**SALT – PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of Yitzchak’s experiences after relocating in the southern region of Gerar during a harsh drought. Yitzchak worked in agriculture and enjoyed extraordinary success, producing “*mei’a she’arim*” (26:12), which is understood to mean one hundred times the quantity of grain normally expected from the amount of seeds planted (Rashi, Rashbam, Radak).

*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (33), surprisingly, comments that Yitzchak did not actually plant seeds to produce grain. Rather, the word “*va-yizra*” (“planted”) refers to donating charity. The prophet Hosheia (10:12) uses the term “plant” as a metaphor for dispensing charity (“*Zir’u lakhem li-tzdaka*”), and *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* thus suggests that here in Parashat Toldot, too, the Torah means that Yitzchak distributed charity to those in need. The description of the “one hundredfold” of produce, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* states, refers to the reward Yitzchak received, as God blessed him with one hundred times the amount of money he gave to the poor.

Rav Noach Gad Weintraub, in his *Tuv Ayin* commentary to *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, notes Rashi’s comment on this verse, citing the Midrash, that Yitzchak planted his seeds during harsh conditions. The weather that year was unfavorable for agriculture, and the land on which he planted was not especially fertile. For this reason, Rashi writes, the Torah emphasized that Yitzchak planted “*ba-aretz ha-hi*” – “in that land” – and “*ba-shana ha-hi*” – “in the year,” to highlight the miraculous nature of his phenomenal success. Rav Weintraub suggests that according to *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*’s reading of this verse, the Torah’s emphasis on the unfavorable conditions might refer to the surrounding culture, which did not encourage charitable giving. Yitzchak “planted” charity in a society characterized by selfishness and disregard for the needs of others. This was a land of miserly people, and this was a period of shortage, when people were especially disinclined to share their assets with the underprivileged. But Yitzchak nevertheless adhered to the values which he imbibed in his father’s home, the values of selfless giving and generosity, and was unaffected by the miserliness of the people around him. He showed that even under conditions which make it difficult to follow our principles, it is possible – and critically important – to resist surrounding influences and do what we know is correct.

Sunday

In the opening verses of Parashat Toldot, we read of Rivka’s unusual pains during her pregnancy, as the two fetuses in her womb “scurried about” (“*va-yitrotzetzu*” – 25:22). Rashi famously cites the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 63:6) as explaining that when Rivka would walk near a house of idol worship, the fetus which would become Eisav tried to push his way out to practice idolatry. And when Rivka would pass near a house of Torah learning, the fetus that would become Yaakov tried to exit the womb so he could study.

The Maharal of Prague, in *Gur Aryeh*, explained this seemingly strange depiction as teaching that Yaakov and Eisav were born with drastically different ingrained tendencies. Yaakov was naturally drawn and inclined to study and piety, whereas Eisav was naturally drawn and inclined to sin.

Rav Chaim Friedlander, in *Mesilot Chaim Be-chinukh* (vol. 1, pp. 81-84), emphasizes that despite Eisav’s natural sinful tendencies, he was nevertheless held accountable for his wrongdoing. The Torah believes in the human being’s capacity to change, to restrain his negative impulses, and to resist temptation, and we are thus expected to overcome our sinful impulses, even when this is difficult.

The core essence of Eisav’s failure, Rav Friedlander writes, is expressed by Rashi later in his commentary to this *parasha*, in discussing Eisav’s marriage to two Chittite women when he was forty years old. Citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:1), Rashi writes that Eisav got married at the age of forty in order to outwardly resemble his father, Yitzchak, who – as we read in the beginning of Parashat Toldot (25:20) – got married at this age. Eisav decided to get married at forty so he could appear like his righteous father, and give the impression that he followed Yitzchak’s model of piety. The Midrash likens Eisav in this regard to a swine, which has split hooves – one of the two properties of kosher animals – but does not chew its cud, and is thus not permissible for consumption. Eisav sought to outwardly appear righteous, without actually being righteous. The Midrash says that Eisav would routinely kidnap married women and violate them, and yet presented himself as a saintly figure like his father, by marrying at the age forty just as Yitzchak had.

