

HE WHO RECOGNIZES THAT HE WAS STUPID

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 215, V'Sain Tal U'Matar. Good Shabbos!

Who Is The Wise One? He Who Recognizes That He Was Stupid

Parshas Toldos contains the story of Eisav selling the birthright to Yaakov. After the transaction, the Torah uses the expression "VaYivez Eisav es haBechorah." [And Eisav scorned the birthright.] [Bereshis 25:34] Rash"i explains that this expression is testifying to Eisav's wickedness.

It is obvious from the context of the narrative that Eisav scorned the birthright. This added expression tells us that there was an additional scorning -- over and above that implicit in the sale itself.

Rav Leib Chassman tells us that this pasuk [verse] provides an important insight into human personality: When we do irrational or foolish acts, we compound our folly by attempting to rationalize what we have done. Nobody wants to believe that he is an idiot or that he has done something stupid. So when people realize that they have done something foolish, what do they do? Invent a philosophy! People will invent a philosophy to rationalize their deeds.

In other words, Eisav was starving -- hungry as a bear. His stomach was driving him. He did not evaluate what he was doing. "Don't talk to me about the birthright -- just give me something to eat." After finishing the lentil soup, he realized that he did a foolish thing. The human mind needs to rationalize its actions. "It wasn't worth it anyhow. The birthright was worthless! I would do it again!" "VaYivez Eisav es haBechorah" is the human mind's necessary rationalization to justify its own foolish actions.

We twist ourselves into pretzels and invent the most ridiculous philosophies to convince ourselves that we are not foolish. "I'm the one who got the best of the deal. The birthright is not worth a pot of soup."

This is so true. We all do stupid things once in a while. But the chochom (wise person) is not the one who never does anything foolish. The chochom is the one who, after doing something foolish, can

look back and recognize that it was a mistake. "I was, in fact, stupid." The fool, on the other hand, invents philosophies to perpetuate his errors, so that he does not need to face his mistakes.

Kedushah [Holiness] -- It's the Real Thing

The Torah describes that Yaakov dressed up in the garments of his brother Eisav, and entered his blind father's room. "Yitzchak smelled his clothing" (begadav) and proclaimed, "See the aroma of my son is like the aroma of the field that G-d has blessed" [27:27].

The Medrash comments that the pasuk which we translated "Yitzchak smelled his clothing" should not be interpreted based on the word begadim [clothing] but rather based on the word bogdim [from boged -- a traitor]. Yitzchak 'smelled' (i.e. -- he sensed through Ruach HaKodesh [Divine Inspiration]) the traitors of the Jewish people. Yitzchak knew prophetically that there were descendants of Yaakov Avinu who would be rebellious and traitors to G-d. Therefore, Yitzchak was inspired to give Yaakov a blessing.

What is the meaning of the Medrash? Why did a negative prophecy inspire Yitzchak to bless Yaakov? This Medrash can be understood based on the example that the Medrash then relates. The Medrash gives the following example of the type of traitors that Yitzchak saw, who inspired him to give the blessing.

The Medrash relates an incident with an individual named Yosef Meshisa. When the Romans came to destroy the Beis HaMikdash [Holy Temple], they did not know their way around. They needed a guide. They took a Jew -- a traitor to his G-d and a traitor to his nation -- to help them out and show them around the Beis HaMikdash. They told him that as payment for the 'tour' he could take whatever he wanted from the "spoils" of the Beis HaMikdash.

Yosef Meshisa went in and took out the Golden Menorah. Imagine how low a Jew can sink to do such a thing, to steal the Menorah itself! However, the Romans told him that it was not appropriate for a commoner to have such an item in his house. "Go back and take something else -- anything else, just not the Menorah."

Yosef Meshisa replied, "I can't go back in." They promised him that the income from the next three years of tax collection would be his, but he persisted. "I cannot go back in. Is it not enough that I angered my G-d and defiled His Temple one time, I should have to do it again? I can't do it."

The Romans tortured him until he died. As long as he was alive, while being tortured, he mourned "Woe unto me, for I have angered my Creator".

The Ponevezher Rav asked, "What happened here? What made Yosef Meshisa do Teshuvah? He was apparently a Jew who had no sensitivity whatsoever to Jewish values, and then he turned around and was prepared to die as a martyr. What transpired that transformed him from a wicked person to a righteous person?"

The Ponevezher Rav answered that the very fact that Yosef Meshisa entered into a holy place transformed him. He was exposed to holiness. He went into the Beis HaMikdash for the worst of reasons and with the worst of intentions -- but he walked out a different person. There is something real about holiness and purity. Mere exposure to the presence of the Shechinah [G-d's Divine Presence] can change a person for life.

That is what happened to Yosef Meshisa -- he was exposed to something holy.

This, says the Medrash, is an example of the 'traitors' that Yitzchak perceived. It is possible to have a Jew that is so removed from his G-d that he can willingly enter the Temple, help the enemy, and take the Menorah -- and yet that same Jew can turn around on a dime, do Teshuva [repent], and say "No more. I have done enough. Kill me, torture me -- but I won't do it again."

That power of Yaakov's descendants, to raise themselves from the depths of lack of spirituality to its greatest heights, is the trait of the 'bogdim' that Yitzchak saw, that inspired him to give the blessing. This is what the Medrash relates. It is an amazing Medrash.

Lest one should claim that this power is unique to the Beis HaMikdash, lest one claim that today there exists nothing comparable which can so instantaneously turn a wicked individual into a righteous one, I will tell you a true story.

The story is about a Jew named Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929). Franz Rosenzweig recorded this true story in his book, *The Star of Redemption*.

Franz Rosenzweig was a totally secular Jew. He was a prolific author and a great philosopher, but totally secular -- to the extent that he was preparing to convert to Christianity as part of his engagement to a non-Jewish woman. He was a Captain in the German Cavalry in World War I, and was stationed in a Polish town on what happened to be the night of Yom Kippur. As an observer, he went into a Polish Shteible [small synagoguel] on the night of Kol Nidre.

Franz Rosenzweig walked into the Shteible just to see what it was like, strictly out of curiosity. He walked out of there a Baal Teshuvah [a "returnee" to religion]. He broke his engagement and became a religious Jew. This was not in America in 1990 where it is a common phenomenon for Jews to return to their religion and become Baalei Teshuvah, but in Germany in 1915, where it was almost unheard of for a secular Jew to become religious.

What did it? What was it? It was the same as with Yosef Meshisa. He was exposed to Kedusha. A person who is totally secular, or even anti-religious, or even a person who is prepared to adopt another religion, who goes to a shul -- not to pray and not to participate, but merely to observe... Someone who is merely exposed to such a place of holiness, on such a night of holiness -- that can do something to a person's soul. It can change a person. It is real.

Holiness, Kedusha, is real. Purity, Taharah, is real. And through his exposure to Kedusha and Taharah, Rozenzweig became a different person. This does not require exposure to the Beis HaMikdash. It just

takes a minyan of honest Jews praying sincerely to the Master of the World. That can change a man forever.

Sources and Personalities

Rav Leib Chassman -- (1869-1935) [Ohr Yahel]; Mashgiach of Chevron Yeshiva, Israel.

Ponevezher Rav (1886-1969) [Rav Yosef Kahaneman]; Lithuania; Bnei Brak, Israel.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

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