

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

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First Shabbat Meal

"And these are the descendants of Yitzhak, the son of Avraham; Avraham fathered Yitzhak (Bereishit 19:25)."

The greatness of man and his true test is going against his nature

The Parashah begins with a seemingly repetitious clause ("Yitzhak son of Avraham, Avraham fathered Yitzhak"), on which Rashi comments that this repetition is to counter the derisive comments of mockers that Avraham wasn't the biological father of Yitzhak. They propagated that Avimelech, the ruler of Gerar, was the true father of Yitzhak. As irrefutable evidence that Avraham was the true father of Yitzhak, Hashem made them resemble one another exactly. That people resemble one another is not uncommon, but in Avraham and Yitzhak's case, Hashem made them resemble one another exactly. The level of semblance was perfect, which even identical twins can't claim to be. Hashem changed the nature of things to prove beyond any iota of doubt that Avraham fathered Yitzhak.

This statement must be further analyzed, because surely the mockers' claim that Sarah was pregnant from Avimelech couldn't have been meant literally. Sarah's abduction by Avimelech occurred almost twenty years prior to Yitzhak's birth, so he surely couldn't have fathered Yitzhak?

To explain their true intent, we must first introduce the following idea. One can only transmit and give over something which is in existence or in their possession. If one has money they can give it over, or if one has intelligence they can transmit it onwards. But what one doesn't have they cannot transmit over. This is a simple truth.

Now, each of the forefathers had a unique personality trait which defined their overall being. Avraham lived and breathed the trait of kindness and generosity, whilst Yitzhak excelled in restraint and control and Yaakov had a combination of both ("Tiferet," Yaakov's trait means balance and beauty). What the mockers were perplexed by was the exact opposite characters of Avraham and his son, Yitzhak. If Avraham had absolutely no element of 'Gevurah', justice and restraint, where then did Yitzhak get it from? It must be, they concluded, that it had come from Avimelech.

What they ignored, however, was Avraham's origin and his true nature. Avraham was born in Haran, Assyria, and this reveals that Avraham's true nature was actually one of justice and discipline ('Haran' means anger). With much effort, Avraham transformed his being from one of restraint and control, to one of absolute kindness. Avraham's nature then, was the true origin of Yitzhak's character.

This insight gives added meaning and respect for Avraham's character of kindness and generosity. Avraham transformed himself from one personality extreme to the other. This is true greatness. Transforming one's character from one extreme to the other, such as a stingy person going beyond themselves and giving charity, is a true measure of greatness.



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Soul Of the Rif

In the event that, G-d forbid, a person reaches the stage of hating another, the Torah warns, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart (Vayikra 19:17)." If a person hates another for no reason, this is a sign that there are negative aspects within their heart, and not just a hatred towards this particular person in this specific instance.

With this in mind, it is imperative to silence all negativity and sulliness within our hearts through Teshuva (repentance). One needs to fix and straighten them, because if one does not do so, they will remain with you. You will then argue with another person tomorrow, and then a further person the day after. To make peace with someone for whom one has baseless hatred is not enough, as the baseless hatred demonstrates that there is a wider problem, and it is that broader issue which one needs to work on.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"Avraham fathers Yitzchak (Bereishit 19:25)"
Something which is done for the first time in the world creates an opening for others in that matter.

In the weekly portion, we read the verse: "These are the generations of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham, Avraham fathers Yitzchak (Bereishit 19:25)."

The question must be asked, what does it mean when it says that he fathers him in the present tense, it should say that he fathered him in the past tense? Every word in the Torah is precise, and as such we must understand why the Torah states that Avraham fathers Yitzchak now, despite the fact that Yitzchak was already sixty years old, having been born many years earlier?

A second question is that in our daily prayers we read the verse "then Moshe will sing (Shemot 15:1)." It should say that Moshe 'sung' in the past tense, why is this verse phrased in the future tense? This is similar to our section, where rather than writing "fathered" in the past tense, the Torah speaks in the present tense.

