

UNSTATING THE OBVIOUS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

He was afraid to say, "She is my wife," lest they kill me.

Meshech Chochmah: Ibn Ezra points out that the intent of the last phrase is elliptical. It does not say "lest they kill him," in the third person. Rather, the phrase captures the words of Yitzchok, still speaking in the first person. It should be understood as if it said, "[Yitzchok was] saying to himself, 'lest they kill me.'" While such constructions are not surprising, we can still ask why the Torah employs a truncated form here and not elsewhere.

A possible answer suggests itself based on a *teshuvah* of the Ramo.^[2] He makes the argument that Soro should have become legally forbidden to Yitzchok after he and his wife claimed to be brother and sister. In many, many areas of the law, society has less than perfect knowledge of crucial facts and relationships. Often, we need to know how people are related – whether as spouses, parents and children, or as relatives. We almost never have direct knowledge; often witnesses are theoretically impossible, or unavailable.

Halacha deals with these issues through *chazakah*, maintaining assumptions that have established themselves in the public mind. If a person assumes a certain legal identity for thirty days, he is often saddled with the consequences of that identity even if he should argue later that it was not accurate. Even providing a plausible reason for having lived the fiction is usually ineffective against a *chazakah* of relationship. If two people called themselves brother and sister for that length of time and then were intimate with each other, they can be executed for incest, at least according to the opinion that a Noachide is forbidden to his sister. If the two object that they are not really related, the court will not accept their claim. In our narrative, if Yitzchok and Rivka claimed that they were siblings, they would have established themselves in society as forbidden to each other. Their knowledge that they were in fact not related would have no bearing on the legal prohibition for them to resume a husband-wife relationship.

There are always exceptions. One of those exceptions may help us out of our dilemma. It is true that plausible denial is ineffective against an established *chazakah*. If the excuse, however, is better than plausible – if it is actually compelling and self-evident – such an excuse is accepted by the court, as well as general society. Given the circumstances surrounding their statement, it was obvious to all that the claim that Yitzchok and Rivka were not husband and wife but siblings was made only out of fear of the consequences. Rivka's beauty was apparent; the promiscuous behavior of the region and

the royal court were well known; twice before, Yitzchok's father was forced to employ the same ruse to save himself. The reason for Yitzchok's behavior was apparent to any reasonable observer.

This, then, is the reason why the Torah does not explicitly say that Yitzchok said to himself, "lest they kill me." It was not just Yitzchok who said that to himself, but everyone. All understood that a visitor to their country with an attractive wife would not risk death by admitting to be her husband. The Torah therefore makes the statement in the distant, third person voice.

Unstating the Unstatable^[3]

He built an altar.

Meshech Chochmah: People in Tanach built such altars when they wished to publicize a miraculous occurrence or an episode of prophecy. Thus, we find^[4] "Hashem is my miracle," and "Hashem made whole [check]."^[5] The Torah does not tell us about any altar built by Yitzchok upon the occasion of his earlier prophecy,^[6] in which he was promised that he and his descendants would inherit all the lands of the region. This was not something that Yitzchok wished to publicize! He did not want to incite a jealous backlash from the local inhabitants, who would certainly find such a claim arrogant, offensive and dangerously hostile. Yitzchok understood that he was not a warrior. Additionally, even ignoring the physical danger to which such a claim might expose him, it was not the right thing to do. Yitzchok lived peaceably with his neighbors. It would be boorish to announce to them that one day his descendants would take over their lands.

Yitzchok's later *nevuah* was different. It made no mention of inheriting land. It told him not to fear, and that he would be blessed. Here was something that he could trumpet to his neighbors, without fear. He therefore built an altar to draw attention of his prophetic experience at that place.

The sharing of information succeeded. His neighbors responded with, "We see that Hashem is with you!"^[7] Building the altar amounted to announcing in advance that Hashem had promised him success. When that success materialized, the people were able to relate his astounding success to his earlier claim that Hashem had appeared to him, and assured him that his efforts would be hugely successful.

Earning Galus^[8]

Hashem will give you the Abrahamic blessing.

Meshech Chochmah: It was Yaakov's hurried departure that led to Yitzchok giving this additional *berachah* to Yaakov, beyond the one for material, earthly success over which he contended with Esav. Part of the blessing to Avraham had been the forecast of a long, dark *galus*. Yitzchok now saw Yaakov leaving his home, ready to live the life of an exile. He realized that this was the beginning of the fulfillment of that prophecy, and that it was specifically in Yaakov that the rest of that *berachah* would vest. He reasoned that if it was Yaakov who was willing to pay off the "debt" in the contract offered to Avraham, that he would become the owner of the "document."

Many years later, the generation of the wilderness would send a proposal^[9] to the King of Edom, asking for safe passage through his land, in order to enable them to reach Canaan. Surprisingly, their proposal to the king recounts much early history which seems irrelevant to their request. Why do Moshe's emissaries relate that their forebears descended to Egypt, and there endured terrible hardship? And why do they refer to their people as "your brother Yisrael?" Why the politically-correct brotherhood? Rashi explains that as brothers because of their common descent from Avrohom, the burden of *galus* should have been shared. Rashi means what we proposed above: because the *Bnei Yisrael* assumed responsibility for the contract's "debt," they were entitled to the proceeds. By shouldering the burden of the Egyptian exile, they were entitled to collect the deed for the Land of Israel.

^[1] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bereishis 26:7

^[2] Shut Ramo #2

^[3] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bereishis 26:25

^[4] Shemos 17:15

^[5] Shoftim 6:24

^[6] Bereishis 26:4

^[7] Bereishis 26:28

^[8] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bereishis 28:4

^[9] Bamidbar 20:14-15
