

BEYOND REASON

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

It came to pass when Yitzchak was old, and his eyes were too dim to see . . . (Bereishis 27:1)

It is something that religious Jews take for granted, too much for granted. To the non-believer, today's nations have merely evolved from yesterday's nations. To the Torah believer, the world today is about Ya'akov, Eisav, and Yishmael, just as it was thousands of years ago.

Even more remarkable is that nothing really has changed about them when they first began. Ya'akov is still being Ya'akov, Eisav is still Eisav, and Yishmael is as Yishmael as he has ever been. Even someone who disputes the Divine origin of Torah should marvel at how accurately it depicted the natures of history's main characters thousands of years in advance.

The Talmud makes an interesting statement with respect to this week's parshah. One of the reasons why Ya'akov was able to fool his father, Yitzchak, into giving the blessing intended for Eisav to him instead was because Yitzchak was blind. This is why Yitzchak asked to feel Ya'akov's arms: unable to see who was standing before him, he had to resort to a more physical means of verification.

As to why Yitzchak was blind in the first place, there are conflicting opinions. Rashi says:

It came to pass when Yitzchak was old, and his eyes were too dim to see . . . (Bereishis 27:1)

Were too dim: Because of the smoke of these [wives of Eisav] (who would burn [incense] to the idols). (Rashi)

This is the first of two explanations that Rashi provides for why Yitzchak suffered from blindness. The smoke that burned in the house from incense offered by Eisav's wives and intended for idol worship damaged Yitzchak's eyes. It wasn't just the smoke that got to Yitzchak, but the fact that it was idol worship incense. It was a spiritual cause of a physical effect. How fathers can end up paying for the sins of their sons!

Rashi offers an alternative explanation for Yitzchak's lack of sight:

When Yitzchak was bound on the altar, and his father was about to slaughter him, the heavens opened. The ministering angels saw and wept, and their tears fell upon Yitzchak's eyes. As a result, his eyes became dim. (Rashi)

This is certainly a far holier reason for Yitzchak's blindness. The only question is, why should he have lost his eyesight by doing a mitzvah, and an incredible one at that? Because he was prepared to

sacrifice his life to God he had to suffer blindness? Where was the Divine justice in that?

The Talmud provides yet a third explanation for the blindness of Yitzchak. It says:

Rebi Elazar further said in the name of Rebi Chanina: "The curse of an ordinary person should not be lightly esteemed in your eyes, because Avimelech cursed Sarah, saying, 'behold it is to you a covering of the eyes for all who are with you' (Bereishis 20:16). This was fulfilled through her seed, [as it says], 'It came to pass when Yitzchak was old, and his eyes were too dim to see . . . (Bereishis 27:1)'. (Megillah 15a)

What makes this explanation even more curious is that Avimelech had not meant his words as a curse, at least according to Rashi:

For all who are with you: They will cover their eyes, so that they will not denigrate you, for had I returned you empty-handed they could say, "After he violated her, he returned her." Now that I had to spend much money and to appease you, they will know that against my will I returned you, and through a miracle. (Rashi)

From this it seems as if Avimelech's words were more blessing than curse, sparing Sarah from any future ridicule. How could they have led to anything bad, let alone to a righteous son who had yet to be born?

The Talmud offers yet another contributory reason for Yitzchak's loss of eyesight:

Rebi Elazar said: " 'It came to pass when Yitzchak was old, and his eyes were too dim to see . . . (Bereishis 27:1),' because he used to gaze at the evil Eisav." (Megillah 28a)

This explanation was brought in response to someone being asked why he lived so long. His answer was that he never looked at an evil person his entire life, teaching that doing so shortens life. Elsewhere, the Talmud explains that a blind person is like a dead person (Nedarim 64b), so it can also apply to Yitzchak as well even though he actually lived to 180.