Perhaps, this can be answered by way of a tremendous concept. Everything which takes place for the first time is difficult. However, once the first time has passed, it is easy for everyone else to do the same. This is like a person who puts on a new shoe, who pushes and it hurts and afterwards it becomes easier and comfortable for them. So too, in life, every time something comes for the first time in life, it is difficult, however once one passes it, it becomes easy. The first time a person performs a given Mitzvah it is difficult, however after one does it, it becomes easy to do it repeatedly. A person who goes and establishes a first yeshiva in a given area will find that it is difficult at the beginning, but after that, others will find it easier to do the same.

The same can be said in regard to "Al Hanissim," the prayer recited on Purim and Chanukah.

When we say "in those days" the miracle began, but after the miracle begins and is active, we declare "in this time," as the whole thing is much easier in terms of making it happen. Our mother Sarah was barren, but after she was remembered and granted children, other barren women also had an easier time in being granted children, for she opened the door for all of the barren women, enabling them to be granted lasting progeny.

If people are unsuccessful in business, they will often find that once another person succeeds in that industry, it is easier for them to do the same. It is hardest for the first person, however once they succeed, others will succeed with greater ease.

It is therefore possible to say that Avraham "fathers Yitzchak." Avraham did not only father him as an individual in the past. But rather, injected the world with a heightened ability to bear children and this miracle remains until today - hence the present tense. So too, we can understand the verse "then, Moshe will sing" in a similar vein. It means to say that the miracle for the Jewish people at the Red Sea was not just a miracle which ended at that time, but was rather a miracle which continued for generations. Every time a person undergoes a challenge, they can draw strength from the miraculous salvation of the Splitting of the Sea, which remains for generations.

This is a tremendous concept to be aware of. The holy Avot (forefathers) paved the way for us to be remembered and saved from any difficulty throughout the generations; this was achieved by way of the birth of Yitzchak. The same is true of the splitting of the sea and the verse "then, Moshe will sing."

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Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, my daughter has been going out with a certain young man for many years, and she wishes to get married. However, the young man finds it difficult to come to a decision, yet on the other hand, they refuse to separate. As a mother, what can I do?

Answer:

Things which stretch on for a long time are not healthy or good. It is necessary to urge them to make a decision to get married, and it is also necessary to understand the reasons, and to hear the reasons why they are not making a decision. It is healthy for a couple to go out for a period, and then to get married. To drag it out for many years is not healthy, this is also caused by the Evil Inclination. As well as not being good, this arrangement can go on for years, and the Evil Inclination can come between them and break the relationship, which is of course not good. After a period, a time should be fixed, it is necessary to formalize this and to get married, stretching things out is not good.





3rd Shabbat meal

“And Yitzchak entreated Hashem in the presence of his wife, and Hashem answered him, and Rivka his wife became pregnant (Bereishit 25:21).”

Hashem listens to the prayer of a person who accepts everything which happens to them with joy. The holy Torah tells us that Rivka was barren and had no children. Yitzchak and Rivka stood up to pray that Hashem would grant them children. Yitzchak stood on the southern side, and Rivka stood on the northern end, and Hashem heard Yitzchak's prayers and granted them children. Let us ask the question: Why did Hashem specifically listen to the prayer of Yitzchak and not the prayer of Rivka? Perhaps we can suggest that if a person undergoes suffering, but accepts all with love and joy, and continues to believe in Hashem, their prayer has great value. Our father Yitzchak had great suffering, such as his mother dying and losing his sense of sight. He dealt with many challenges in life. He had a good life, but it was not straightforward. Despite everything, he never claimed or complained against Hashem; he accepted all that came his way with love and joy. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 92b) says that after King David finished writing Sefer Tehillim, Nevuchadnetzar began to praise Hashem. When he spoke, he almost contradicted all of the praises which David said in Tehillim. It is well known that Nevudnetzar was a great Rasha (wicked person), he destroyed the Beit HaMikdash, and yet all of the praises that he expressed were stronger than the prayers of King David.

When Sefer Tehillim stood opposite the praises of Nevuchadnetzar, an angel came and placed molten gold in his mouth and Nevuchadnetzar was silenced from all of the praises that he was going to say. Let us ask the question: If he was praising Hashem more than King David, why was it necessary to use molten gold to silence him? This can be explained in light of what our holy rabbis teach us. Nevudnetzar praised Hashem, although for him, everything in life was good. He was wealthy and ruled the world. He praised Hashem because all was good for him. However, David was different, the whole of Tehillim is filled with suffering. David was pursued by his own son, he endured various troubles and despite all, he praised and ascribed glory to Hashem. This was the greatness of David. Therefore, the angels placed something boiling in the mouth of Nevuchadnetzar when he was praising Hashem, and instantly, when things were no longer good for him, he stopped praising altogether.

