Dedicated in memory of Rachel Leah bat R' Chaim Tzvi

תורת אמך WOMEN'S TORAH WEEKLY

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Parshat Toldot: Testing The Essence

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

Parshat Toldot discusses the enigmatic story of Yitzchak and the blessings he gave to his sons. How do we understand that Yitzchak initially overlooked Yaakov in favor of Esav? How did Yaakov, who personified truth, deceive his father?

The Torah says, "And he (Yitzchak) smelled the fragrance of his (Yaakov's) garments and he blessed him." *Begadav* (clothing) is related to *boged* (traitor). Yitzchak saw with prophecy that a descendant of Yaakov, Yosef Mishisa, would betray his people and then die in repentance sanctifying the name of Hashem. Other commentators say that Yitzchak sensed the fragrance of Gan Eden on Yaakov's clothing which aroused him to bless him. What prompted Yitzchak to bless Yaakov? A blessing doesn't affect a person's point of choice. Rather it's a prayer that a person's outer surroundings should be bountiful so that he will be able to make the best decisions.

There are two types of people, those who have reached their highest point of *avodat Hashem* and those who are in constant conflict attempting to attain it. Yaakov was an *ish tam*, a man of perfection. Therefore, Yitzchak believed that he didn't need any further blessing or assistance. His hardships would just enhance his service of Hashem. But Esav had a baser nature. Yitzchak believed that he had a good inner core that needed more Divine assistance. Therefore, he wanted to give him the *brachot* to help him overcome his challenges. But he didn't know Esav had already extinguished the inner spark in his heart. While Yitzchak prayed for the *boged*, the traitor, Hashem hinted to him with the fragrance of Gan Eden that the one who had achieved perfection should receive the blessings. This perhaps was the greatest test of Yitzchak. He blessed Yaakov even though he really wanted to bless Esav. He couldn't understand the logic but he subdued his inner mindset to follow the will of Hashem.

Rivkah's name comes from the root word *ravak*. *Ravak* is an instrument that links two animals together so they can plow the land or carry a burden. Rivkah's trial was a test of her essence. She, who loved both of her children would have to separate them and favor one child over the other. Yet we see that she went against her nature in order to do the will of Hashem. Yaakov too was tested in his way. If the will of Hashem demanded that he be untruthful, he would follow His command.

The Torah says that after the incident with the *brachot*, Esav took another wife. Esav comes from the root word *asui*, man made. It was as if he said, " I don't have to look inward. I don't have to see how I can improve myself. Let me get married and maybe my luck will change." Yaakov comes from the root word *eikev*, a heel. The hallmark of a Jew is going forward. Yaakov personified growth, self-assessment, and searching for the hand of Hashem at every point in his life. The Kotzker Rebbe said on the verse, "*Bereishet bara Elokim*," that Hashem created only the beginning. It's up to man to build himself and his world. Perhaps we cannot give ourselves up completely to Hashem as Yitzchak did. But all of us, in small ways, can emulate his ways by putting aside our own will for Hashem.

Parshat Toldot: Wells of Faith

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

In Parshat Toldot, the *Torah* tells us that Yitzchak dug wells. The *Avot* were the progenitors of the Jewish people and their actions were indicative of everything that would happen to their descendants in the future. The Midrash says in the name of Rav Yehuda that Yitzchak dug four well. In the future his children would have four camps in the desert. The Rabbanan taught that he dug five wells, corresponding to the five books of the *Torah*.

The Shem Mishmuel explains this puzzling Midrash with a verse from Mishlei, "There are very deep waters to be found in the wisdom of the human heart. A wise man knows how to draw from these waters." Just as water comes forth from the ground when one digs up the earth, deep spiritual wisdom resides within the human soul. One must be wise enough to know how to break through the physical barriers and other impediments that prevent us from accessing our natural spirituality. This is the symbolic meaning of the wells. When Yitzchak dug them, he made it possible for his descendants to do the same on a spiritual level. Our forefathers taught us that just as it is important to break through our physical impediments and allow our spirituality to surface, it's equally critical that our Judaism be vibrant and alive.

