

REMOVING THE SHACKLES

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

As Yaakov (Jacob) approached his father Yitzchak (Isaac) for the Divine blessings for material sustenance, he did so dressed as his coarse twin, Esav (Esau). This scheme was undertaken in accordance with the prophecy of his mother Rivka (Rebecca) that Yaakov - who was already destined to receive the Divine blessings for the spiritual and national providence promised to their grandfather, Avraham (see Beraishis/Genesis 28:3-4) - would need this blessing, too, if he was to survive.

"Yaakov said to his father, '...Rise up, please, sit and eat of my game...' and So Yaakov drew close to Yitzchak his father who felt him and said, 'The voice is Yaakov's voice but the hands are Esav's hands.'" (27:19,22) Rashi explains that the voice recognition was not an issue of insufficient disguise; rather it was an issue of verbiage. Yaakov would request, "Father, rise up, please," where Esav would say "Get up, father!" (27:31)

But the Medrash Rabba explains that the honoring of his father was of paramount import to Esav. This evil son offered one hundred times more honor to Yitzchak than did the righteous Second Temple era sage Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel to his father. Esav genuinely felt compelled to wear his most formal wear when serving his father; Rabban Shimon could have gone through the motions, attempting duplication of Esav's dedication, but it would have been an empty, meaningless act. If Esav's sensitivity to his father's honor was so profound, his actions and his words are most incongruous! How could he speak to Yitzchak in such a crass manner? It is even more perplexing considering Esav's objective of putting Yitzchak in the proper frame of mind prior to offering his blessing!

Rabbi Alter Henach Leibowitz (Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim in Kew Gardens Hills, New York) observes that one's habits in speech are such an ingrained element of the personality that they come to surface in all situations. Thus, no matter how much honor Esav truly desired to bestow upon his father, his biting, chiding tone came through. For speech is a manifestation of the soul, as Onkelos (authoritative Aramaic interpretive translation by the Tannaic-era proselyte Onkelos, c.90) translates Adam's soul of "life" (2,7) as the power of "[intelligent] speech". Effecting genuine change in one's speech demands an overhaul of one's core personality, no small feat.

Rabbi Leibowitz draws the similarity to changing any one of our negative midos (character traits), a challenge the great ethicist Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883; founder and spiritual father of the Mussar movement, a moral movement based on the study of traditional ethical literature and

development of techniques for spiritual and character growth) called more difficult than learning through the entirety of the Talmudic and Midrashic Oral Tradition. Not addressing these spiritual shortcomings can be extremely self-defeating. Rabbi Leibowitz concludes that Esav's negative trait of cruelty was, to his detriment, the root cause of in his selling his birthright to Yaakov. Nachmanides (R' Moshe ben Nachman; 1194-1270; of Gerona, Spain; one of the leading Torah scholars of the Middle Ages) explains that his own sense of cruelty turned on him and caused himself harm by cruelly selling a birthright that he knew in his core essence to be most valuable.

As we strive to develop our "G-d consciousness", to foster the growth of every Jew's Divine spark and bring our G-dliness to the fore, we need to realize that we cannot move forward so long as we are shackled in place by bad character traits. Freedom is not the ability to DO what you want; freedom is the ability to DETERMINE what is in your best interest and ACT upon it. One who is "free" to react with jealousy, hate, rage, haughtiness and a pursuit of desires may not be a slave to another human...but is very much enslaved to himself. Only when we succeed in removing these fetters will our Jewish selves truly be free to soar.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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