

infirmity that are often associated with the aging process. Yet, here we see Yitzchak Avinu, the *Olah Temimah*, perfect sacrifice, becoming a victim to old age. The *Rashi* (quoting *Midrash Rabbah* 65:10), to which we are all acquainted, explains that Yitzchak's waning eyesight, his premature myopia, had not been naturally induced; rather, he was a victim of the "side-effects" of the *Akeidah*, Binding. Apparently, when he was lying bound on the Altar of the *Akeidah*, and his father, Avraham Avinu, stood poised over him, knife in hand, prepared to slaughter him, the sight was too much for the Ministering Angels. They cried bitterly, and their tears fell into Yitzchak's eyes. As a result, in Yitzchak's old age, his vision weakened. Obviously, *Chazal's* words are steeped in allegory. Nonetheless, it behooves us to understand what unique ingredient of the Angels' tears could have induced Yitzchak's blindness. Furthermore, I have always been bothered by the delayed-effect of the Angels' tears. Why did it take a lifetime, until Yitzchak became old and infirm, for his diminished eyesight to set in?

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, offers an insightful explanation. The above *Midrash* is based upon a *pasuk* in *Yeshayahu* 33:7, "Angels cried out openly; messengers of peace wept bitterly." The second half of this *pasuk* is the key to understanding *Chazal's* statement concerning Yitzchak's premature blindness. Like all angels, these "messengers of peace" were just that: angels sent by Hashem with a singular mission, peace. These angels of mercy were the epitome of *shalom*, the ultimate personification of peace. They were intensely compassionate and incapable of any negative perspective on any given subject. Their tears were tears of pure compassion – no room for tough love, just total mercy.

When these angels looked down at the *Akeidah*, at an elderly father about to slaughter his only son – they began to weep. Their tears, which were a manifestation of their extreme compassion, fell onto Yitzchak's eyes, resulting in altering his ability to perceive anything but compassion. Yitzchak could see only good in others, unable to comprehend anything negative about another person, regardless of his apparent faults and shortcomings. Thus, Yitzchak was prepared to bless Eisav, regardless of his son's deficiencies.

Perhaps this is why his eyesight diminished most with age. When the angels gazed upon the *Akeidah*, they saw a traumatic scene, an old father about to slaughter his only son. While these were angels of peace and compassion, their compassion was related most to the scenario of an aged father. Ostensibly, Yitzchak's perception of anything negative was stunted, but his true Angel-induced compassion peaked when he was an old father about to bless his son. The compassion of the Angels jumpstarted at this moment. He may not have seen until then all of the negative activities of his errant son, Eisav, but, at this moment, Eisav was as distant from sin (in Yitzchak's stunted eyes) as Yaakov. So, why should he withhold blessing?

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Va'ani Tefillah

Bareich Aleinu... es ha'shanah ha'zos. Bless on our behalf... this year.

Some people have difficulty confronting the present. They either live in the past: glories of yesterday; the successes that represent everything but the present – or they dream of the future: new relationships; new projects; new deals. The present is reality; it bespeaks responsibility, obligation, things we must do – now – not tomorrow. Bless on our behalf... this year. We are urged to live in the present, not wallow in memories of the past or dream fantasies of the future. Life is now. Serving Hashem is now. We must live in the present and make plans for the future, based upon the lessons of the past and the foundation of the present.

Horav Avraham Chaim Feuer, quotes the *Alter, zl, m'Novardok*, who was wont to say: "Even the worst present is far more beautiful than the brightest future." I think this is because the present is real; the future is but a dream. The *Alter* added, "A person must relinquish all of his tomorrows for one today, lest he come to relinquish all of his todays for one tomorrow." When we spend all of today dreaming about tomorrow – we have just wasted today, and tomorrow remains a dream.