How do we turn away from excess materialism and refocus on spirituality? The first step is to have a plan. Examine how you spend your day. What percentage of time is spent on spirituality and how much time is consumed with physical matters? Working your way up to larger percentages of time on spirituality is a worthy goal. When we make decisions, spiritual factors should play a critical role. Focus on what's important. Set aside time for meditation, learning *Torah*, and doing acts of kindness. Make an effort to be part of a congregation, because the power of a group is so much greater than what one person can muster. Realize that life is a spiritual quest, an opportunity and a challenge.

The first level of digging the well is breaking down the barriers that prevent us from being what we truly can be, spiritual beings. The second level is engendering excitement. Our Judaism should be bubbling and effervescent like *mayim chayim* – life giving waters.

The Jews in the desert were faced with many difficulties among them lack of food, water, and direction. The four camps was Hashem's way of organizing the people to survive the rigors of the desert. Only with the miracles Hashem performed and with Moshe's steady leadership were they able to endure their harsh circumstances. We remember these gifts through the four wells. The Torah is like a flowing spring, it's an amazing source of spiritual and intellectual life. It is the five wells

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corresponding to the five books of Torah. The Zohar writes that the wells also represent *tzizit* and *tefilin*. *Tzizit* protects us from evil. It is compared to the four camps. Tefilin is like the Torah. It imparts holiness.

Digging a well involves *sur me'ra* – discarding the earth, the evil. Then it can evolve into something greater – *asai tov* (doing good). But we can still access spirituality on whatever level we are at. It might be difficult to break the cycle of sin, so starting with *asei tov* (doing good deeds) can slowly push the evil away.

The wells of Yitzchak are a lesson for life. They teach about overcoming barriers and impediments., to approach life as an exhilarating venture instead of getting mired in negativity. May we revel in the opportunity to accomplish our spiritual goals life according to our ultimate purpose.

Engaging in Kindness

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur on Chassidut by Rabbi Hanoch Teller

In secular society, *chesed* (kindness) is considered a positive attribute but it is not something regulated or legislated. In Jewish tradition kindness is a significant value. In fact, the Chafetz Chaim wrote an entire book called Ahavat Chesed, in which he codified the numerous laws pertaining to this *middah*.

The Gemara in Suka mentions that engaging in *chesed* is superior to charity in three ways. Charity is done only with money, but kindness can be performed with money and with one's body. Charity is only given to the poor but kindness can be given to rich and poor alike. Charity is dispensed only to the living, while kindness can be done with the dead as well. It is called *chesed shel emet* (true kindness) because it can never be paid back.

The Mishna in Avot tells us that the world stands on three pillars, Torah, *avodah* (serving Hashem), and *gemilat chasadim* (kindness). Kindness holds up the world. The Gemara in Yevamot says *chesed* characterizes a Jew. In fact, being kind is such an intrinsic Jewish attribute that the Gemara says that if a person is ruthless one should investigate his lineage. The Midrash Rabbah asks why Megilat Ruth was canonized in the Bible if it contains no ritual laws. Rav Zeira answered that it was to teach us the great reward for those who do acts of kindness. The prophet Micha teaches that the three primary obligations of a Jew are to do justice, walk humbly with Hashem, and to love kindness.

The Rambam stresses in three of his eight levels of charity the importance of anonymity. We should always look for opportunities to do *chesed* whether we are acknowledged for it or not. Small acts of kindness that count big in heaven include picking up trash from the sidewalk, giving up your seat for an elderly person, helping someone cross the street, allowing another car to pass you, listening with your heart to someone down on their luck, giving your used clothing to the needy, praising someone for their good deeds, encouraging your children to donate their old toys, and initiating a dialogue at a social gathering with someone who appears left out,.

There was once a *mitnagid* who set out to prove that *Chassidut* was not all it was made out to be. He came to a Chassidic town and asked the townspeople where the Rebbe was. They answered that he had gone to say *Selichot* (the penitential prayers) in heaven. The *mitnagid* was determined to disprove their foolishness. The next morning he ambushed the Rebbe's house and observed him walking out dressed as a lumberjack. He headed for the forest, chopped some wood, lugged it to the home of an old sick woman and lit a fire for her. When the *mitnagid* saw this he humbly admitted, "Surely he is in heaven, if not higher."

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