

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Toldot)

Eli Wiesel describes one of the most painful moments he ever experienced, as a push from behind. Shouting, chaos, dogs barking and even attacking, SS guards with guns shouting commands in German which most could not understand; for the Jews who arrived at Auschwitz, stepping out of the cattle cars onto the platform must have been a hell beyond description; a world of pure chaos and terror. Eli Wiesel's mother, having survived the ghetto, must have instantly understood what was happening: the Nazis were herding the hapless Jews towards the far end of the platform, where they were being split into two lines. She must have been watching and quickly realized what that selection meant: all the young and strong were headed to the right, and the old and sick the weak and the babies were being directed to the left; you did not have to be a genius to figure it out, so she pushed young, barely bar mitzvah age Eli towards his father, to life.

Rav Yisrael Lau's mother, when he was barely seven or eight, would do much the same thing on his own journey into hell. The same mother who had sheltered him under her coat risking her life to safely bring him out of the Pietrekov Synagogue before it was set on fire, saving his life, would eventually push him into the arms of his older brother Naphtali demanding that they live

And I remember hearing another Holocaust survivor tell of how her mother, confronted by an SS soldier who burst into the room where she was hiding in the ghetto, hugged the baby she was nursing close and defiantly stared the soldier down causing him to simply leave the room....

Motherhood; to me it always seemed to mean selfless devotion; sensitivity; the ability to see greatness long before anyone else was paying attention, and most of all, the driving force in helping us to understand who we really are and who we are meant to be.

A mother, like the mother bear defiantly and determinedly protecting her cubs, never gives up on her children, hence the verse describing our mother Rachel crying over the children of Israel, her children, determinedly beseeching G-d Himself to bring them home until finally He has no choice but to relent....

This week, we read the portion of *Toldot*, whose theme seems to be the offspring and accomplishments of Yitzchak our fore-father. But a closer look reveals it is really all about Rivka, and motherhood.

“These are the Toldot (Offspring? Generations? Accomplishments?) of Yitzchak... Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka... as his wife. “(Bereishit (Genesis) 25:19-20)

Whatever Yitzchak achieved in life, it all began when he married Rivka; she was the driving force behind the events of this week's portion and indeed Yitzchak's entire life.

Indeed, though the portion begins by suggesting these are the offspring of Yitzchak, the spotlight immediately shifts to Rivka and her difficult pregnancy. The Midrash (Rashi ibid. 25: 22) suggests allegorically that Rivka was confounded by the seemingly contradictory nature of the life she carried in her womb; whenever she passed a house of idolatry Esau kicked and struggled to get out, and when she passed a place of righteousness and Torah study Yaakov struggled to get out, implying two contradictory natures. Torn by who this baby would become (and apparently not yet understanding she is carrying twins) G-d eventually reveals to Rivka (25:23) that :

“Two nations are in your belly, and two nationalities will separate from your womb... and they will struggle...”)”

It is to Rivka that the prophecy of this epic struggle is given. Rivka, even before their birth, knows that these two boys will separate, and one will have to be chosen to carry on the mission of father Avraham.

In fact, the **Ramban** (ibid. 27:4) suggests that Rivka never tells Yitzchak of this prophecy, possibly because Yitzchak’s faith will cause him to leave it all in G-d’s hands anyway...

Very quickly we will see that these two boys are indeed very different and, most markedly, Yitzchak will love Esau, and Rivka will love Yaakov; hardly a healthy family dynamic!

And yet, at the end of the portion the Torah very clearly tells us that Rivka is:

“Rivka, the mother of Yaakov and Esau.” (ibid. 28:5) Why the need for this redundancy?

Rashi actually says he does not know what this is meant to teach us, so one should hesitate to offer explanation, but perhaps the Torah is telling us, through it all, that Esau was still Rivka’s son, and the path he chooses still causes her great pain. Indeed, when he takes women from the daughters of the Hittites, she is greatly distressed (ibid. 27:46), suggesting she still cares deeply for her son Esau. After all, we get upset about the things we care about....

So, which is it? Does Rivka love Yaakov at the expense of Esau, or is Rivka nonetheless a mother to both?

Interestingly, in describing the love of Yitzchak and Rivka for their sons there is a marked difference: Yitzchak, says the Torah, loves Esau “... *because he is a hunter...*” (25:28), but the Torah does not give a reason as to why Rivka loves Yaakov; it simply says she loves him. (ibid.).

Some commentaries suggest that given the fact that Rivka received a prophecy so many years ago, she loves Yaakov because it was foretold to her that he was the chosen one. But in that case the Torah should have said so; it does not. It simply says she loves Yaakov.

Perhaps we are witnessing two entirely different forms of relationship:

Yitzchak and Esau on the one hand, and Rivka and Yaakov on the other. And perhaps, way back at the beginning of the Jewish journey as part of how we become Jews, Hashem wants us to see that one of these relationships is what Judaism is all about.

Clearly, despite the fact that Yaakov and Esau are the first brothers who are both born of Jewish parents, something goes wrong. After all, why is Esau not considered a Jew, even if he ends up as a wicked one? Perhaps there is something about the relationship between Yitzchak and Esau that is so foreign to the goals of Judaism, Esau remains outside the fold.

Yitzchak’s love for Esau is conditional; he loves him for who he wants him to become, rather than seeing and loving him for who he is.

And Esau’s love for Yitzchak seems as well to be practically informed. Hence, he can declare himself to be waiting for his ‘beloved’ father’s death so he can kill Yaakov. Esau is the utilitarian; the hunter for whom nature is there to service his desires. Indeed, paganism is all about conditional relationships. Ancient pagans worshipped their gods based on what they perceived to be receiving, but if the Nile stopped overflowing its banks, the Egyptians turned to other gods they thought could more successfully

supply their needs. Indeed, the only time we see Esau relating to Yaakov is when Yaakov has something Esau wants: a pot of soup. And he gives up his birthright in that moment because it does not seem to hold any practical value.

And for whatever the reason, Yitzchak, having eaten of the food of Esau calls to Esau partly because he desires that food. Theirs seems to be a relationship based on what they can get; but such relationships never last.

Rivka however, does not love Yaakov for what he can do, or even for who he is. She simply loves him; her love is based not on what she can *get* but on what she can *give*.

But you cannot give someone what they do not want, and Rivka is told way back in the beginning that Esau will not want what she has to give, which is unconditional love....

And this is the foundation of what Judaism is all about, and what the world so desperately needs.

G-d does not love us only because of what we do or do not do; Hashem loves us unconditionally, for who we are, and that is our greatest mission in this world: to love each other unconditionally. This does not mean accepting any and all actions, it means loving a person even when denouncing their actions, however difficult that may be.

Love after all, is all about giving; in fact, the word *ahava* (love) is related to the word *le'havi*: to bring. That's why Love, which is about giving, is so different from lust, which is all about taking.

And of course, that is the essence of motherhood; no matter what a child may do, a mother will never stop loving that child, even if he is Esau....

Knowing we are loved unconditionally is what allows us to believe we should never give up; we can always become better, always make a difference.

Judaism, at its foundation, was built upon the belief that there is always a better world worth building; whether it be the world personified in the person next to me (each person after all, is a world...) or the entire world, one person at a time....

Shabbat Shalom,

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