

ENERGY OR EXHAUSTION - EISAV SHOWS HIS TRUE COLOURS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Jewish teachings explain that the name of a particular Torah portion gives us a special insight into that portion. The name of this week's parsha, Toldos, is derived from its opening words: "And these are the generations (toldos) of Yitzchak (25:19)." Yet an earlier parsha, Noach, which begins with a similar verse, "These are the generations of Noach," is known as parshas Noach, not as parshas Toldos! What is the essential difference between these two portions, as reflected in the Torah's choice of names?

Parshas Toldos tells of the Yaakov's cunning seizure of the birthright from Eisav:

The lads grew up, and Eisav became a man who knew trapping; a man of the field. But Yaakov was a virtuous man, who dwelled in tents. Isaac loved Eisav... but Rivkah loved Yaakov. [One day] Yaakov was cooking a stew when Eisav came in from the field, exhausted. Eisav said to Yaakov, "Swallow me some of that red stuff, for I am exhausted." Yaakov said, "Sell today your birthright to me." Eisav said, "I'm about to die [of exhaustion] - of what use is the birthright to me?!" ... And he sold his birthright to Yaakov. [25:27-33]

From the context, and particularly from Yaakov's words, "Sell me your birthright today!" it appears that what transpires here was not premeditated: something has just occurred that motivates Yaakov to seize the birthright. What was it about Eisav's return from the field, and his discussion with Yaakov, that emboldened him to daringly make a move for the birthright?

One time, at a Chassidic gathering, chassidim were sitting and drinking mead (a sweet honey wine that was very popular). A Chassid named Reb Moshe told the following story:

"Many years ago," he began, "while visiting Vienna, I sent my servant to a nearby Jewish inn to buy a bottle of mead. When he came back I discovered that it was the most delicious mead I had ever tasted. In fact, it was so good that I immediately sent him back to buy some more. I gave him enough money for ten bottles, figuring that my family and I would enjoy it for a long time to come.

"But my servant came back empty-handed. I took out a few more coins from my pocket, but he shook his head. "It isn't the money," he told me. "There just isn't any more to be had."

"I decided to go see for myself. When I entered the inn, I saw a large crowd of people who had apparently just finished eating a festive meal. I approached the innkeeper and asked him to sell me some of his delicious honey wine.

"I'm sorry, but there isn't even a drop left of that particular type,' he said. 'Well, when do you expect to get more?' I persisted. 'Quite frankly, never!' The innkeeper then told me the following story:

"Many years previously he had been a mohel, a ritual circumciser. As a mohel, he had given himself one cardinal rule: he would never refuse a request perform make a bris milah (circumcision), no matter how difficult the circumstances.

"One year on the day before Yom Kippur, a Jewish farmer knocked on his door and asked him to circumcise his eight-day-old son. The farmer lived quite a distance away, and it was Erev Yom Kippur. Still, the mohel agreed to perform the bris.

"The farmer was too poor to have hired a carriage for the mohel; neither was the mohel himself a man of means. There was no choice but to walk the whole distance. The farmer started out in the direction of his house, but he was walking so quickly that the mohel soon lagged behind. Eventually the farmer disappeared behind a bend in the road. Hours later the mohel arrived in town and asked some neighbours where the family with the new baby lived. When he walked into the house, he found the mother lying in bed with the infant. The father, however, was nowhere to be seen. For some reason he hadn't thought it important to attend his own son's bris.

"The mohel now faced a serious problem: Who would serve as sandek to hold the baby during the ritual procedure? Time was of the essence: It was the eighth day of the infant's life, and he needed to be entered into the covenant of Abraham immediately. But without a sandek it would be very dangerous. Indeed, the mohel had never attempted such a thing before.

"The mohel walked outside hoping to find someone on the street he could ask. For a long time he waited, but the street was deserted. Suddenly, he spotted an old beggar coming around the corner. 'I'm in a big hurry,' the man replied impatiently when the mohel asked for his assistance. 'Today is Erev Yom Kippur, and I can make a whole ruble going door to door if I get to the city in time.'

"By then desperate, the mohel promised to pay him a ruble if he would only serve as sandek. The beggar agreed, and the bris milah was conducted without incident. The mohel then left for the long walk back home.

