

THE MYSTERY OF THE WELLS

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Toldos

The Mystery of the Wells

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Today's Learning:
Eruvin 6:6-7
O.C. 467:8-10
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Eruvin 59
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Berachot 61

Ramban writes: "The Torah spends time with the wells that Yitzchak dug, although the simple story is of no significance and in no way enhances Yitzchak's honor, because there is something hidden within it." He explains that the first two wells, over which there were quarrels, allude to the first two Batei Mikdash / Temples. The third well, which was dug in peace, alludes to the coming Third Temple.

R' Yaakov Kamenetsky z"l (died 1986) adds: Chazal say that the 400 years of exile that Hashem foretold for Avraham's descendants began with Yitzchak. Therefore, the Torah had to teach us that Yitzchak suffered a form of "exile" at the hands of another nation.

Yitzchak did not realize at first that he was among enemies; that is why he called the second well "Sitnah"/"Hatred" (not the first). At first he thought that the Plishtim stole his well because they needed water, but when they stole his second well also, he realized that they were motivated by hatred for him. Realizing this at last, Yitzchak moved farther away and was able to dig a well in peace.

A similar fate befell the two Batei Mikdash. During the period when each of them stood, the Jewish People sought alliances with their neighbors, and in both instances, those alliances played a role in the Temple's eventual destruction. (For example, the alliances that King Shlomo made resulted in the introduction of idolatry into the Land.)

The first two wells were dug by Yitzchak's servants, while the third well was dug by Yitzchak himself. So, too, the third Bet Hamikdash will be built by Hashem Himself (according to Rashi), and will exist in peace forever. (Emet Le'Yaakov)

The children agitated within her . . ." (25:22)

Rashi z"l writes: "Whenever she passed the doors of a place where Torah was studied, Yaakov moved convulsively, trying to be born. Whenever she passed a pagan temple, Esav moved convulsively, trying to be born."

Commentaries ask: We can understand if Esav was in a hurry to leave the womb to go worship idols, but why would Yaakov need to leave in order to go study Torah? Doesn't the Gemara teach that an angel studies Torah with a baby in the womb? Could Yaakov have found a better teacher elsewhere?

R' Shimon Sofer z"l (1821-1883; rabbi of Krakow, Poland) answers: The negative effects of having bad classmates outweigh the benefits of having a good teacher. Therefore, Yaakov was willing to forego studying with an angel in order to get away from his classmate, Esav.

How do we know this is true? Our Sages say in Pirkei Avot (chapter 1), "Make a teacher for yourself and purchase a friend for yourself." This demonstrates that a good friend is more important than a good teacher.

(Michtav Sofer)

"The lads grew up and Esav became a man who knows hunting, a man of the field; but Yaakov was a wholesome man, residing in tents." (27:25)

R' Moshe Hager shlita (the Vizhnitzer Rebbe in Bnei Brak) commented: This verse is teaching each of us, descendants of Yaakov, that we are expected to apply the same level of effort to our "residing in tents" (i.e., Torah study) that an Esav applies to his worldly activities.

(Quoted in Otzrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim)

"He [Yitzchak] smelled the fragrance of his [Yaakov's] garments and blessed him, saying, 'See, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed'." (27:27)

Rashi z"l comments: "Surely there is no more offensive smell than that of washed goat skins. However, the Torah implicitly tells us that the perfume of the Garden of Eden entered the room with Yaakov."

Why would Yitzchak call the fragrance of Gan Eden "the fragrance of a field"? R' Yitzchak Isaac Liebes z"l (noted American posek) explains:

The Torah relates that just before Yitzchak met his wife Rivka, "Yitzchak went out to pray in the field towards evening." What was he praying for? He was beseeching G-d that his forthcoming marriage produce worthy children who would serve Hashem. Until the moment described in our verse, Yitzchak did not know whether his prayer had been answered, but when he smelled the fragrance of Gan Eden, he knew. Then he said, "The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field." This is what I prayed for that day in the field.

(Quoted in Otzrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim)

"He said, 'See, now, I have aged; I do not know the day of my death'." (27:2)

Rashi z"l explains (citing a Midrash): "When a person approaches the age at which his parents died, he may well be anxious five years before and five years after. Yitzchak was then 123 years old, and he said, 'Perhaps I will only reach the age of my mother, who died at the age of 127, and I am now within five years of her age; therefore, I know not the day of my death. I may only reach the age of my mother or it may be the age of my father'."

