



Sefer Bereishis - Parshas Toldos

Personal choice

When Rivka was pregnant, she was in pain all the time:

וַיִּתֵּר יָצוּ הַבָּנִים, בְּקִרְבָּהּ, וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן, לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי; וַתֵּלֶךְ, לְדֶרֶשׁ אֶת-ה'.
(25:19-20)

Chazal understand that each time she walked past a holy place, one child would agitate, and each time she walked by a place of idolatry, the other would agitate.

Not yet knowing it was twins, she could not understand what she was going through – לָמָּה – זֶה אֲנִי (Literally, “Why is this happening to me?”).

But her resolution was quite odd:

וַתֵּלֶךְ, לְדֶרֶשׁ אֶת-ה' וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ, שְׁנֵי גַיִם בְּבִטְנְךָ –

She went to a prophet, and he said to her, “There are two nations within you”.

After learning she was expecting twins, she was no longer distressed by what bothered her earlier. This is quite odd, as seemingly, the fact she was expecting twins does not address the issue that bothered her – her pain. What was the dialogue and resolution?

R' Chaim Brown suggests a fascinating resolution. When Moshe reviews the Torah in his final speech to the people, he tells them: – רָאֵה אֲנִי נִתַּן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה –

See how I place before you a blessing and a curse... Good and Evil. (11:26)

The obvious meaning is that there is a choice between two archetypes: good and evil, and we are implored to choose wisely.

But there is a different implication. אֲנִי means the first person, the self, “I”. What kind of אֲנִי do you want to be?

Tying this to Rivka’s problem, R’ Brown frames her problem and resolution in a different light: – לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי where is the אֲנִי in this child? Does he want to go to holy places, or serve idols? This child has no אֲנִי – he is confused!

And the prophet replied to her:

– שְׁנֵי גַיִם בְּבִטְנְךָ It is not one confused child, it was two distinct אֲנִי archetypes. With this, she was comforted. This is also the choice laid before the Jews. What’s it going to be?

Yitzchak's wells

It is curious how the Torah discusses this at length, without it being clear at all what it is we are meant to learn from here, or what significance these events bore.

R' Ezra Hartman explains that this portion of the Torah tells us what our aspirations should be.

וַיָּשָׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחְפֹּר אֶת-בְּאֵרֵי הַמַּיִם, אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ בְיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו, וַיִּסְתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים, אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם; וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶן, שְׁמוֹת, כַּשֵּׁמֹת, אֲשֶׁר-קָרָא לָהֶן אָבִיו –

Yitzchak returned, and dug the wells that had been dug in the days of his father Avraham, that the Philistines had filled, after his father Avraham's death. He called them the names his father had called them.

The Torah tells us that if our ancestors are worth emulating, we absolutely should. An eye ought to be kept on heritage and tradition – Yitzchak pursued and reclaimed his fathers assets, and named them as his father did. But we should not aspire to be someone else, to fill their shoes, however large – we should aim higher, to exceed where our ancestors reached.

The Ramban and Kli Yakar discuss the details of the three wells that Yitzchak had excavated. The Ramban discusses how the three wells are veiled references to the three Temples, the Batei Mikdash.

וַיְרִיבוּ רְעֵי גֵרָר, עִם-רְעֵי יִצְחָק לְאֹמֶר-לָנוּ הַמַּיִם; וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם-הַבְּאֵר עֵשֶׂק, כִּי הִתְעַשְׂקוּ עִמּוֹ –
And the shepherds of Gerar quarreled with Yitzchak's shepherds, saying, "The water is ours"; so he named the well Esek, because they had contended with him.

This is the first Beis HaMikdash. There is a strong parallel, in that the Torah emphasises two factions, that argued. The era of the first Beis HaMikdash was defined by two factions the kingdom of Israel against Judea, arguing over who deserved the monarchy.

