

THE ROOTS OF STRENGTH

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Yiddishe nachas - two words so full of Jewish meaning that they defy translation into any other language. Yiddishe nachas is that special blend of pride, joy and satisfaction that Jewish parents feel when they look at their successful children and remember all the effort that went into them. It is a sigh and a smile grafted together.

Child rearing is never easy, especially in Jewish families that demand so much from their children. Even in the best of circumstances, molding a child into a sensitive, responsible person is not only a rewarding experience but also a harrowing ordeal that last for some twenty years. And should problems arise - as they often do - the ordeal can become next to unbearable.

Why is this so? We don't find such extended periods of child rearing among any other species in the world. The young are born, they are kept under their mother's figurative wing for a few hours or days or weeks, and they're off on their own. Humans, however, are helpless for the first few years of life and heavily dependent on their parents for many years afterwards. We find the same disparity in childbirth itself. All species give birth quickly and easily - except for humans. Why did Hashem see fit to bring the little bundles of joys into the world by such a painful process? And why did he give them such a long period of dependency?

Perhaps we can find the answers in this week's parshah. As Rachel feels her life ebbing away after a very difficult childbirth, she looks at her newborn son and with her last gasping breaths she names him Ben Oni, "the child of my affliction." But Jacob does not accept this name for his son. Instead, he names him Ben Yamin (Benjamin), "the child of the right hand." Why didn't Jacob allow the child to carry the name his mother had given him with her dying breath?

The Ramban explains that Jacob was not rejecting the name Rachel had chosen. Rather, he was focusing on one specific aspect of it. The word oni means both affliction and strength, and these two concepts are very closely related. Strength is inevitably the result of affliction. Solid results of lasting value can only be achieved through toil, sweat and tears. Therefore, Jacob chose to name his son Ben Yamin, because the right hand symbolizes strength, which goes hand in hand with affliction.

Human beings are infinitely higher than the creatures of the animal kingdom. They cannot be formed with a snap of the fingers. It takes years and decades of careful nurturing and education to produce this wondrous creature known as a human being. And the more effort invested the greater the reward.

A man once came to visit a principal of a large school. As he waited in the office, he saw the principal in the hallway surrounded by children clamoring for his attention. The principal responded to each of the children with patience and a kind word. When they had all gone, he came in to greet his visitor.

"I don't know how you manage it," the visitor commented. "I would go out of my mind if I had to go through every day with dozens of little kids screaming in my ears. You must be climbing the walls!"

"Not at all, my friend," said the principal. "Each of these children is an unpolished diamond. I spend years shaping, smoothing, polishing and buffing these precious little diamonds in the rough, and by the time they leave me, I can see them glittering from within. Which of these little diamonds would you have me discard?"

We all have our own shares of troubles in life, but we should view them as obstacles to overcome on the road to personal fulfillment. Each obstacle is an opportunity for growth, depending on how we respond to it. Like Rachel, we must recognize the afflictions that are part of life, and like Jacob, we must see in them the roots of a strength that will make it all worthwhile. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and Torah.org.

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