

GAME THEORY - RESPECTFUL REBUKE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Yitzchak's love for Eisav is a matter that has given commentators no small amount of difficulty. The Torah describes it thus: "Yitzchak loved Eisav, for there was game in his mouth. (25:28)" Rashi offers two possible interpretations: 1) Yitzchak's love for Eisav was due to the fact that Eisav supplied him with food (game), and was swayed by his partiality to the one who fed him. 2) Eisav "hunted" Yitzchak with his mouth, asking him seemingly pious questions such as, "How does one tithe salt and straw?" (which are not tithed at all).

Both explanations leave us wondering: Was Yitzchak really taken in by Eisav's superficial ploys? Was he so shallow as to be persuaded by Eisav's feeding him, or so foolish as to be convinced of Eisav's piety because of a few strategic questions? We have all met insincere people in our lives. Many of us would pride ourselves in our ability to see through their contrived sincerity, and recognize them for what they truly were. Was the patriarch, Yitzchak, not capable of identifying Eisav's childish "games" as such?

Possibly these questions are based on our lack of understanding of the true cunning of Eisav. Perhaps he was exceptionally good at what he did; so good that even the penetrating gaze of Yitzchak was unable to see through his masquerade. Or maybe Yitzchak knew what was happening all along, and it was Yitzchak who was playing the "game"...

In his younger years, the holy tzaddik R' Naftuli Tzvi of Ropschitz zt"l studied under the famed tzaddik Rav Mordechai of Neshchiz zt"l. Recognizing the potential of his young disciple, R' Mottele, as he was known, took R' Naftuli under his wings. He quickly became a member of R' Mottele's household, eating at his table regularly, and at times sleeping under his roof. R' Mottele gave away much of his precious time to R' Naftuli, teaching him the hidden secrets of the Torah, and guiding him to serve Hashem with greater intensity and depth.

One day, unexpectedly, this all came to a sudden stop. R' Mottele called R' Naftuli over and extended him his hand, blessing his journey home with blessing and success. R' Naftuli was devastated. He had no idea what he could have done to be banished from before his rebbe so suddenly. He pleaded with R' Mottele to let him stay - there was so much more to learn! - yet R' Mottele didn't flinch. Without offering any further explanation, he cut off the conversation.

R' Naftuli was not to be put off so quickly. He decided to turn to R' Mottele's rebbitzen (wife), who was renowned for her piety and wisdom, not to mention her substantial influence over the rebbe.

She listened carefully to R' Naftuli's story, and agreed to plead his case before her husband.

The tzaddik listened to his wife's impassioned appeal. "You know, my wife," he began, "that I am not a stubborn man. Indeed, because you have asked, I will grant your request. Naftul'che stays. I only hope that I will not regret having changed my mind..."

The ominous implication of his last words frightened the rebbitzen. She tried to rescind her request, but R' Mottele wouldn't hear of it. "You've already interceded on his behalf, and 'an advocate cannot become a prosecutor,' (Talmud, Berachos 59a). Go and tell him he may stay; I, however, will have to take great caution..."

One day, weeks later, it was mid-afternoon and R' Naftuli sat alone in the beis midrash of Neshchiz studying Torah. A well-dressed stranger suddenly appeared, and, after wiping the sweat off his brow, approached the young man who sat bent over his sefarim. "Young man, is it possible to see the rebbe now?" he asked.

R' Naftuli raised his eyes and gazed intently at the man standing before him. Suddenly, as if gripped by a spasm, R' Naftuli shivered. He straightened up. "You - see the rebbe?" he asked incredulously.

"I wanted to know if it's possible to see the rebbe now," he said.

"You - see the rebbe?! To enter into the holy of holies with your soul so filthy with sin?"

The stunned villager retreated backwards. R' Naftuli's entire being seethed. "You are full of sin - not only old ones, but even over the last few days, you continue to sin. Like this you wish to encounter the pure countenance of the holy rebbe?!"

"I knew it! I knew that's how it would be!" the man blurted out as he fled the shul.