This, Rav Friedlander explains, is the root of Eisav’s failure. Had Eisav tried to truly change, he could have. But rather than aspiring to change his essence, he aspired to project a pious image. He did not concern himself with genuine, internal growth, worrying instead about how he was perceived.

We all have flaws that need to be corrected, habits that need to be changed, and natural tendencies that need to be reversed. Rav Friedlander here teaches that for this to happen, we must focus our attention on who we really want to be, and not on how we want to appear to the people around us. Preoccupation with our image and reputation prevents us from working toward actual change. Like Eisav, we all have character flaws – and we are warned to avoid his mistake, and to concern ourselves with addressing our flaws rather than trying to project a certain image.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of how Yaakov and Eisav, the twin sons of Yitzchak and Rivka, grew to become very different young adults. Eisav is described as an “*ish yodei’a tzayid, ish sadeh*” – “a man who knows hunting, a man of the field,” whereas Yaakov was an “*ish tam, yosheiv ohalim*” – “a wholesome man, a dweller of tents,” referring to his intensive involvement in learning (25:27).

Rav Shlomo Twersky, in *Malkhut Shlomo*, finds it significant that the descriptions of Yaakov and Eisav begin with the word “*ish*” (“man”). This formulation, Rav Twersky suggests, implies that the Torah depicts not simply what Yaakov and Eisav did, how they acted and how they spent their time, but rather their essence, who they were at the core of their beings. The description of Eisav as an “*ish yodei’a tzayid*” indicates that Eisav was aggressive and competitive in all his affairs. Hunting was not just what he did during the day, but his essential character. He was always “hunting,” seeking to defeat other people. Even when he was engaged in inherently valuable pursuits, he did so in a manner of “hunting,” with aggression and belligerence, always looking to knock people down and to triumph over them. Yaakov, by contrast, was defined as a “*yosheiv ohalim*,” a quality which informed everything he did. Even when he was outside his “tents” of study, he lived according to the values and principles which he learned and imbibed within the “tents.” Yaakov would eventually become fabulously successful, but he did so, Rav Twersky writes, without “hunting.” He struggled not to defeat other people, but rather to defeat his character flaws and weaknesses. Whereas Eisav was a “hunter” in everything he involved himself with, constantly striving to defeat others, Yaakov approached everything in life as a “tent dweller,” as a student and follower of Torah principles, conducting all his affairs with humility, honesty and refinement, as the Torah instructs.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Toldot of Yitzchak’s digging anew the wells in the southern region of Gerar which his father, Avraham, had dug previously (26:18). The local *Pelishtim* filled the wells with earth after Avraham’s passing, and Yitzchak now dig them anew so they could again provide water for the arid Negev region. Many writers throughout the ages have proposed that this event is to be understood not only as an account of Yitzchak’s economic struggles with the *Pelishtim*, but also symbolically, of the spiritual struggles which Yitzchak waged.

Rav Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov suggested that the image of earth is symbolic of humility, as in Avraham’s famous pronouncement when he prayed to God, “*…ve-anokhi afar va-eifer*” – “and I am but earth and ashes” (Bereishit 18:27). The description of the *Pelishtim* filling Avraham’s wells with earth, the Maggid of Zlotchov explains, means that many tried imitating Avraham’s exceptional humility. They tried filling their lives with “earth,” with expressions of humility, to mimic Avraham’s example – but this was just mimicking; it was not sincere or heartfelt. Yitzchak’s digging the wells anew symbolizes the fact that in order to truly follow the model set for us by our patriarch, we need to do our own “digging,” we need to work and exert real effort. Haphazardly throwing “earth,” putting on displays of humility, does not make us followers of Avraham Avinu and bearers of his legacy. Genuine humility, as taught by Avraham, requires “digging,” honestly working on our characters, and making an effort to acknowledge our faults and shortcomings, and to respect other people’s admirable qualities and achievements, without egotism or competitiveness. In order to continue providing to mankind the blessings brought by Avraham, we need to “dig” deep into our beings, to mold and refine our characters, without ever thinking that this can be done through superficial, outward displays of piety.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Toldot of Yitzchak and Rivka’s residence in the area of Gerar during a period of famine. Just as Yitzchak’s parents – Avraham and Sara – had done when they moved somewhere new, Yitzchak and Rivka posed as siblings, to avoid the risk of a local resident killing Yitzchak in order to make Rivka available for marriage. The Torah writes that after Yitzchak and Rivka had been living in Gerar for some time, “Avimelekh, the king of Gerar, peered through the window,” and he saw Yitzchak and Rivka acting as a married couple, thus realizing that they were husband and wife (26:8).