וַיַּחְפְּרוּ בְּאֵר אַחֲרָת, וַיְרִיבוּ גַם-עָלֶיהָ; וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמָהּ, שִׁטְנָה –
And they dug another well, and they fought about it too; so he named it Sitnah.

This is the second, which was defined by hatred between everyone. This is worse than the first. The Torah emphasises how the first was fought by the shepherds, which is a metaphor for the leaders, which is who fought for the first Temple. This time around, an unattached "they" just fought. No one in particular; a heavy hint to baseless hatred. Further, they failed to listen to the lesson of the first – וַיְרִיבוּ גַם-עָלֶיהָ – they fought about this one too.

The third however had no such strife – וַיַּחְפֹּר בְּאֵר אַחֲרָת, וְלֹא רָבוּ, עָלֶיהָ; וַיִּקְרָא –
שְׁמָהּ, רְחֹבוֹת, וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי-עֲתָה הִרְחִיב יְהוָה לָנוּ, וּפְרִינוּ בְּאֶרֶץ –

He moved away from there, and dug another; they did not quarrel over it, so he named it Rechovos, and he said, “For now the Lord has expanded on our behalf, and we will be fruitful in the land.”

The third is defined by peace. The word for peace is שלום, from the root שלם, whole. With peace, there is wholeness, harmony and space, and there is expansion. By learning these traits, we will see a third Temple that will stand forever.

Hidden Messages

When Yakov hatched his scheme to secure his fathers’s blessings, he is questioned by his father, and Yakov, under the guise of Esau, placates him:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל אָבִיו אֲנִי עֵשָׂו בְּכֹרְךָ עָשִׂיתִי כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ אֵלַי קוּמ נֹא שָׁבָה וְאָכְלָה מִצִּידִי בְּעֵבֹר – תִּבְרַכְנִי נַפְשְׁךָ

Yakov said to his father, “I am, Esau your firstborn. I have done as you have said to me. Please rise, sit down and eat of my game, so that your soul will bless me.” (27:19)

When this story is taught, particularly to youngsters, they learn that when Yakov said “I am, Esau your firstborn”, he did not lie; he did not claim to be Esau. Yakov paused after he said “I am”, and then simply affirmed that עשו was his firstborn son.

But what about the rest of what he said – “I have done as you have spoken to me,”? This just seems an outright lie!

Rashi addresses the issue and states that Yakov could simply have been referencing an earlier instruction that he had carried out.

The Od Yosef Chai expounds on this; the Avos taught their sons the principles of the Torah, father to son, Avraham to Yitzchak, Yitzchak to Yakov, Yakov to the Shevatim. Certainly the instructions they received included the mitzva of honouring ones parents, which requires carrying out instructions and fulfilling their will.

We find in the build up to this incident that Rivka instructs Yakov to take the food to his father, and thus receive the blessings. He did as his mother had instructed because his father had raised him to do so. This is the meaning of “I have done as you instructed” – to listen to my parents.

And that was certainly no lie!

On Antagonists

Avraham is blessed by Hashem after the Akeida:

כִּי בָרַךְ אֲבְרָהָם וְהִרְבָּה אַרְבָּה אֶת זַרְעוֹ כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּכְחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׁפַת הַיָּם וַיִּרְשׁ זָרְעוֹ אֶת שְׁעַר אֲבִיו –

I will bless you, and I will greatly multiply your descendants, like the stars of the heavens, and like the sand on the seashore; and your descendants will inherit the cities of their

enemies. (22:17)

Years later, Lavan blesses Rivka as she leaves to marry Yitzchak:

– וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת רִבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ אַחַת תִּנּוּ אֵת הַיָּי לְאַלְפֵי רַבָּה וַיִּירֶשׁ זָרְעֶךָ אֶת שְׂעַר שְׂנָאִיו
 And they blessed Rebecca and said to her, “Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads, and may your seed inherit the cities of those who hate you.” (24:60)

Rashi notes that Lavan is quoting the blessing received by Avraham, that she’d “inherit the cities” of her antagonists.