"After praying Mincha (the afternoon service) the mohel went home for the final meal before the fast (se'udah ha-mafsekes). He was astonished to find the beggar waiting on his doorstep. He quickly paid him the ruble he had promised, but the beggar also demanded a drink of mead. The mohel was very rushed and in no mood for entertaining. Nevertheless, but he invited him inside and poured the drink. But even that wasn't enough for the strange old man: He insisted that the mohel join him in his le-chaim, and that they wish each other a good and sweet new year. With no choice, the mohel complied.

"Tell me, is there any more of this mead left in the barrel?' the annoying stranger persisted. 'Very little,' the mohel answered, 'only a few more drops.' 'There will always be mead in this barrel,' the

beggar pronounced cryptically, 'until the last blessing is recited at your youngest son's wedding celebration.' The beggar then pointed to the mohel's youngest son sleeping in his cradle.

"The blessing was fulfilled in its entirety," the innkeeper concluded his tale. "Perhaps that old man was Eliyahu Ha-navi (Elijah the Prophet) - who knows? With my seemingly endless supply of mead I opened this inn, and completely forgot about the rest of his prediction. That is, until today, when the barrel suddenly fell and broke into pieces as we were reciting the Grace after Meals at my youngest son's wedding. And that is why I tell you that there will never be any more of this particular batch of mead..." [Adapted from Le'Chaim!]

The mohel performed a mitzvah with every last drop of his strength. He was rewarded that the last drops from of his mead barrel flowed endlessly with Hashem's blessings. This is characteristic of the righteous, who serve Hashem with every drop of strength they can muster. Instead of becoming exhausted, they are rewarded with a wellspring of vitality and energy, as the prophet Isaiah says (Yeshaya/Isaiah 29:31):

He gives strength to the weary, and grants abundant might to the powerless. Youths may weary and tire, and young men may falter, but those who look toward Hashem will have renewed strength; they will grow wings like eagles. They will run and not grow tired; they will walk and not weary.

Despite Eisav's affinity for the field, and Yaakov's dedication to Torah study, Yitzchak favoured Eisav. Some explain that Yitzchak was not put off by Eisav's penchant for the physical. To the contrary, one of the tenets of chassidus is that it is far greater to elevate the material/physical by harnessing it for one's service of Hashem than it is to simply abstain from the pleasures of this world altogether. Most people, of course, must first go through many years of measured abstention and restraint before they aspire to elevate (one can not elevate that to which one is attached), but who was to say that Eisav was not just such a tzaddik?

Perhaps Yaakov too had his misgivings. True, he was more likely to have doubted the sincerity of his brother's overtures than his father, but still, how was one to know for sure that beneath that hairy red facade lay not a pure neshama so exalted that it was impossible for any other mortal to perceive?

Eisav returns from the field ayeif - exhausted. This is the same term used in the above passage, "Youths may weary," and in the Torah's description of the Jews before they were attacked by Amalek, "You were faint and exhausted - and you did not fear G-d. (Devarim/Deuteronomy 25:18)" This was the confirmation Yaakov had been looking for. Were Eisav the hidden tzaddik his father imagined, he would have returned from his "holy work" invigorated and energized. Not the kind of person to say, "Swallow me some of that food - I'm about to die!"

The birthright, through which the service of Hashem would be conferred, would not be done justice by those who throw themselves down on the couch after a long day at the Temple, guzzling a bottle of wine and scarfing down a pot of stew. "Today," Yaakov said, "I have seen your true colours. Sell me your birthright!"

The portion of Toldos, mefarshim explain, emphasizes the concept of descendants. Toldos, related to the Hebrew word for birth (ho-lada), implies both physical offspring and spiritual heirs. When we do a mitzvah, we create new "generations" - new spiritual children.

The generations we create, however, must be "the generations of Yitzchak" and not "the generations of Noach." The name Noach is related to the word n'yacha, meaning rest. Yitzchak is related to laughter. Yitzchak is thus a symbol of the joyful person, one who is filled with laughter and delight. The name Toldos teaches us that our mitzvos, when performed with the proper intentions, should bring joy and enthusiasm into our lives, not exhaustion. If they aren't, perhaps we should be putting more into them.

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. ***** Text Copyright © 2004 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and [Torah.org](#)