A Jew, even if there is suffering and problems, continues to praise Hashem. For a gentile, the test is when there are problems, they may rebel and want nothing. In the prayer Aleinu, we say “and we bend our knees and bow” - even when we are bent under the burden of problems, and we are falling and lack the strength to withstand our suffering, we still bow and thank Hashem. This is the positive trait of a Jew, and this was also the trait of Yitzchak. Hashem accepted his prayer, because despite all of his problems, he accepted all with joy. When a person starts with arguments, along the lines of “this is not good, and that is not comfortable” they lose everything. When they accept everything with joy and love, this is the highest level a person can reach.

“And the children struggled within her, and she said ‘Why is this happening to me?’ and went to seek Hashem (Bereishit 25:22).”
Helping and honoring Talmidei Chachamim is a Segula for one's children to go in the way of the Torah and the Mitzvot.

In this week's portion, we find “And the children struggled within her... and she went to seek out Hashem.” Our holy rabbis say that when

Rivka would pass houses of idol worship, Eisav would try to come out. Consequently, the sages teach us that she sought out the Beit HaMidrash (study hall) of Shem and Ever to seek out Hashem. The question is why did she do this? Perhaps this can be answered based on the Talmud (Shabbat 23b), which teaches as follows: Rava says: One who loves Talmidei Chachamim will have children who are Talmidei Chachamim, and one who cherishes them will have sons-in-law who are Talmidei Chachamim. Rava said that whoever cherishes Talmidei Chachamim and helps them, will merit to have children who are Talmidei Chachamim. When Rivka saw that she had a son who wanted to go out to houses of idol worship, she went to the Talmidei Chachamim of the time, Shem and Ever, in order to help them, so that she would merit that the son inside of her who at the time wanted to go to places of sin, would become a Tzaddik, in merit of her cherishment of Talmidei Chachamim. From here, we see a tremendous concept, that when a person has affection for Talmidei Chachamim and endeavors on their behalf, this causes one to merit that their children will go in the path of Hashem and become Talmidei Chachamim. Therefore, one needs to make efforts with all of one's strength to honor Talmidei Chachamim, in order to merit children and children-in-law who are Talmidei Chachamim. In these times, when the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination) is incredibly strong, and educating one's children is difficult, one needs to make a particular effort to honor Talmidei Chachamim, in order that this be a Segula that one's children go in the same direction.

“And Yitzchak entreated Hashem in the presence of his wife (Bereishit 25:21)”

The main prayers of a man should be focused on the spirituality of the home; whilst those of a woman should be on earthly things.

Within this week's portion, we read about the childlessness of Yitzchak and Rivka. Yitzchak stood in the south and Rivka stood in the north, and both of them prayed to be granted children. Let us ask, why was it that one stood in the north and the other stood in the south?

Perhaps we can explain a great concept, based on the Talmud (Bava Batra 25b). The Talmud there states: Rabbi Yitzchak said, one who wishes to become wise should face the south (when praying), and one who wishes to become wealthy should face north. If a person wishes to become wealthy, they should pray and head towards the north. One who wishes to become wise in Torah, should pray towards the south. Based on this, Yitzchak chose to pray as he did, in the south. Rivka stood and prayed in the north, because the husband must pray for spiritual things, such as fear of Heaven and service of Haashem, and the woman must pray for the sustenance of her house. Of course, the husband must also pray for income and the wife must pray for fear of Heaven and Torah, but most of the prayers of the husband should be about Torah and those of the wife should be about income.

The Gemara in Bava Metzia (59a) teaches “honor your wives in order that you will be rich.” The power of one's income is given over to the hand of wives. A wife is the key to income in one's house. Therefore, Yitzchak prayed in the south, asking that he would have a son who would be Tzaddik, with Torah and Yirat Shamayim (fear of heaven). However, Rivka prayed in the north, for the power of income is to be found there. In light of this, a person needs to learn the following lesson and teach it to his wife: When praying, a man should focus the bulk of his prayer on spiritual matters, and the wife should focus her prayer on earthly needs.