R' Naftuli sat back down, still trembling with indignation. Soon afterwards, he heard the familiar footsteps of his rebbe approaching. "Naftuli, who was here?"

"Some man had come to see you."

"And where is he now?"

"I couldn't bear the thought of such a disgusting person approaching the rebbe. Even being in his presence was too much. He fled."

"Oy vey!" exclaimed R' Mottele, "this is exactly what I was afraid of! What have you done? Go - now - and find him and bring him back here! I warn you - don't come back without him!"

After many hours, and a great distance from Neshchiz, R' Naftuli finally caught up with the man. It was only with great effort and persuasion that he convinced him to return.

"Shalom aleichem," R' Mottele greeted him when he saw him approaching. "It's been so long since you came to see me. I hope all is well. How is business?" After talking privately for a long time, R'

Naftuli overheard the man promising the rebbe that from now on he would come to see the rebbe regularly.

After the man had left, R' Mottele had R' Naftuli call the rebbitzen. "You see - R' Naftuli almost cost us a Jewish soul." The man, it seems, had once been a regular visitor to R' Mottele. While he was a simple villager, R' Mottele inspired him to serve Hashem with all his heart, and he looked forward to his visits with the rebbe, which would refresh his soul.

One day, the man fell prey to sin. From that point on, things went downhill. The more he sinned, the further he fell, until he completely gave up keeping Shabbos and kosher. His times with the rebbe faded and became a distant memory. Ultimately, he even considered conversion, and spoke with a local priest about the prospect. "You know that over the years, I had succeeded in kindling a Jewish flame in the man's heart. As he spoke with the priest, he began to reminisce about times we spent together. He decided he could not go through with it without travelling to see me one more time, despite deep shame and fear over how I would react, and if I would somehow realize all that had transpired. 'Perhaps,' he thought, 'the rebbe can rekindle that flame.'"

"Since then, I've been waiting every day for his arrival. The thought of a soul so lost has given me no rest these last months. I feared, however, that our Naftul'che here would meet him first. I knew his penetrating eyes would not be fooled by the man's outward appearance, and that he would be repelled by his sins and transgressions. 'Why do I have to worry so much,' I said to myself. 'Let Naftuli go home in peace, and let the man come to me in peace!' That's why I sent him away. At any rate, my deepest fears were confirmed. R' Naftuli lambasted the man, and banished him from the shul. Thankfully, I realized what had happened, and managed to catch him and bring him back. Naftuli almost cost us a Jewish soul..."

"Do not rebuke the scoffer, lest he hate you. Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. (Mishlei/Proverbs 9:8)." The holy Alshich zt"l explains: There are two ways to rebuke the sinner: One way is to reprimand him by calling him a fool and a sinner. While your words will surely ring out with the unadulterated truth, they will likely only cause him to hate you, thereby distancing him even further from the path of the Torah. The other way is to admonish him by telling him how much you respect him, and how shocked you are that a person as wise and thoughtful as him could make so fatal a mistake. By showing him respect, while at the same time expressing surprise that someone like him could act in a manner so unbecoming, he will love you, and will almost surely accept your rebuke.

The Alshich thus explains the above verse: Do not rebuke the scoffer - by calling him a scoffer, for he will [only] hate you - as a result of your harsh rebuke. Rebuke a wise man - by telling him how wise he is, and how inappropriate his actions were for a person of his stature, and he will love you.

Yitzchak saw through Eisav's superficial piety from the onset, explains Ruach Eliyahu. The "game" was upon Yitzchak's lips, not Eisav's. Yitzchak was glad, because Eisav's feigned tzidkus gave him

the opportunity to show Eisav some (undeserved) love and respect, which Yitzchak hoped would keep their relationship stable, so that perhaps a time would come when Eisav would change his ways and live up to the expectations his father had been showing him all these years.

While, sadly, it seems Eisav never did live up to Yitzchak's expectations, he taught us an exceptional lesson when dealing with others: Show a person respect, and they will love you; scoff at them, and you will have made a lifelong enemy.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication was sponsored in memory of Pessel bas R' Bunim Dohan, by her son. May her memory be a blessing.

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