The word used for “peer” in this verse is “*va-yashkeif*,” a derivative of the root *sh.k.f.*, which we find used earlier in Sefer Bereishit, in Parashat Vayeira, amid the story of the destruction of Sedom (18:16). The Torah relates that the angels who had visited Avraham “set their sights” (“*va-yashkifu*”) upon Sedom, preparing to annihilate the sinful city. Rashi, commenting on that verse, writes that the verb *sh.k.f.* always connotes “looking” in the sense of seeking to inflict harm. Accordingly, it has been noted that here in Parashat Toldot, too, the word “*va-yashkeif*” presumably implies that Avimelekh looked to find fault in Yitzchak and Rivka, that he viewed them with suspicion, and “peered” at them for the purpose of uncovering a reason to treat him with hostility.

Significantly, the Torah describes Avimelekh as “peering through the window,” looking into Yitzchak and Rivka’s private life, in an effort to find fault. When we seek to identify a person’s weaknesses and flaws, when we look to criticize, condemn or besmirch, we will investigate, analyze and study them and their lives in search of a failing of deficiency. Often, when we assess people superficially, they are, deservedly, likeable, and it is only once we probe their character and conduct in more detail that we unearth their unimpressive qualities. Avimelekh’s “peering” into Yitzchak and Rivka’s private life is thus associated with the word “*va-yashkeif*,” because it is by thoroughly studying people’s character and behavior that one can discover their flaws, which was Avimelekh’s objective – and a practice that we are to avoid.

Rashi concludes his aforementioned comments to Parashat Vayeira by noting the one important exception to the rule regarding the root *sh.k.f.*. In Sefer Devarim, the Torah presents the *vidui ma’aser* text which a farmer must recite avowing his having fulfilled his tithing obligations. This proclamation ends with the prayer, “***Hashkifa*** *mi-me’on kodshekha, min ha-Shamayim*” (26:15) – asking God to “look down” upon His nation from the heavens, and shower us with blessing and prosperity. Although the root *sh.k.f.* normally connotes a harsh “looking,” Rashi writes, it is used in this context in reference to “looking” for the purpose of blessing, because “the power of gifts to the poor is great, in that it transforms the [divine] attribute of wrath into compassion.” Once the farmer has complied with the Torah’s tithing requirements, he can pray, “*Hashkifa*,” because in reward for his assisting the poor through his tithes, the harsh “peering” implied by this word is transformed into favorable “looking.”

In light of what we have seen, we might explain that peering “through the window,” inquiring into and scrutinizing people’s lives, is acceptable – and even commendable – when it is done for the purpose of charity, to determine their needs and how we can help fill those needs. Normally, peering “through the window” is an inappropriate exercise in negativity, criticism and judgementalism, and a violation of people’s privacy. But we transform *sh.k.f.*, this kind of “peering,” into a great source of blessing when our intentions are purely and exclusively for the person’s benefit, in a sincere effort to extend the assistance that he or she requires. Studying and scrutinizing people’s behavior and life is illegitimate when it is done for the purpose of looking down on them and feeling superior. But it is “transformed” into “compassion” when we analyze people so we can, without condescension or arrogance, sensitively offer the assistance that they need.

Thursday

In the beginning of Parashat Toldot, we read of the prophecy given to Ribka during her pregnancy that she would be producing “*shenei goyim*” – “two nations” (25:23), referring, of course, to the descendants of Yaakov and those of Eisav.

