

TEACHING REDEMPTION TEACHING TRUTH

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In the aftermath of the Akeidah (the binding) Yitzchak entered the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. Of all the Avos (Patriarchs) Yitzchak spent the least time studying with his great grandparents. Yitzchak was 37 at the time of the Akeidah and he married Rivkah when he was forty. The moment of their first meeting "in the field" was the place where the Akeidah had taken place, which was in the same vicinity as the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. The verse states that after he married Rivkah he settled his new wife in the tent of his mother in Kiryat Arbeh - Hebron. Presumably, that was when he left the Yeshiva.

I would like to suggest that Yitzchak spent the least time with Shem and Ever because the contribution he was destined to make as an Av (Patriarch) did not require great input from Shem and Ever.

Shem and Ever were wise in the ways of the world and worldly in their understanding and appreciation of G-d. On the other hand, Yitzchak's wisdom and focus was inward and insular. He did not go looking for the outside world. His encounters with the world were forced upon him and limited to within the borders of Eretz Yisroel (Israel); such as, his first encounter with Avimelech or his later encounters negotiating water rights and treaties. The advantage of studying with Shem and Ever was their profound knowledge of the "Goyim - other nations" and how to influence them toward monotheism. That was not Yitzchak's focus

Influencing the other nations was not to be Yitzchak's main concern. Like the future Bais Hamikdash (Temple) and the Kohanim (Priests) who would primarily administer the spiritual needs of the nation, not the outside world, Yitzchak's contributions were to be toward the strength and determination of his future children, not teaching faith and understanding to the other nations.

Yitzchak learned the lesson of targeted focus and growth from his mother Sarah. Sarah, the great and possibly greatest teacher to ever live, lovingly gave up all other interests so that she could focus her attention on raising Yitzchak. So great was her focus and so on target was her understanding that she was confirmed by G-d as knowing what Yitzchak needed more so than Avraham. "You are to listen to all that Sarah tells you."

In contrast with Yitzchak's relative isolation, Avraham and Yakov had to confront the outside world and master or survive it.

Avraham mastered the physical world while Yakov survived it. Avraham pursued students wherever

they were to be found. Along with Sarah he opened his home and heart to the "souls that he made in Charan."

Yakov was no less involved in teaching the word of G-d; however, he had greater familial responsibilities than Avraham. Yakov was responsible for raising his thirteen children. First he had to survive the murderous intents of Eisav. He then had to survive the insidious intrigues of Lavan. He then had to confront and out-negotiate a much older, stronger, and sophisticated Eisav. But always his main focus was raising and protecting his children.

- 1.** Next week's Parsha begins with Yakov asking, "Please return me whole to the house of my father." The Talmud comments that the meaning of "whole" is, "With all my children committed to carrying out the mission of the Jewish people."
- 2.** When Yakov fled from Lavan at the end of next week's Parsha, Yakov did so because the children were getting older (Reuven was 12) and more susceptible to Lavan's influence.
- 3.** In Parshas Vayishlach Yakov refused to join forces with Eisav because "the children are young." His reasons were not age oriented as much as their lack of readiness to withstand the lure of Eisav's overwhelming materialism.

Avraham needed to be wise in the ways of the world. He needed to know how the rest of the world thought and what they feared. He needed to know how to inspire them and strengthen their personal resolve to be G-dly. Despite his own background as a Baal Teshuva (one who returns to G-d), Avraham turned to the experts, Shem and Ever for those lessons. Granted, as a Baal Teshuva he understood the pagan mindset and the process of change but he also recognized that he and Sarah were unique. They were both seekers of the truth who were motivated to rethink societal norms and beliefs. As such they were ready to receive the truth and change accordingly. The rest of the world was different. Most were content living their lives with foolishness and hypocrisy so long as it did not unduly interfere with their pursuit of worldly possessions and pleasure. Influencing the majority was the real challenge. For that he turned to grandfathers far more experienced and learned.

Yakov's focus was also outwardly focused but his scope was more limited than Avraham. More than knowing how to teach the non-Jewish world was his need to withstand the intentions of the non-Jewish world to either dominate Judaism or destroy it. Yakov knew that the greatest impact on the world would not be so much the words he would speak as the actions he would display. G-d promised to Avraham that the families of the world would be blessed through him. The meaning of "blessed through him" was that they would see his family and wish to emulate his success. Yakov knew that his destiny was to be the first true Jewish family presenting four generations of belief in G-d. He was to be living proof that "the way of G-d" was true and lasting. To do so he had to survive and he had to raise his children. One generation is easily a historic anomaly. More often than not, it is experimental at best with little hope of continuity. The second generation doesn't prove much either. Raised by strong and idealistic innovators success is a reasonable probability; however, a third and

fourth generation believing in the truths of parents and grandparents begins to define reality rather than challenge it

In essence, Yakov needed to know how to make the greatest impression without saying a word. Words are cheap and words can be easily misunderstood and perverted. On the other hand, action speaks louder than words. Action proves the validity of intent by showing its intelligence and benefits. Action avoids the need to justify and explain because the results speak the loudest.

Yakov needed to know how to interact with the Goyim (other nations) without getting too involved. Lengthy conversations are dangerous because they demand greater contact without the guarantee of better results. More often than not, the longer the conversation the less is remembered. Yakov turned to Shem and Ever for their expertise, insight, experience, and secrets. That is why Yakov first stopped at the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever before going to Lavan. Despite the 63 years of study in the house of his father, Yakov needed the extra skills that only Shem and Ever could teach.

