

STAYING SEPARATE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

As Avrohom bound Yitzchok, the ministering angels cried. Their tears slipped into Yitzchok's eyes, and left their mark. When he aged, his eyes weakened.^[2]

"I have loved you," says Hashem, but you ask, "How have you loved us?" Was not Esav Yaakov's brother?- The word of Hashem - "Yet I have loved Yaakov, but I hated Esav... Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what Hashem... says: "They may build, but I will demolish."^[3]

In the generation of Malachi, Hashem would speak, and the people would respond. Hashem would say, "I loved you," and they would retort with a challenge, "How have you loved us..."^[4]

Why did the angels cry for Yitzchok alone? Had they no compassion for Avrohom, and the monumental conflict of values and interests that he faced?

Upon reflection, the answer is obvious. From their perspective, Avrohom's task was simple. They were, after all, angels, not humans. Their essence was eager, happy translation of Hashem's Will into reality. Nothing separated His command from their compliance. Listening to His instruction was an angelic no-brainer. Avrohom's task seemed easy to them. When Hashem tells you to do something, you do it!

Yitzchok's reaction, however, was a different matter. They could not relate to his complete willingness to give up his life. They were programmed to effortlessly accept Hashem's commands, which they received directly from the Source. Yitzchok, however, had never been instructed by Hashem to die on the altar. He learned of such instruction only through an intermediary – the words of his father. Why would he give up his life on the say-so of another human being?

Generally, we are told to disregard the words of anyone claiming prophetic insight when they contradict clear laws of the Torah. It is true that a proven, established prophet – which Avrohom certainly was – can ask us to violate Torah law, but only when he seeks to protect the greater part of the Torah. Avrohom did not make such a case to Yitzchok at the *Akeidah*. Had Yitzchok asked us, we would have told him not to listen to his father!

This leads us to another question. Why, in fact, should we not listen in all circumstances^[5] to an

established prophet who speaks in the Name of Hashem? The Chasam Sofer^[6] writes that the Torah recognized a danger in allowing humans to find justification for violating Torah laws – ever! If the *navi* could call for suspension of Torah law, too many people might convince themselves that they, too, received Divine instruction to ignore some Torah precept.

Here is where Yitzchok parted company from the rest of us. His extraordinary purity completely banished the idea of falsehood from his comprehension. He simply could not imagine people telling lies – willful or otherwise. The Chasam Sofer's line of reasoning had no appeal whatsoever to him.

The angels, on the other hand, understood more than Yitzchok did. Somehow they comprehended the idea of lying. This is why many of them protested the creation of Man,^[7] seeing him as a being mired in falsehood. Yitzchok's cluelessness about the power of lying seemed tragic to the angels. Therefore they cried.

Their tears left a mark. Decades later, Yitzchok's eyes would be sealed shut to the evil committed by his son Esav.

Yitzchok's wholehearted simplicity closed his eyes to crucial distinctions between good and evil in those around him. The angels could find that tragically beautiful. There would be other times when people would fail to discriminate between good and evil, but neither angels nor people would applaud. We could make the case that this was the primary theme in the prophecy of Malachi, parts of which give us the *haftorah* this week.

According to one opinion, Malachi was identical with Ezra. (Tosafos^[8] conclude that this opinion prevails over the others.) He faced obstacles far different from his prophetic predecessors. While they faced strong resistance, that usually came from a small minority of people with power. The masses, while sinners themselves, were conscious of their guilt, and generally honored those who rebuked them. Malachi had to deal with a generation of young people more self-satisfied and confident. They married out with impunity. The miraculous interventions of previous generations were not available to Malachi, having ground to a halt after the time of Esther.

Moreover, Malachi encountered a generation of skeptics. Hashem assured them of His love – and they cynically responded, "How have You loved us?" They questioned and mocked the most important assumptions that Jews had lived with and by.

Chief among them was that the Jewish nation was charged with a mission, and that to carry it out, Jews needed to keep themselves as a separate and distinct group. So long as they honored this mandate, they won the respect of others. When they felt the need to merge with others – leading eventually to the rampant intermarriage that Ezra battled – they saw themselves as "enlightened," and rejected the notion that they needed to remain a people apart. They began to incorporate the ways of their neighbors, leading inexorably to their exile, and to the Land remaining desolate to all

conquerors. (The latter effect demonstrated that the Land's bounty was directly dependent on the Jewish people fulfilling its mission.)

This is what Chazal mean when they say that the Land was lost *על שלא ברכו בתורה תחלה*, i.e. they lost the message of the first *berachah* recited over the Torah – the one that stresses the chosenness of the Jewish people through the Torah. Once that sense of specialness and separateness was questioned, the Land was doomed. Thus, when Hashem underscores His love for them, they challenge Him: “Was not Esav Yaakov’s brother?” (This can be read as part of their words, not His.) Why must we see ourselves as different and apart? Wasn’t Esav as much a son to Yitzchok as Yaakov was?

Hashem responds: Nonetheless, I chose Yaakov. You can detect your chosenness in examining the punishment of Esav, when thy sinned. Unlike you, they did not need to be exiled from their land, to be sent to the far reaches of the globe to act as a light unto the nations! And lest you think that they somehow were not so guilty, and were allowed to stay upon their patrimony so that they could rebuild it – know that this is not true! “They may build, but I will demolish.” The difference between you is that you, the Jewish people, have been commissioned with a responsibility to take My word to the rest of the world.

Yitzchok’s praiseworthy lack of discrimination morphs in later generations into a blameworthy one that erases distinctions between Jew and non-Jew. Along the way, Rivka as well is confused by the muddling of identities. She struggled to understand what was happening in her womb. She would pass an idolatrous shrine, and something inside sought to exit. But the same happened when she passed a place of Torah! “I am carrying a Lavan,” she exclaimed. Someone who can say to Yaakov, “You are my bone and my flesh,”^[9] and turn around and say, “It is in my power to do you all harm.”^[10] She was consoled only when told that her child did not suffer from confused identity. Rather, she carried two children who would become two distinct nations, “separate from your insides.”^[11]

This separateness must continue in all matters of religion. In regard to matters of general life, however, we are meant to show love and brotherhood to all who are created in His image, as we explained last week.

1. Based on HaMedrash V’HaMaaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz.
2. Bereishis Rabbah 65.
3. Malachi 1:2-6.
4. Tanchuma, Terumah 9.
5. With the exception of telling us to worship another deity, where the Torah itself specifies that we should not listen to the *navi*.
6. Shut Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim 208.
7. Bereishis Rabbah 8:5.

8. Yevamos 86B s.v. mipnei .
9. Bereishis 29:14 .
10. Bereishis 31:29 .
11. Bereishis 25:23 .