This is something that most people take for granted. After all, how can just seeing an evil person have a physical impact? This is something that is answered in Sha'ar HaGilgulim, and there are some who take the possibility so seriously that they even apply it to something as remote as a photograph. To this day, some people will not look at a picture of Hitler, ysv"z, or Stalin, ysv"z, for this very reason.

So, which was it? What caused Yitzchak to go blind in life, or did all three reasons work together to take away his eyesight? The answer to this question may have more to do with the third answer Rashi mentions:

A third explanation: [Yitzchak became blind] to enable Ya'akov to take the blessings. (Rashi)

In other words, Yitzchak had to be blind, at least by the time Ya'akov had to dress up like Eisav and take the blessings meant for the latter. Even though Ya'akov was far worthier than Eisav to receive

the blessings, Eisav was the first born son, the “halachic” heir of Yitzchak. This made Eisav the Blessing-Elect regardless of his spiritual worthiness to receive them.

Though this did not deter Rivkah, who risked everything to make sure that her younger and more worthy son received the blessing, it would have bothered Yitzchak. Yitzchak was the very symbol of din—judgment—and far be it from him to tamper with the rules of Creation just to give a blessing to a more fitting son.

This is why Yitzchak had Eisav hunt for food for him just prior to blessing him. He could not change Eisav for Ya'akov, but he could change Eisav himself. Having him do a mitzvah of honoring his father, something by which Eisav abided, could put him in the right spiritual mind for the moment to receive the blessing. After that, the blessing could do its magic and completely transform Eisav into a better person.

Thus, whether it was angel tears that blinded Yitzchak, the smoke of illicit incense, or seeing Eisav himself, or all three of them together, Yitzchak was destined to be blind. History together with his very nature demanded it in order to allow Ya'akov to pull off his risky ruse and usurp the blessing and leadership of the future Jewish people. It was never a question of if Yitzchak would be blind, just of how it would happen.

This answer, of course, raises additional questions. It's like scratching the back of the right side of your head by reaching around the left side. Why all the subterfuge? If Ya'akov Avinu was destined to be the father of the Jewish people, make him the first born. If for some reason he cannot be the first born, then make it that Yitzchak agrees to bless Ya'akov instead. It's not like Yitzchak didn't speak to God.

Even if Yitzchak's blindness was necessary for other reasons, let him get blind with old age. Why did it have to be the product of the Akeidah, or the incense of Eisav's wives, or the seeing of an evil son? What is the lesson in all of that?

There are many points that can be addressed here, but the main one for now, is called “mirmah u'tachboles,” which means “trickery and scheming.” As the Arizal explains in Sha'ar HaGilgulim, God is “forced” to work in a backwards manner sometimes to accomplish a straightforward goal. The Satan, or Prosecuting Angel, does not allow good people to get good things if they haven't done everything right to get them. This is true of personal redemptions and national redemptions as well.

“But the Sitra Achra works for God!” you might question. “If he causes strict judgment on someone or a nation, he does so ON BEHALF of God! Why would God circumvent His own system of judgment with Divine mercy by fooling His own angel? And, why make good people suffer along the way?”

The answer is complicated. In fact, it is too complicated for man to completely grasp. Many have tried, and pieces of the answer may even be correct-ish. The complete and accurate answer however involves an omniscient and omnipotent vision of a historical picture too large for a human

mind to see, let alone accurately interpret.

This is not a cop out. It is a "cop in." It is a reminder about something that too many of us take too much for granted when trying to explain history and its lack of straightforwardness. It seems to be all too natural to assume that because we understand something about God and His ways that we can also understand everything about God and His ways. People do this even to the point of taking issue with some of the things God does.

This can lead, and has only lead to spiritual suicide for so many throughout history, beginning with Adam HaRishon himself. In fact, this is a recurring theme throughout these parshios, and in essence, it is the foundation of the Jewish people. Accepting this idea and trusting in God to the end, no matter how much our minds scream out against the logic of His logic, can be the determining factor of who belongs to the Jewish people, and who does not.