The Gemara in Masekhet Avoda Zara (11a) observes that the word “*goyim*” (“nations”) in this verse is spelled in an unusual manner, such that it could be pronounced “*gei’im*,” which means “distinguished ones.” Accordingly, the Gemara comments, this prophecy foretold the emergence of not only the two nations of *Am Yisrael* (Yaakov’s descendants) and Edom (Eisav’s descendants), but also two prominent individuals from these nations. Namely, this prophecy alluded to Rabbi Yehuda Ha’nasi and the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius, two powerful, wealthy leaders who enjoyed a close bond of friendship.

In describing the affluence attained by these two men, the Gemara says that there was never a lack of a variety of foods on their tables, “neither in the *yemot ha-chama* (summer) nor in the *yemot ha-geshamim* (winter).” The plain meaning of this remark is that Rabbi Yehuda and Antoninus were able to afford all kinds of produce throughout the year, even during seasons when some species are in limited supply and thus expensive. These leaders were wealthy enough to have all types of fruits and vegetables on their tables all year long, regardless of the season and the availability of the different species.

Rav Shmuel Ehrenfeld of Matersdorf, in *Chatan Sofer*, creatively suggests a symbolic understanding of the Gemara’s description of Rabbi Yehuda and Antoninus’ wealth. If the Gemara glowingly depicts their tables as having been filled with delicacies, Rav Ehrenfeld writes, we might assume that these foods were spread not for their indulgence, but rather for charitable purposes, to feed needy guests. The Gemara here seeks to express that truly generous and hospitable people assist and give to those in need during all “seasons,” under all conditions. They open their hearts, their homes and their wallets not only during the “*yemot ha-chama*” (literally, “sunny days”), when they enjoy blessing and prosperity, but also during the “*yemot ha-geshamim*” (“rainy days”), when the skies have darkened, and they face hardship. The Gemara here indicates to us that we are to “fill” our “tables,” to share our blessings with people in need, under all circumstances – not only when sharing is relatively easy, but even when this becomes a challenge and requires real sacrifice. We should not wait until we acquire all the comforts and luxuries that we desire before giving to others; even on “rainy days,” when we find ourselves struggling, we are to give what we can to those whom we are able to help.

Friday

The opening verses of Parashat Toldot tells of the birth of Yaakov and Eisav, after which we read, “The youths grew, and Eisav became a man who knew hunting, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a wholesome man, a dweller of tents” (25:27).

Rav Shmuel Ehrenfeld of Matersdorf, in *Chatan Sofer*, boldly suggests interpreting the phrase “*Va-yigdelu ha-ne’arim*” (“The youths grew”) as indicating that Yaakov and Eisav in effect raised themselves, having not received proper education and religious training at home. The reason, Rav Ehrenfeld posits, is because their father, Yitzchak, grew blind when they were still very young. The Torah later (27:1) tells of Yitzchak’s blindness in introducing the story of how he mistook Yaakov for Eisav because he could not see, but in truth, Rav Ehrenfeld claims, Yitzchak lost his vision already earlier. As a result, he was not in a position to properly train, educate and guide his sons, and so “*va-yigdelu ha-ne’arim*” – Yaakov and Eisav grew by themselves.

Rav Ehrenfeld explains on this basis the respective descriptions of Eisav and Yaakov, as “a man who knew hunting” and “a wholesome man.” Without a father to train and educate them, Yitzchak’s sons developed their natural, instinctive qualities; they each became an “*ish*” (“man”) characterized by their instinctive natures. Eisav was naturally drawn to violence, and so he grew to become a hunter, whereas Yaakov was naturally drawn to piety and scholarship, and so he became a quiet, disciplined “tent-dweller.” They were not trained or molded by their father, and so they developed themselves according to their natural instincts.

Of course, even according to this novel theory, Eisav is held accountable for his wrongdoing despite having been deprived a proper education. As profoundly as our upbringing and educational background affect our development, an improper or inadequate education does not excuse a person from his obligations as an adult. Even if a person had the misfortune of growing in the home of “blind” parents, who did or could not, for whatever reason, provide a proper education, he is expected to “raise” himself through his own efforts. Ultimately, we are all responsible for our conduct and our personal development, and cannot excuse ourselves by blaming our background or upbringing.