Yitzchak was the beginning proof of success. Yitzchak was the 2nd generation after the prophet. Avraham was the prophet to whom G-d spoke, and Yitzchak was the 2nd generation that had to trust the prophet as to what G-d commanded. Under the most extreme circumstances, the Akeidah, Yitzchak proved that the system of transmission worked. He trusted his father that he was doing as G-d had commanded despite the contradictory illogic of the moment. Nothing else mattered, nothing else was more important.

Three events dominate this week's Parsha. First, the fact that Rivkah was barren; second, Yitzchak's interaction with Avimelech and Phicol; third, Yakov buying Eisav's birthright and making sure that he received Yitzchak's blessings. At first glance the three events do not make sense. A second generation without a third is a waste of time. Following Avraham's lifetime of sacrifice and work, it made no sense that Sarah would not have a child to carry on the mission.

Nevertheless, Hashem made Avraham and Sarah wait till they were both old before granting them Yitzchak. Once born, the notion of sacrificing Yitzchak at the age of 37 made even less sense; nevertheless, the commandment was given and then rescinded. Once Yitzchak was granted life after the Akeidah it made even less sense that Rivkah would be barren! How would the promises be fulfilled? How would G-d's intentions be realized? The longer the investment in time and effort the more nonsensical G-d's part in the story line seems to get.

OK, G-d listened to their prayers and after 20 years Rivkah got pregnant and had twins. Why was one good and one bad? Why was the bad one the older so that the younger has to run circles and jump through hoops to get what was necessary to fulfill G-d's intent? Granted, Eisav had freewill, but that did not extend to being born first. That was G-d's doing! Let Eisav choose to be bad. Make it necessary for Yakov to eventually marry both Rachel and Leah. But why decree that Eisav be the oldest, the Bechor?

In the middle of the generational storyline Yitzchak encounters Avimelech and butts heads with him

and his general Phicol. What was that all about? Why the repeat performance of Yitzchak and Rivkah needing to protect themselves by lying about their relationship? Why is it important for us to know about Yitzchak's financial success relative to the Plishtim? Why force upon Yitzchak the entire episode of their jealousy and Yitzchak having to move to avoid further conflict? What was the whole well conflict all about? Legally, the water rights belonged to Yitzchak because Avraham had dug the wells. Ancient Canaanite law granted possession of the water to the one who dug the well. How many wells did Avraham dig? Did Yitzchak dig any new wells? The Torah described three wells. What was the meaning of the names given to the wells? Why didn't the Plishtim fight over the last well? What about the well that was completed during the actual treaty with Avimelech? Was that a fourth well or the renaming of the third?

Leaving the particulars of the wells for a different issue let me address the seemingly nonsensical nature of the generational storyline and the broader implications of Yitzchak's conflict with Avimelech. Fundamental to the transmission of G-d's word from the beginning of time until today is the belief in prophecy and the trust we have in the prophets. The final words of the final prophecy of the final prophet Malachi were, "Remember the Torah of Moshe My servant." (Rav Moshe Eiseman - Shelter Among the Shadows) Who and what we are is completely dependent on not forgetting the truths taught to us by the previous generations. As smart as they were and as wise as they may have been, their truths were not their own. Their truths were commanded to them by G-d through the medium of prophecy and the voice of the prophet. As I have often repeated in past issues, first we teach our children, "There is no other god like G-d," and then we allow our children to ask, "Who is like our G-d?" Subservience to the taught word of G-d is absolute and inviolate. Ask whatever you wish and argue against any answer you find unsatisfactory, but you must still keep the 613 Mitzvos, adhere to every rabbinic decree, and incorporate every established custom. It is a system that is beyond the human experience. It is a system addressing every generational innovation and invention. It is a system that humbles human supremacy clothing it in selfless responsibility and dignity.

In relation to the bareness of Sarah, Rivkah, and Rachel, the Talmud says, "G-d desires the prayers of the righteous." Even though rational analysis suggests that the Imahos, (Matriarchs) more so than anyone else, deserved the gift and miracle of children; nevertheless, G-d showed that it had nothing to do with rational judgment and expectations. Life is His to grant. We are mere subjects awaiting the opportunity to experience His intent and live by His word. Regardless of what we think should be or what we really really want, we must accept that His will is paramount and our job is to accept it with joy and contentment.

It also teaches that the post-Eden world will always be a world of challenge and hard work. The Nachash (serpent) is everywhere and we have to be extremely vigilant in exercising our freewill.

It also contrasted in further proof and details the non-trustworthiness of human-made judgments and values. The first Avimelech proclaimed his righteousness in the face of taking a woman against

her will. Why? Because it was the law of Avimelech. Upon hearing from G-d that she was the wife of a prophet, he returned her amidst great protestations of innocence. Proving his sincerity and innocence, Avimelech invited Avraham to stay among them and teach them "the way of G-d." One generation later the same scenario occurred with Yitzchak and a new Avimelech. Granted, the laws of the land seemed more ethical although the questions being asked were still not proper. Yitzchak and Rivkah still felt the need to protect themselves. More so was Avimelech's confrontation with Yitzchak and the eventual request that he move away from his kingdom! What happened to the values of the first Avimelech and the desire to learn from the prophet? The evolving society of the Plishtim was still the law of Avimelech rather than the law of G-d.

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