

SUCH IS THE POWER OF CYNICISM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Toldos

Such Is The Power of Cynicism

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #569, Yichud With Relatives. Good Shabbos!

The pasuk says: *"And these are the generations of Avraham: Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak"* [Bereishis 25:19]. Rashi is bothered by the fact that *"Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak"* merely restates something we already know. Furthermore, why does the Torah go back and trace the family lineage from Avraham when introducing the offspring of Yitzchak?

Rashi answers that the cynics of the generation (leitzanei hador) contended that Sarah became pregnant from Avimelech. "She lived many decades with Avraham and had not become pregnant from him." To counteract this cynicism, G-d fashioned Yitzchak's appearance to be identical to that of Avraham. It was immediately obvious to anyone who saw Yitzchak that *"Avraham fathered Yitzchak."*

Many times children look like their parents. It is possible to meet someone for the first time and immediately recognize him as being the son of an individual who is well known to you. In this case, the identical appearance of the father-son pair was more overt than even that. The Medrash states that G-d made a "miracle" to make this happen. The appearance of Yitzchak was so exactly like that of his father that it was miraculous!

The Gemara [Bava Metziah 87a] describes that Avraham made a party to mark the occasion of the weaning of Yitzchak, to which he invited all the great men of the generation. Avraham Avinu was not just a private citizen. He was society's primary proponent of monotheism. He rejected the pagan idols of the rest of the world and proclaimed the existence of a Master of the Universe.

Avraham Avinu wanted to sanctify the Name of G-d (Kiddush Hashem) and publicize the great miracle that G-d did for him. Avraham made this big celebration for just that purpose, but the cynics

were sitting there having a field day. They joked that Yitzchak could not possibly be Avraham's child. Sarah must have become pregnant from Avimelech. We know how it goes: A roll of the eyes, a twist of the nose, a mocking smile.

In truth, this cynicism was illogical. They were saying that "Sarah was pregnant from Avimelech" because he could not possibly be Avraham's child. The wonder here wasn't that Avraham had fathered a child. Avraham had already fathered a son from Hagar! The wonder was that Sarah, barren all her life, indeed conceived after she reached the age of ninety!

What then was the nature of this cynicism? Why did G-d respond in such a miraculous fashion to counteract this patently false type of mocking?

The point is that cynicism (leitzanus) has exactly this power. Cynicism does not need to be precise or accurate. The effect of a "one-liner" is basically that of a pin that, in a moment, bursts the balloon. The "press" will write it up. The fact that anyone with intelligence who thinks about this for 30 seconds will recognize it as nonsense is irrelevant. The damage has already been done. Such is the power of leitzanus.

Allowing this momentary bursting of the balloon of Kiddush Hashem would have defeated Avraham's entire purpose in making the party. Thus, G-d needed to make a miracle to restore the inspirational nature of this festive meal.

The Mesilas Yesharim writes in Chapter 5: "With the smallest joke, a person can deflect from himself the greatest amount of inspiration and enthusiasm. One joke pushes away 100 rebukes."

Consider the Biblical incident of Eliyahu at Mt. Carmel [Melachim I Chapter 18]. Eliyahu duels with the prophets of Baal. He is trying to prove that idols are false and that the Almighty is the Only G-d. He brings down fire from heaven to consume his offering, after the prophets of Baal fail miserably when calling out to their gods.

All Eliyahu had to do was to cry out "Answer me, my G-d, Answer me." (Anneini Hashem Anneini). Why the repetition of the word "Answer me"? Chazal explain that Eliyahu offered a dual prayer: (1) Answer me, G-d, that a fire will come down from Heaven; and (2) Answer me, that the people not say that my actions were witchcraft (ma'aseh keshafim). In other words, "G-d, please save me from the cynics." Save me from the proverbial guys in the back of the shul that no matter what the Rabbi says, no matter what happens, always have a "one-liner" to make a mockery out of anything inspirational or thought provoking.

Eliyahu was worried that he might be able to bring down fire from Heaven and have everyone shout "Hashem is the Lord! Hashem is the Lord!"... and that one cynic might undermine it all by saying: "Eh. It's magic!" That is what Eliyahu was worried about and that is what the Almighty was worried about when he miraculously made Yitzchak look exactly like Avraham. Such is the destructive power of leitzanus. The Almighty felt that it was imperative to combat it, even at the cost of making a miracle.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Toldos are provided below:

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