly invoke this in their defense. Although in an American civil court a person would be absolved from slander by saying it is true, according to Jewish law, it is still forbidden. This kind of speech denigrates someone else and it is inherently unfair because the person isn't there to defend himself. The Torah says, "Lo telech rachil b'amecha." A rachil is a peddler. There is a peddler mentality to gossip. If we reveal something intimate and negative about someone, we expect the other person to recompense us by telling us something negative about someone else. The Rambam refers to someone who speaks lashon hara as a meragel, a spy who will reveal secrets that are damaging to the country he is spying on. Likewise, someone who speaks lashon hara damages another person's reputation while they are defenseless.

One who speaks lashon hara violates the commandment of "Love your neighbor as yourself." The two things people least want revealed about themselves are character flaws and intimate details about their life. Most people gossip about precisely this. Lashon hara violates the commandment of judging one's fellow Jew fairly, "B'tzedek tishpot et amitecha." The Gemara says, "Cursed is the one who strikes his fellow man in secret." This refers to lashon hara, which since it is not said in the person's presence, he is unable to defend himself.

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Parents should discourage their children from speaking lashon hara about each other. Obviously if a child is being bullied you have to tell a parent, but as a rule you should discourage tattle-tailing. Yosef and his brothers serve as the example. Yosef kept bringing back evil reports about his brothers and they despised him and nearly killed him. Human nature is to speak negatively. The healthiest way to uproot this nature is to train children to avoid evil speech. One should explain that it is damaging, mean-spirited, and drives people apart.

The Torah tells us there is a positive commandment to remember what happened to Miriam. She spoke lashon hara against Moshe and was stricken with tzoraat (leprosy). If you read the story, it doesn't seem so terrible. Yet if Hashem gave us a positive commandment to dwell upon it, it clearly was not inconsequential. The person being gossiped about is hurt. Even Hashem is also hurt. Just as a parent feels bad when someone speaks negatively about his child, Hashem, our Father, is distressed when evil is spoken about His children.

Parshat Toldot: Potent Prayer

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

In Parshat Toldot we read how Yitzchak and Rivkah both prayed to Hashem for a child. Rashi explains that Hashem listened to Yitzchak over Rivkah because one cannot compare the prayer of a son of righteous parents to the prayer of a daughter of evil lineage. Yet Chazal teach that baalei teshuva are ranked greater than tzaddikim. They also teach that Hashem listens to all who call out to Him in truth. What made Yitzchak's prayer greater than Rivkah's?

Rav Dessler explains that Yitzchak could have easily continued along the path of Avraham. Instead he worked hard to forge his own path in avodat Hashem. He was not content to follow a routine. Instead, he invested enormous effort to make gevurah, self-discipline, his own way of serving G-d. In this way he was greater than Rivkah, who simply moved from outright evil towards righteousness. This is one of our greatest challenges. A person should not be satisfied with the level he has reached, but should constantly strive to reach greater heights in serving Hashem.

Prayer is about working on our relationship with Hashem. It connects us to the Source. We so often see prayer as simply a means of procuring our needs. Yet the essence of prayer means moving beyond ourselves to a larger and greater reality. The first step to growth in tefilah is to recognize that Hashem is the center of a person's life. This ultimately leads to deveikut, closeness with Hashem.

Rav Dessler explains that good bechira entails moving beyond complacency in order to see the truth. Each of us has different battle points. For example, a habitual liar who repeatedly overcomes his evil inclination and tells the truth will find after a while that it is no longer a battle for him. He has moved his point of bechira further up. Now the battle will be in a different area. The purpose of creation is to exercise our free will and use it to elevate ourselves to greater levels. The challenge most people face with tefilah is that they fail to focus on what they are saying and to whom they are speaking. Their prayer lacks depth and passion. Yitzchak mapped out for us the paradigm of a tzaddik ben tzaddik. He could have davened just the way his father taught him. But he understood that he needed to develop his own personal relationship with Hashem.

The Imrei Shefer writes that normally when a diplomat comes to visit a foreign country, a diplomat of equal stature comes out to greet him. Is it proper for us to send our bodies, our lower selves, to greet the King of Kings as we stand before Him in prayer? This should be our battle. It takes a great deal of practice and self-control to reach full concentration. Thinking about the meaning of two or three words at a time helps. Rav Segal recommended pointing to each word. This slows you down and forces you to think.

The second step to growth in tefilah is moving outside yourself to a larger realm where you feel the anguish of another person as if it were your own. The Tiv Avodah writes that Yitzchak was a tzaddik and he believed that Hashem's decree that he be childless was for the best. Yet he felt his wife's pain so strongly that he prayed for her with depth and passion. The Gemara writes, "One who prays for another and is in need of the same request, he is answered sooner." The one who prays becomes a conduit for blessing, which then affects him first. This is why Yitzchak's prayer was accepted before Rivkah's.

The third level of tefilah is bitul, nullifying your will before Hashem's will. Rivkah prayed for the ultimate tzaddik. In contrast, Yitzchak asked for a child who would be best for them in their avodat Hashem. A tzaddik ben tzaddik tends to rely on his yichus. Yitzchak went against his natural nature and completely nullified himself before the will of Hashem. This was the greatness of Yitzchak's tefilah.

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