

TRAILBLAZING

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And these are the offspring of Yitzchak, son of Avraham; Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak. (25:19)

A grade two rebbe amused me this week as he described how, after learning the above pasuk with his class, he then asked them if there was anything problematic with its wording. As their hands slowly went up, the smile that formed in the corner of one of the student's mouths confirmed he had found the difficulty: If the verse has just told us that Yitzchak is the son of Avraham, why does it recapitulate by saying "Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak?"

We might ask another question: Both Sarah, wife of Avraham, and Rivkah, Yitzchak's wife, were akaros - barren women; they were not naturally gifted with the ability to give birth. Both of them, after extended periods of barrenness, did indeed give birth. Yet there is a distinct difference. Avraham and Sarah were only able to conceive after going through a partial "metamorphosis;" it was only after Avram became Avraham, and Sarai became Sarah, that they could bear children. As Chazal, our Sages, say: "Avram can't bear children - but Avraham can. Sarai can't bear children - Sarah can. (Bereishis Rabbah 44:12)" Furthermore, they were forced to leave their place of birth before they could conceive. This is based on the concept that at times one must undergo major life changes in order to, so to speak, change one's mazal.

Yitzchak and Rivkah, while faced with the same challenge as their parents, had a far easier time overcoming the barrier of childlessness. "And Yitzchak prayed to Hashem regarding his wife, for she was barren, and Rivkah, his wife, conceived. (25:21)" It seems no name- changes, and no exiles, were necessary.

The sefer Botzina de-Nehora cites a most interesting Gemara. The Talmud (Chullin 7a) tells the story of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, who, on his way to redeem some Jewish prisoners that had been taken captive, came across a bridgeless river too deep and too wide to pass.

"River, river - split your waters, and allow me to pass," he beseeched. "Why?" said the river. "You are going to do the will of Hashem, and I too am doing the will of Hashem (by continuing to flow)." "If you do not split, I will decree that your waters will never again flow!" The river split. [He then split the river twice more for two men accompanying him.]

How much greater is [Rabbi Pinchas] than Moshe - for Moshe split the sea but once, while Rabbi Pinchas split the river three times!

How does the fact that Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair split the river three times, in comparison to Moshe's once, prove his superiority? Surely, were there a need, Moshe too could have split the sea three, or even more times? Furthermore, does the Torah itself not exclaim (Devarim/Deuteronomy 34:10), "For there will never be another... like Moshe!"

The holy Beis Yosef, Rabbi Yosef Karo of Tzefas, author of the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law), once invested many hours in order to understand an extremely difficult Mishnah he was studying. A certain question plagued him, and try as he might, he could not come up with an answer. It was only after working for an extended period of time that an answer was revealed to him, and he came to understand the Mishnah's true peshat. His joy knew no bounds. I rejoice with Your words like one who has come across a great treasure! (Tehillim/Psalms 119:162)

Later that day, he went to Beis Medrash to learn. To his amusement, a pair of young boys sitting at his table just happened to be studying the same Mishnah. "I don't understand," said one bachur to the other, and proceeded to pose the exact question that had bothered Rabbi Karo. After giving it but a moment's thought, his friend said he thought he understood, and went on to explain the Mishnah using the same logic the Beis Yosef had toiled so long to grasp.

Rabbi Yosef was crestfallen. Was he so distant from the light of the Torah that he had to extend great effort to figure out what a young boy had come up with in a matter of minutes? It is known that the Beis Yosef had a maggid (an angel) that, on occasion, would teach him Torah (indeed, he even wrote a sefer, Maggid Meisharim, chronicling his conversations with his maggid). "Do not let this bother you," the maggid told him. "Let me explain what happened. The light of the Torah is very great and ethereal. To bring such great light down to the realm of the physical is no mean feat. Thus, for you to grasp the true understanding of the Mishnah required tremendous effort. Once, however, you succeeded in explaining the Mishnah, you infused the world with a new and holy light, which was subsequently 'available' for others to perceive with far greater ease. This is why what came so difficultly for you, was a matter of relative ease for those boys."

The same is true, says the Botzina de-Nehora, with regard to the above Gemara. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was able to split the river with seeming ease, because long before him, Moshe had already "paved the way" by splitting the Red Sea. This, he says, is what the Gemara means: "How great is Rabbi Pinchas?" i.e. What is the source of his apparently effortless greatness? "From Moshe!" It is a result of Moshe, many generations prior, having opened the door by infusing the world with a holy light which those who tapped into it would, like Moshe, be capable of splitting rivers and seas in order to do the will of Hashem.

Avraham too was a trailblazer - he was the first person to overcome the natural order that a barren woman could not conceive. This required great effort, as well as changing both his and her name and location. Once, however, this had been achieved, it became a relatively simple feat for Yitzchak to tap into the force Avraham had created, and thus he was able to accomplish with one prayer what

had taken his father many years.

These are the offspring of Yitzchak, son of Avraham - i.e. The reason that Yitzchak was able to bear children in the face of barrenness without the efforts required of his father Avraham, was: Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak - Avraham "gave birth" to the ability to change the forces of nature when he bore Yitzchak. And Rivkah, his wife, conceived - She was able to conceive without changing her name. [Beis Aaron]

While we may sometimes feel that "whatever we do, we do for ourselves," nothing could be further from the truth. When we study Torah, and perform mitzvos, especially when we do so with effort and self-sacrifice, we infuse the world a new and wondrous light. This light becomes an integral part of the "new world" we have helped to form, and is available for others to experience and enjoy. We may never know what comes of our "light," yet this is of little consequence. Ultimately, we will bear the fruits not only of our own labour, but also of the resulting changes brought about by our original effort. It's an encouraging thought.

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