But the quote is not identical. What is the difference between – שְׂנָאִיו אֵיבָיו – enemies and שְׂנָאִיו – those who hate you?

R’ Yehoshua Hartman points to where the two are used in conjunction to note the difference.

– וַיְהִי בִּנְסֹעַ הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מִנְּשָׂה קוֹמָה הִ' וַיִּפְצוּ אֵיבָיו וַיִּנְסוּ מִשְׂנָאֵיהֶם מִפְּנֵיךָ –
 So it was, whenever the Ark set out, Moses would say, “Arise, Lord, may Your enemies be scattered and may those who hate You flee from You.”

Rashi says that אויבֵיךָ is enemies who are assembled for battle, and that מִשְׂנָאֵיךָ are pursuers.

There is a distinction between an enemy and a pursuer. The word אויב is similar in root to the word אוהב – to love. Both verbs are a result of closeness. A שונא however, is someone whose hatred transcends proximity, and will pursue.

Eisav is referred to as שונא ישראל, and Yishmael is referred to as אויב ישראל, and circumstances on the ground reflect this – if a Jewish State had been set up in Uganda, there would be no problems with the Palestinians and neighbours, inheritors of the mantle of Yishmael – the situation is a result of being together. Conversely, the Nazis had little to do with Jews worldwide, and yet their extermination campaign spanned the globe; truly the definition of רודף.

But how does this insight correlate to the different terminology Rivka and Avraham were blessed with?

R’ Hartman explains that at Mt. Moriah, the blessing was to Avraham, for Yitzchak, regarding his Yishmael – the אויב, therefore the pasuk says שְׂעַר אֵיבָיו. In contrast, Rivka received a bracha that was for Yakov, regarding Esav, and Esav is a שונא, and therefore the pasuk says שְׂעַר שְׂנָאִיו.

Why did G-d “relent” to Isaac and Rivka’s prayers?

When it was clear that they would be unable to have children, Isaac and Rivka prayed, and

the Torah says:

וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ, כִּי עֲקָרָה הִיא וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ ה'
 “And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and He relented to him”. (21:25)

A gentleman once told R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld a new take on this. Why does the Pasuk say Hashem “relented to him”? Does this not seem an odd way of saying that G-d heard and heeded his prayer?

The gentleman explained that there is a tradition that all the Patriarchs were meant to live until the age of 180. Yet Avraham died aged 175. Avraham was 99 when he circumcised himself, 100 at Isaac's birth, 137 at the Akeida, at which point Isaac was obviously 37. Isaac was 40 at his marriage, and 60 at the birth of Yaakov and Esau, making Avraham 160 at their birth. Esau first murdered aged 15, making Avraham 175. There is a Midrash that Avraham would live to see Yishmael repent (25:9), but die before Esau killed someone for the first time (25:30). If he died aged 175, where are the missing 5 years?

The gentleman said to R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld that “וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ ה'” is the answer. There was never any doubt that Isaac would have children; his father had been promised “nations”, through Isaac. Rivka would certainly be their mother as she was the one deemed worthy, as evidenced by the miracles Eliezer witnessed. It was just a matter of time then.

– וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ ה' G-d did not want to give them children just yet, but simply wanted them to wait a little longer so Avraham would not live to see his grandson become a murderer. But they begged so, He “relented”.

When R' Yosef Chaim heard this, he added that this was certainly accurate, because the numerical value of “וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ ה'” is 748 (686+36+26), the same Gematria as – חַמֵּשׁ שָׁנִים – 748, which represents G-d relenting to their prayers to have children – at the expense of חַמֵּשׁ שָׁנִים from Avraham Avinu's life.

R' Yosef Chaim notes that we say in Ashrei: – רְצוֹן-יְרָאִיו יַעֲשֶׂה; וְאֶת-שׁוֹעֲתֵם יִשְׁמַע, וְיוֹשִׁיעֵם –
 He will fulfill the desire of them that fear Him; He also will hear their cry, and will save them”. Isn't this in the wrong order? Doesn't Hashem fulfill their desires to placate their cries? R' Yosef Chaim explains that prayer can change what is meant to happen. But people don't know what's best for them, and sometimes suffer as a consequence of getting what they desire. The pasuk teaches that Hashem will even repair this later cry of suffering that is their own doing.

Benefiting from Miracles

R' Chaim Brisker wonders how the jug of oil the Hasmoneans found in the Chanukah story was suitable for use beyond the first day. It wasn't natural olive oil after the first day – it was the product of miracle, and therefore not organic – and the commandment to light the

Menorah was with natural olive oil specifically. It might have had the physical and chemical properties of olive oil, but the substance had not come from an olive!

What was the point of using it after the first day?

Secondly, the Gemara in Taanis 24 states that one ought not benefit from a miracle.

Examples of this may be found in the stories of rabbis of old in Europe who didn't have food, and when circumstance or luck provided something for them to eat, the Rabbi would refuse it on the grounds that it would detract from his Olam Habah.

At the construction of the Mishkan, in Shemos 35:27, the Torah describes how the princes, **וַיָּבִיאוּ** brought oil and spices after the nation donated resources, but **וַיָּבִיאוּ** is spelled without the letter **ו**. Rashi explains the oversight to mean that their intentions were good, but their actions were deficient, in that they underestimated the will of the Jewish people to donate materials for the construction of the Mishkan, and so their name was shortened here to teach us to act wholeheartedly.

R' Yonasan ben Uziel explains differently, reading Nesi'im as Neshaim, Aramaic for clouds. It was not the Nesi'im who provided the materials, but rather, clouds came to the princes with stones, oil and spices – from the sky!

R' Chaim Zevin asks R' Chaim Brisker's question; how could the princes use these for the Mishkan? They might have physically been olive oil/stones/spices, but again, they were unnatural. And then there is the prohibition of benefiting from miracles.

This can be answered by understanding how Noach left the Ark.

וַתָּבֵא אֵלָיו הַיּוֹנָה לְעֵת עֶרְבֹ, וְהָיָה עָלֶיהָ זֵיתֵי טָרֶף בְּפִיהָ –
 The bird came back in the evening with an olive branch in its mouth. (8:11)

The Ramban explains that the olive branch was from Gan Eden – clearly, it is an actual place with actual things within it.

Knowing this, R' Tzvi Pesach Franck concludes that we can differentiate between certain kinds of miracles. The cases under discussion were not Yesh Me'ayin – something from nothing. These were Yesh MeYesh, manipulations of something that was somewhere else – specifically, in Heaven! They were then moved to Earth. They were thus completely permissible, much like the Manna, which was not a new “thing”, rather, it is what the angels grind to make their bread according to the Gemara in Yoma. Nothing new was created, which was what the prohibition in Taanis was referring to. That is to say that the miracle was not their creation, which one would be forbidden to benefit from according to Taanis 24, but rather, their miraculous manipulation to be somewhere else at the appropriate time.

This can be proven from when Yakov brings a feast to his father, Yitzchak:

וַיֹּאמֶר, הַגִּשָּׁה לִי וְאֶכְלָה מִצֵּיד בְּנֵי-לְמַעַן תִּבְרַכְךָ, נַפְשִׁי; וַיִּגֶשׁ-לוֹ, וַיֹּאכַל, וַיָּבֵא לוֹ יַיִן, וַיִּשְׁתְּ” –
 “And he said: ‘Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son’s venison, that my soul may bless thee.’ And he brought it near to him, and he did eat; and he brought him wine, and he drank.”

At no point did his mother prepare wine, and R’ Yonason ben Uziel again points out the previous idea of things existing in Heaven and says that an angel brought wine made from grapes that were in heaven since Creation.

There is a saying; “To bake an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the Universe,” – this is the same idea. The objects under discussion were not from scratch at all.

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