

## PARASHAT TOLDOT

### The Blindness of Yitzchak

By Rav Ezra Bick

#### Introductory Note:

This shiur will make liberal use of midrashim in order to understand the personality and spiritual qualities of Yitzchak. There is a widespread tendency to view peshat and midrash as mutually exclusive, seeing drash as appropriate for rabbis making a point in a sermon but not as genuinely addressing the text. I believe this is a fundamental misunderstanding of midrash. The midrash presents a sensitive second-level interpretation of the narrative, searching for the meaning and wider understanding of events. The language of the midrash does indeed require decoding. Precisely because it deals so often with themes and understandings beyond the literal exposition of a story, it uses associations, metaphors, myths and other literary devices to convey its meaning. There are undoubtedly many midrashim that are homiletic in origin; nonetheless, the majority are interpretative. One of the goals of this shiur is to illustrate this point.

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Parashat Toldot recounts the entire career of Yitzchak. Avraham's life and deeds are described in Lekh Lekha and Vayera in a series of incidents involving heroism, devotion, sacrifice and moral excellence, and this is continued into Chayei Sara. Yaacov's life is detailed from Vayeitze until the end of Bereishit (viewing the struggle of Yosef and his brothers as belonging to the life of Yaacov, i.e. how the mission is passed on - parallel to Chayei Sara for Avraham and the second half of Toldot for Yitzchak). Yitzchak's life, his position in the trilogy of Avot, is completely encapsulated in one parasha - Toldot. And what did Yitzchak actually do in this parasha, other than having children and eventually sending them on their way? He dug wells! The only incident from Yitzchak's career described in the Torah is that he dug wells in Gerar. No drama, no great deeds of heroism, no struggle, no journeys. The last point is especially indicative. Travel and wandering are hallmarks of Avraham and Yaacov. Avraham not only makes the long journey to Eretz Yisrael, he continually moves about within Eretz Yisrael, as well as a trip to Egypt. Yaacov makes the round trip to Aram and is associated with several different places in Eretz Yisrael, completing his life in Egypt. Yitzchak's life is circumscribed by Gerar on the one side and the desert beyond Chevron on the other. The picture we receive is a sedentary one, uneventful, quiescent, passive. The Torah had nothing much to tell, it seems. Why then is Yitzchak an 'av,' a father, an archetype? An archetype of what?

Let us begin by focusing on Yitzchak's blindness. "When Yitzchak grew old, his eyes weakened from seeing" (27,1). That Yitzchak had difficulty seeing is undoubted - the

deception of Yaacov in order to obtain the berakhot (blessings) depends on it. Nonetheless, it is tempting to interpret his blindness as not only physical but a perceptual, spiritual inability to distinguish: for instance, to distinguish between Yaacov and Eisav, and not only in the form of their faces. How is it that Yitzchak loved and favored Eisav, when we assume he was unworthy of this preference? The answer is - he was blind, for some reason unperceptive, indiscriminating, and hence easily fooled.

There is one relatively strong indicator of this interpretation, despite its seeming "drush" character. Normally, the Torah introduces a necessary background piece of information not at the beginning of the story but precisely at the point where an explanation is demanded. For instance, although the fact that Sara is barren is clearly part of the background of the visit of the angels to Avraham, only when Sara is about to laugh at their announcement of the impending birth of Yitzchak does the Torah write, "And Avraham and Sara were old..." This is injected in the middle of the story and to modern ears sounds like an interruption. This is, however, standard practice in the Torah. (See also, "And Rivka had a brother..." [Ber. 24,29].) In our case, the story begins with a statement that Yitzchak was blind and continues by stating that he called for Eisav to come. If the significance of Yitzchak's blindness is to explain how Yaacov could fool him, this statement need not appear before verse 5. On the contrary, its actual location indicates that his blindness is part of the explanation of why he sent for Eisav. From that, it is one more step to conclude that we are dealing with lack of discernment rather than just physical blindness.

This principle, that explanatory material explains the nearest verse, is behind the midrashic principle of "dorshin semuchin" - proximity is a source of meaning. Naturally, the explanations need not be mutually exclusive. Not only is it possible that Yitzchak was blind in both ways, but a connection may be seen between the two. Yitzchak's physical blindness symbolizes and is reflected in his mental lack of discernment - the physical state of a Biblical tzaddik mirrors his spiritual state.

Why then was Yitzchak blind, unperceptive, not attuned to the world about him? The midrash (Bereishit Rabba 65,9) cites several explanations, some of which are quoted by Rashi. Let us examine two of them.

The midrash traces Yitzchak's blindness to something he saw during the akeida. This approach is based on the statement, "His eyes were weakened from seeing." The latter phrase, "from seeing," is unnecessary and the midrash chooses to understand it as causative ("seeing" caused his blindness) rather than modifying (his blindness was of the type which affects seeing). The first explanation is that Yitzchak, while bound on the altar, looked up and SAW into the heavens, where the angels were weeping. The tears entered his eyes, seared them and, years later, caused his eventual blindness. An alternate version is that he saw the glory of the celestial throne and this sight alone resulted in blindness.

Both these midrashim are clearly referring to spiritual blindness rather than physical blindness. After all, the verse explicitly states that Yitzchak became blind in his old age. Would the searing experience of angel tears have a delayed effect, if we are to understand that they in some way burn? Would the sight of the glory of heaven gradually attack the optic nerve, like a dormant virus, or would it, taking the story

literally, burn away the tissues of the eye like a red-hot poker? The midrashim are describing an experience which reorients Yitzchak's perception, a tendency which increases with age and eventually, when it becomes totally dominant inwardly, is reflected in his physical blindness as well. But what exactly is the connection between the experience of the akeida and blindness?

I think the explanation of the first midrash is as follows: Angels are routinely used by the midrash to express an objective rational truth, even where God disagrees. For instance, the angels argue against the creation of man because "he is completely deceitful" - and Truth is the seal of God (Bereishit Rabba 8,5). God's answer is to "cast Truth down" - not an answer which addresses their argument rationally. Similarly, the angels protest the akeida as being "foreign" to God (ibid. 56,5) - meaning, not in accordance with Divine justice. In our midrash, the angel's tears express the objective tragedy of the akeida - the world, its spiritual foundations, weep at the sight of a father sacrificing his son. Yitzchak was witness and victim - willing victim but victim nonetheless - of this act. He felt the tears of the angels, the tragedy and sadness of existence in a world where such an act is possible, while looking at his father's face, stern and determined, preparing to sacrifice him. Is it any wonder Yitzchak was unable to reject a son, even Eisav?

The akeida, an episode in Avraham's section of Bereishit, was the formative experience Yitzchak's life. While Avraham also was unwilling to reject his son, Yishmael, nonetheless he could be persuaded, by Sara, by God. Avraham appeals to God to accept Yishmael (17,18) and the appeal itself indicates he recognized Yishmael's true nature. Yaacov, of course, is famous for his willingness to discern and distinguish between his sons, beginning with Yosef and ending with the individualized berakhot - and not always berakhot - to his sons on his deathbed. Yitzchak, however, is unable to do so, and this is due not to a simple lack of intelligence or insight but to a heightened spiritual awareness of the value of fatherhood and sonship, an overwhelming sense of the tragic fragility of human continuity, of its cosmic significance (the angels are crying) and infinite value. This sensitivity will undoubtedly interfere with the practical side of fatherhood - you can't raise children if you refuse to distinguish between them. But is it not possible that it is nonetheless a crucial part of fatherhood and Yitzchak is an 'av,' a forefather of the Jews, precisely because he exemplified that ideal?

The second explanation of the midrash relates that Yitzchak peered into the heavens, and therefore was blind. Chazal are saying that Yitzchak's eye, following the akeida, was turned inward, or heavenward. Having seen so high, so holy a sight, having been in "that world," he was unable to also see and weigh and consider the problems of "this world." Yitzchak, in other words, was so overwhelmed by spirituality as to be relatively detached from mundane concerns. He was a dreamer, a visionary, contemplative, inward, detached - a "luftmensch" - and that is the sort of disability that blinded him to a clear distinction between Yaacov and Eisav.

The first midrash, while more tightly focused, is not actually presenting a different picture of Yitzchak. Whatever the nature of the cause, the result of the akeida is that Yitzchak's heightened spiritual sensitivity makes him unable to make hard-nosed distinctions in the mundane world. His mind is directed upward and inward; his field is depth of experience rather than practical living. From where in peshat did Chazal

derive this picture? Consider the way Rivka maneuvers Yitzchak. It isn't only that she succeeds, both in the case of the berakhot and in arranging for Yaacov to be sent away, but in her apparent inability to approach Yitzchak directly. In his presence, Rivka is unable to confront or persuade. The Netziv traces this back to the story in last week's parasha of Rivka falling off the camel when first meeting Yitzchak. A touching story - but what is its significance? The Netziv explains that Rivka's first impression of Yitzchak, returning from a "walk in the field," which the Netziv believes refers to a spiritual exercise of meditation, was so overwhelming in its spiritual force and intensity that Rivka could never overcome the feeling of trepidation and awe in his presence, even when she knew intellectually that she was right concerning a particular matter.

This is indicated even more clearly by the lack of episodes in Yitzchak's biography. Yitzchak did not engage in remolding his external world; his experiences were inward, contemplative. He is an "av" - this sort of experience is a necessary and essential ingredient in the development of a full spiritual personality - but there cannot be much to tell. One episode in Yitzchak's life, repeated twice - digging wells - is the metaphor of this activity. Yitzchak doesn't conquer new heights, he deepens the achievements of the past. He not only digs wells in Eretz Yisrael, he RE-DIGS the wells of Avraham. After Avraham, who climbed to the pinnacle of Mt. Moriah, spiritual development requires introspection - "la-suach ba-sadeh" (24,63), wandering through the field, digging within; and Yitzchak, in his all-encompassing fixation on the throne of glory, was the one to do that. The great achievements of Avraham will dissipate - the wells will become filled in - if Yitzchak will not return and deepen them, forgoing the advance into new areas in order to solidify what has been gained. His blindness, then, is part and parcel of his fatherhood.

Consider - God could have intervened and told Yitzchak to give the blessing to Yaacov. When Avraham hesitated to banish Yishmael, God told him to do so, for Yitzchak was to be his successor. In Yitzchak's case, God neither cures nor instructs, and his blindness results in the berakha reaching Yaacov by mistake - not despite the blindness but through the blindness. Yaacov receives a berakha in a manner where Yitzchak's blindness is part of the berakha itself. The blindness is not merely a disability; it is the obverse side of Yitzchak's depth, concentration, and single-minded dedication to the holy. Yaacov, whose personality is so different, is a product of his grandfather and father - Yitzchak gives him the "berakha of Avraham" (28,4) - and he serves the God of Avraham and the "pachad" of Yitzchak. Pachad, fear and trembling, awe and retreat, are a necessary part of the integrated spiritual personality.

This understanding of Yitzchak's personality, in its one-sided extremeness, is based on Chazal's view of the avot as archetypes, all three of whom are necessary components of Jewish spiritual personality. Chazal understood that to be the deeper 'peshat' of Bereishit - a description of the roots of the People of God rather than a collection of biographies. This approach requires that we search for the significance of each incident in the lives of the avot and relate it to the theme of his life and of Sefer Bereishit, rather than merely, on the first-level of peshat, determine its historical coherence. For that purpose, the midrash is unsurpassed.

Questions and points to ponder:

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1. Eli also suffered from "weak eyes" in his old age (I Samuel 3,2). Is this physical or spiritual? See the Radak. What is the textual indicator in this case to choose metaphoric blindness?

2. Yaacov also, when blessing his grandsons, had trouble seeing (Bereishit 48,10). In context, though, the relationship between his blindness and the berakha, and hence its implications for Yaacov's personality, is the exact opposite of what is claimed for Yitzchak. What is the difference between "weak eyes" (Yitzchak) and "heavy eyes" (Yaacov)?

The Annual NY Alumni Shabbaton with Rosh HaYeshiva Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, shlita, will take place on December 8-9, Shabbat Parashat Vayetze, at the Riverdale Jewish Center. For more information, please call Shirley Schuster at the yeshiva office - 212-732-4874 - or email gush@panix.com. We look forward to seeing you there!

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