Treasure charms from the Rif

Our holy sages learn from an episode in the Talmud (Menachot 44a) that the Mitzvah of Tzitzit is a charm for one to be saved from the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination).

Our sages learn this from the juxtaposition of two ideas in the following verse: “Look at it (the Tzitzit) and recall all the commandments of Hashem and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge (Bamidbar 15:39).”

The sages explain the verse to be teaching us that looking at one's Tzitzit is a wonderful charm to perform all proactive Mitzvot. Additionally, it also serves to safeguard one from being drawn after one's heart and eyes towards an Aveirah.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Storys from the Rif

Serving Hashem without thinking about the reward is wholesome service of G-d.

The Maharsha, Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, was one the holiest Rabbis to live in his generation. Below is a stirring story which took place during his days. The Maharsha was the head of a prestigious yeshiva. Opposite his yeshiva, was a church led by a certain priest. This priest was a rampant antisemite and sought to persecute and antagonize the Jews in any way that he could.

When the Maharsha passed away he left a will instructing his students how to conduct the funeral. In the will, he directed them to take his coffin and place it before the church for a certain amount of time. The will explicated that they should transport the coffin to the cemetery and bury him only once the allotted time had passed.

His student read the instructions and did as instructed. They placed his coffin in front of the church and after a few moments, the church sunk a handbreadth into the ground. Another few moments passed, and sure enough the coffin sank a further handbreadth into the ground. They kept the coffin there for the stipulated amount of time, by which time, the majority of the church had been buried in the ground. The students understood that this had occurred because the church had been the epicenter of the persecution of Jews in the Maharsha's city. Below is further story involving the Maharsha:

It is recorded that the Maharsha constructed a large Yeshiva and in so doing accumulated large debts. Try as he might, he was unable to repay the debts and he therefore convened a meeting of all the Jews who lived in the town and its environs. At the meeting he beseeched each of them to donate to the Yeshiva to help pay off the debts. Some of the people donated, however to the Maharsha's dismay, the donations were small and failed to cover even a fraction of the total amount owed.

Understanding the Yeshiva's desperate situation, the Maharsha rose in the presence of the townspeople and said that he was going to make them a promise. He said that he would give his share in the World to Come to those who agree to donate and pay off the Yeshiva's debts.

Upon hearing this declaration, the wealthy individuals in the town congregated and began to debate. They were all aware that the Maharsha's share in the World to Come was surely unbounded, commensurate with his immense righteousness and contribution to the Jewish people. With this in mind, all of the individuals sought to pay off the loans and acquire his holy share - it was the bargain of a lifetime!

After lengthy discussions, the individuals totted up what they were each willing to contribute and presented it to the Maharsha. The Maharsha listened patiently, yet to his despair, the sum still failed to cover the crushing debts. He therefore rose once more, and announced that whoever would donate the additional amount still required would merit all of the World to Come that he, the Maharsha, would generate from that day until his passing. This is to say that he promised the donor the reward for all of his future Mitzot and Torah learning.

Upon hearing this, the townspeople again began to debate as to who would pledge the amount, and after some time, a certain gentleman committed to make the pledge and cover the Yeshiva's debts. Once he paid the amount and the Yeshiva's affairs were back in order, the Maharsha rose from his chair and began to dance. The onlookers were mesmerized by his joy; he was ecstatic, overcome by unbridled joy. After some time, once he had finished dancing, his students approached him and asked what had caused their Rabbi's great joy? They understood that being freed of the Yeshiva's financial burden was certainly a cause for joy and relief, but sensed that there was something more to the Rabbi's euphoria.

The Maharsha turned to them and explained that indeed they were correct. He explained that from here onwards, all of the Mitzvot which he would perform and all of the Torah which he would learn would be totally pure and for the sake of Hashem. He could now rest assured, that his actions would not be influenced by the prospect of reward, but would rather be totally for the sake of G-d. It was the internalization of this realization which had brought him so much joy.

The above is something we can learn from the holy Maharsha - to perform Mitzvot without anticipating the reward, but to do so purely for the sake of servicing Hashem. It is this form of service which marks true perfection in one's service of G-d.

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