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Parashas Toldos

תשע"ה

פרשת תולדות

ויעתר יצחק לד' לנכח אשתו כי עקרה היא

Yitzchak entreated Hashem opposite his wife, because she was barren. (25:21)

We are accustomed to mentioning the *Avos* and *Imahos*, Patriarchs and Matriarchs, in one breath, as if they were all the same. When we stop to think, we recognize that there was one area in which they were not all the same. It appears at first glance that Avraham Avinu was not an *akar*, sterile man, since he fathered Yishmael. This is questionable from the *pasuk* in *Bereishis* 15:2, "What can You give me, seeing that I go childless?" Later in 16:5, however, Sarah *Imeinu* says to Avraham, "The outrage against me is due to you!" *Rashi* explains that Sarah complained to Avraham that he had *davened* to Hashem only for himself – and not for her. This indicates that both were sterile. Yitzchak Avinu prayed for Rivkah, indicating that he was fine, but Rivkah was not. Yaakov Avinu's wives – both Rachel *Imeinu* and Leah *Imeinu* – were sterile. In conclusion, the only Patriarch that was originally sterile was Avraham. Yitzchak and Yaakov were not. The four *Imahos* were all sterile. *Horav Shlomo Levinstein, Shlita*, wonders why all our *Imahos* and one *Av* were sterile? Nothing just happens. It is by design. Why did Hashem establish the lineage of *Klal Yisrael* in such a distinctive manner?

He quotes the *Ben Ish Chai* and *Maggid m'Dubno* who address this question and render an explanation that both enlightens and inspires. Avraham Avinu had a father, Terach, who was not a saint. He had a store in which he supplied idols to the community. He even betrayed his own son to the evil king, Nimrod; he would have lost him, had Hashem not intervened. Think about it: had Avraham not been sterile, then, by natural course of science, Terach would also have been our ancestor. *Baruch Hashem*, Avraham became our progenitor *b'derech neis*, by way of a miracle!

Next, Sarah *Imeinu* was Haran's daughter – definitely nothing to publicize. Haran was no Terach, but he was far from the saint with whom we would want to identify. Hence, Sarah's barrenness was a good thing for our lineage. Yitzchak was a miracle baby whose parents had both been sterile.

Let us continue. Rivkah *Imeinu* was Besuel's daughter – also no reason for accolades. Hashem spared Yaakov – and us – from having Besuel as our natural ancestor. Therefore, Rivkah was sterile until Hashem listened to Yitzchak's prayers on her behalf. Now, we turn to Rachel and Leah, the two wonderful daughters of none other than Lavan, the swindler. Hashem once again stepped in and spared us from having to identify with him. Rachel and Leah were originally both *akaros*, sterile woman.

The situation which appears at first glance to be a tragedy or, at best, ambiguous, is that four Matriarchs and one Patriarch were each sterile. This, in fact, may have been

Hashem's way of maintaining the purity of the bloodline of our People. The *Ben Ish Chai* interprets this idea as Bilaam's "blessing." *Mierosh tzurim er'enu u'migvaos ashurenu – hen am levadad yishkon u'vagoyim lo yishchashav*; "For from its origins, I see rock-like, and from hills do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not to be reckoned among nations." The word *tzurim*, rock-like (origins), is a reference to the *Avos*. The word, *gevaos*, hills, refers to our *Imahos*. The *rosh tzurim*, "head" of the *Avos* and all the *gevaos*, was created sterile in order that our People could dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations. This means that our lineage has no commonality with the *goyim*. We dwell in solitude without sharing any of them: Terach, Nachor, Haran, Besuel and Lavan!

Horav Reuven Shapiro, Shlita, adds a wonderful vignette. Chanah, mother of Shmuel *HaNavi*, was barren. She prayed for a miracle, and Hashem answered her prayer with an incredible child whom she named Shmuel. When he was two years old, she brought him to the *Bais Hamikdash* where Eili *Kohen Gadol* served. She brought a sacrifice as a form of giving thanks to Hashem for her miracle child. Eili called for a *Kohen* to slaughter the animal. Shmuel, who was only two years old, intervened, claiming that *shechitah K'sheirah b'zar*, even a *Yisrael* may perform the service of slaughtering. Why bother with a *Kohen*? Brilliant! Eili concurred and said to Chanah, "He is right – but wrong." Right in his knowledge of *Halachah*, but he was *moreh halachah bifnei rabbo*, he rendered a *halachic* decision in the presence of his *rebbe*, the *Kohen Gadol* (who is everyone's *rebbe*).

Chavah pleaded with Eili to spare her son. Eili countered that he would pray that she would be blessed with another son – one who would not be so insolent. She replied, *El ha'naar ha'zeh hispallalti*, "I prayed for this lad. I want no other child. I want this one." