

FATHERLY GAME

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Yitzchak loved Eisav, for there was game in his mouth. But Rivkah loved Yaakov. (25:28)

Rashi offers two explanations of the "game" that won Yitzchak's affection. One understanding is that Yitzchak was swayed by the fact that Eisav attended to him - feeding him and taking care of other needs. The "game" refers to the animals Eisav would hunt, cook up, and serve to his ailing father. Rashi's other explanation is that Yitzchak was the game - Eisav "hunted" him with his words. He would "pepper" his father with questions of exceptional piety, such as: "How does one tithe salt and straw (which require no tithing!)" Yitzchak was pulled-in by Eisav's feigned devotion.

That Yitzchak should be swayed by Eisav's loyal support, say mefarshim (see Michtav Me'Eliyahu) is not a criticism of Yitzchak, but rather a testimony to the power of shochad - bribery. The Torah forbids a dayan - a Jewish judge - to receive payment from any of the parties that come to him for adjudication, even if he's already made up his mind, and even if he's sure he would never be swayed by such petty issues as a small favour, financial or otherwise. "Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise (Shemos/Exodus 23:8)." Indeed Yitzchak was blinded, both physically and perceptually, by his dependence on Eisav.

Rashi's second explanation requires some examination. No doubt Eisav was a sly and wily fellow, but how did Yitzchak not pick up on his overdone piety? To say that Eisav knew how to "pour it on thick" just doesn't explain how Yitzchak could be taken in by someone so insincere and superficial. While I'm sure none of us consider ourselves on Yitzchak's level of piety nor wisdom, I think we pride ourselves on the ability to see through insincerity and artificiality; should we not expect the same from Yitzchak?

*In the future, the Holy One blessed is He will say to Avraham, "Your children have sinned before Me." Avraham will answer, "Master of the Universe, may they be blotted out in the sanctification of Your Name." Hashem will say, "Let me tell Yaakov, who went through such difficulties with his own children, perhaps he will arouse Heavenly mercy upon them."
"Yaakov, your children have sinned before Me." Yaakov will respond, "Master of the Universe, may they be blotted out in the sanctification of Your Name." Hashem will say, "The elderly [Avraham] have no sense; the youth [Yaakov] have no wisdom." He will say to Yitzchak, "Yitzchak, your children have sinned before me." Yitzchak will answer, "Master of the Universe, are they my children and not Yours? And furthermore..." (Shabbos 89b)*

Yitzchak continues to argue with Hashem - that they should split the responsibility for their wayward children, "And if not, I accept full responsibility! Was I not prepared to offer my very life upon the Altar before You." At that point in time, we will say to Yitzchak, "Yitzchak, you are our father!"

Besides the fact that this Gemara seems to dispel the popular notion that Yitzchak was the most unforgiving and harsh of the forefathers, it seems almost unthinkable that Avraham and Yaakov would so easily consent to our "blotting out [yi-machu, literally "may they be dissolved"]" without putting up so much as even a perfunctory argument. When confronted with the evil people of Sodom, Avraham prayed with all his might for their salvation; are we not deserving of at least equal service?

At any rate, says R' Meir of Preimishlan zt"l (Divrei Meir), it was Yitzchak, whose line, "Are they my children and not Yours?" saved the day. It would seem that by Hashem's calling us, "Your children," He was trying, so to speak, to disown us. Yitzchak, with his retort, wasn't letting the Almighty off so easily. "They're yours just as much as they're mine." On what did he base his argument?

Yitzchak, says R' Meir'l, argued the following: "Master of the Universe, you are unhappy with the behaviour of the Children of Israel, and rightfully so. You therefore seek to disown them, telling me, "Your children have sinned. Avinu She-bashamayim, Father in Heaven, are they worse than my son Eisav, whom I never ceased to love, even in the face of his wickedness and obviously disingenuous "piety?" Though there was little to love him for, a father never gives up on his child. No matter how far he may stray, a father always leaves the door open, should his son wish to return. Is Your love for Your children - the Jews - less than my love for Eisav, that You so are so quickly ready to abandon them?"

It was this argument that forced Hashem's hand, so to speak, and He acquiesced because of Yitzchak. This explains why the Jews responded by saying to Yitzchak, "You are our father," for it was with your extreme fatherly love that you succeeded in placating Hashem's anger. And this, explains R' Meir, was the "game" in Yitzchak's mouth. Yitzchak loved Eisav, for - in the future, there would be game in his - Yitzchak's, mouth - for it would be based on this unconditional love for Eisav that Yitzchak would win the "war of words" with Hashem.

Perhaps this offers us as well a deeper understanding into the above Gemara. We find in the writings of the Prophets that the Almighty was frustrated with our serving Him outwardly (action), while the inner aspect of our service (i.e. thought/intent) was incomplete. "With his lips he honours Me, but his heart is distant from Me (Yeshaya/Isaiah 29:13)." Hashem came to Avraham with this complaint. Avraham's response was, May they be dissolved in the sanctification of your name - like the sloppily applied veneer, dissolve their mitzvos, removing the lacquer and polish, the insincerity, and allow only the purest of thoughts and actions to remain. Yaakov agreed. Yitzchak was the one who argued that even the outward piety of the Jews shouldn't be shunned, for a father never shuns the deeds of his child, even when they seem blatantly insincere. A father sees his son in the most favourable light

imaginable, and Yitzchak could not bear that Hashem should "dissolve" everything but the purest of deeds. "If I accepted Eisav's 'piety,' deceitful as it was, then how could You not accept all of a Jew's deeds, both the great and the less-than- optimum?" To this as well Hashem acquiesced.

It's not to say, mind you, that we should no longer work on davening and performing mitzvos with all our hearts. But for the times that we try, and our hearts just aren't there, it's good to know we've got someone routing for us.

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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