

# PARSHAS TOLDOS - THE THREE-FOLD PATTERN OF JEWISH HISTORY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## The Three-fold Pattern of Jewish History<sup>1</sup>

*The Plishtim stopped up all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, and filled them with earth. Avimelech said to Yitzchok, "Go away from us. You have become much mightier than we!"*

Seemingly innocuous episodes sometimes turn out to be major turning points in history. This is one of them. It hints at a problem - and at a solution.

To fill up wells that provided much-needed water, the jealousy of the Plishtim must have oozed from their pores. Acting out of spite, they did not pay attention to the advantage of access to live wells in an arid region. If these wells represented Yitzchok's well-being and success, they would rather be rid of them even if this meant denying themselves their blessing.

How differently they treat Yitzchok than Avraham's contemporaries had dealt with him! Avraham travels unimpeded in the company of men. He forges alliances with people outside of his own clan, like Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Seeking to purchase a burial plot for his wife Soro, he is fawned over by the Chais people. Despite being an outsider - something he does not downplay<sup>[2]</sup> - his request is looked upon favorably. He is treated royally, or better than royally. "You are a prince of G-d in our midst!"<sup>[3]</sup> Avraham does not encounter any pushback from those who meet up with him. He encounters one isolated act of hostility (or perhaps simple opportunistic theft), and Avimelech immediately rights the wrong.

With our episode, we arrive at the first of two sea-changes that will determine the future course of Jewish history. The three avos lived very different lives in regard to their interaction with others. The golden age of Avraham ends here, ushering in one of suspicion and envy. It will give way in the life of Yaakov to yet another relationship with the general world, one of oppression and contempt.

All three avos lived lives apart from the rest of the world while not retreating in isolation from it. Avraham was honored and respected for who he was, even by those not ready to join his camp and his cause. They understood that his values and life-style were very different from their own, but did not get exercised about it. Yitzchok was tolerated, permitted to live side-by-side with others, but they envied his success, and murmured about him behind his back. Yitzchok prevailed, but not in the

way his father had had. Increasingly, he was met with ill-will rather than good will.

Yaakov was shown the ugliest side of non-Jewish hostility. He lived in complete subservience to the wishes of Lavan, where he was manipulated and taken advantage of. When mistreated, he had no recourse to justice, other than seeking solace in his closeness to Hashem. When at long last he became successful, the jealousy of others threatened to destroy him and his family, whose members were rejected as foreigners even by their own kin.

The rest of the world dealt with the avos in completely different ways. Each one of the patriarchs, however, felt the close, guiding Hand of G-d. HKBH was there for each of them, addressing their very different needs and circumstances. Those circumstances were so different, that the Torah does not speak of a covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchok, and with Yaakov. It speaks of the bris Avraham, the bris Yitzchok, and the bris Yaakov[4]. The patterns of their lives were archetypes that would spill over into Jewish history. These patterns would turn into very different manifestations of the power of a single, overarching covenant that Hashem maintains with his people. Within it there would be an Avraham-covenant, a Yitzchok-covenant, and a Yaakov-covenant. Each of these smaller covenants would have its epoch and place in the course of the development of the Jewish people.

We know where that development is going to lead us. Galus will be the large bump in the road, seemingly confounding our progress, but in fact preparing us for the last chapter in our saga. In the course of that galus, we would mature, we would steel ourselves against everything negative that the world could throw against us. We would emerge from it so strong, that our national independence would remain forever, unshakeable, incapable of being lost.

We would do this by living through the tests of the three patriarchal covenants in reverse order.

We would like to think that we have safely navigated the first stage[5], the covenant of Yaakov. For many centuries, we endured the servile humiliation of abject poverty and contempt of the nations. With His help, we survived with our faith and loyalty intact.

The challenge upon us now is to endure the demands of Yitzchok's covenant. We will live alongside the non-Jewish world, and have to learn to proudly maintain our distinctiveness. We must lose our fear of being seen as different from others, and forge ahead according to our own requirements, even when that means provoking the jealousy of onlookers who do not understand our need to be different, even while living among them. We must learn that we do not need complete acceptance, if that acceptance dictates too high a price to pay.

Our psukim hint at one of the great survival tools that will allow us to safely navigate these times. Avimelech does not try to convince Yitzchok to change his ways, nor does he attempt to reeducate his own people who have developed a jealous distaste for Yitzchok's success. Rather, he tells him to leave. We see it perhaps as an unfortunate expression of the small-mindedness of Yitzchok's contemporaries. We may be missing the message. What would the consequences have been to Yitzchok - and to his role in developing the fledgling Jewish people - had he not been rejected by

his neighbors? Had they elevated him to a position of prominence and respect, they easily might have expected him to put his wealth and talent to use on their behalf. Such involvement, which he would have gladly agreed to provide, might have turned into a far greater drain on his focus and energies than would have been good for his chief spiritual calling. Their inability to see him as an equal ironically provided him with the space that he needed to function in splendid isolation. Their rejection of Yitzchok may have contributed crucially to his success in his mission - and their parallel rejection of us today may do the same.

Weathering this second stage of the three-part larger covenant, we can look forward to the final stage - the return someday on a national scale to the lifestyle of Avraham. In it, we will win the recognition and respect that we have always sought - not despite of being Jewish, but because we are Jewish, and proudly carrying Hashem's truth to the rest of humanity.

### **Serving the Younger Brother<sup>6</sup>**

*By your sword you shall live, but your brother you shall serve. Only when you humble yourself, you may cast off his yoke from upon your neck.*

Your modus operandi - your course through history - will be the exercise of power. You will be the stronger of the two, and it will be with your strength that you will dominate history. Ironically, the upshot of all your display of strength will be that you will meekly lay all that you conquer before your younger brother! You will yet discover that the power of Rome is flawed and imperfect. As you mature, you will discover the value system of your brother, and come to embrace it. Without his lifting a finger, the power of his spirit will replace the power of your sword.

You will labor for centuries, scorning the ways of your younger brother, rejecting them as unreasonable or unnecessary. In place of his ethos of truth and principle, you will substitute the right of might. Your empire building will leave him far behind, and you will be hopelessly blind to the fact that all that you build will become, in principle, his. Your labor will in time all belong to him, because his values will prevail. In that sense, you will be serving another master, all the time thinking of him as your slave. It is you, however, who will be the servant. You will liberate yourself only when you humble yourself and realize the futility of ruling by conquest alone. When you come to understand that there is no security in the exercise of raw power, you will be ready to accept the values and goals of your younger brother, and by so doing, liberate yourself.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 26:15-16
  2. Bereishis 23:4
  3. Bereishis 23:6
  4. Vayikra 26:42
  5. The irony of this, written decades before the Holocaust, needs no comment

6. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 27:40

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