Rashi's comment raises a basic question: Does a person have a fixed life span which he will reach no matter what, or can a person's life span be shortened by accident or by violence?

Rambam z"l (1135-1204) was asked this very question by his student, R' Yosef z"l (the same person for whom Rambam wrote Moreh Nevuchim / "Guide for the Perplexed). Rambam responded:

In our faith, there is no concept of a fixed life span. Death comes from physical causes which can be internal or external. [At this point, Rambam discusses the medical aspects of the issue.]

Rambam continues: We can bring two types of proofs to this, one from the Torah and the other from nature. We will first present the Torah-based proofs, for they are loftier and greater. After all, the Torah is the goal that one attains following all other studies, and Torah study brings about ultimate success.

[The proofs are as follows:] The Torah says (Devarim 22:8), "If you build a new house, you shall make a fence for your roof, so that you will not place blood in your house if a fallen one falls from it." This verse teaches that adequate preparations and proper precautions against causes of fatalities can reduce the risk of injury. If, on the other hand, one could not take precautions against injury because it was already decreed that he would fall from the roof, this mitzvah would have no purpose [which obviously is not the case]. [Ed. note: In fact, there is another way to read the verse which negates Rambam's proof. Rashi notes that the verse speaks of "the fallen one" falling from the roof. This means that the victim was destined to die anyway, but a homeowner should build a railing so that he will not be the agent of another person's death.]

Rambam offers another proof: The Elevated One said about setting aside cities of refuge (Devarim 19:6), "Lest the redeemer of the blood chase after the murderer, for his heart will be hot, and he will overtake him for the way was long, and strike him mortally." If the accidental murderer had a fixed life span and it was decreed that the avenger would kill him, the city of refuge would do him no good. [On the other hand, if his days were not up, the city of refuge would be unnecessary.] . . .

Rambam continues: We read (Mishlei 10:27), "Fear of G-d will add days, and the years of the wicked will be shortened." Regarding the mitzvot it says (Devarim 11:21), "In order to prolong your days and the days of your children . . ." This teaches that performing mitzvot lengthens one's life.

(Igrot Ha'Rambam)

"Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'avodah"

("The Foundation and Root of Divine Service.")

This year, we are presenting excerpts from the work Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'avodah by R' Alexander Ziskind z"l (died 1794). In prior chapters, the author encouraged us to see every event and object in the world as part of a unified whole that exists to give pleasure to the Creator. In Sha'ar Avodat Ha'lev, Chapter 7, he continues as follows:

Know with certainty that it is impossible to succeed at this basic and fundamental form of service unless you accustom yourself to fulfill two affirmative commandments at all times: (1) the mitzvah of "You shall love your fellow as yourself," and (2) the related mitzvah of "With righteousness you shall judge your fellow." Both of these mitzvot are found in Parashat Kedoshim, for a person who fulfills them constantly deserves to be called "kadosh" / "holy."

The first of these mitzvot requires one to love his friend in every respect just as he loves his own body and soul. Just as one rejoices when Hashem bestows some good upon him, so he should rejoice when Hashem bestows that same good on others. Conversely, one should be as worried and feel as sad when others suffer as he would if the same trouble came upon himself, G-d forbid.

[The foregoing describes how the mitzvah is performed through thought.] As for performing the mitzvah through action, one should fulfill his friend's desire to the same degree that one would fulfill his own desire. Conversely, one should not do to another what he would not want done to himself.

R' Alexander Ziskind continues: The Zohar adds another dimension to this mitzvah. Any time you mention any good aspect of your friend, you are obligated to bless him. One who does not do this deserves severe punishment, the Zohar says. From where do we learn this? From Moshe Rabbeinu, for when he said (Devarim 1:10), "Hashem, your G-d, has multiplied you and behold! you are like the stars of heaven in abundance," he added a blessing (Devarim 1:11), "May Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times yourselves, and bless you as He has spoken of you."

As for the second mitzvah, you must judge every action of another person favorably, even when it is far-fetched and illogical to do so. [Ed. note: For detailed laws of, and exceptions to, this obligation see Chafetz Chaim I 3:7-8.]

Both of these commandments are mitzvot that a person can fulfill at all times because they require no action.

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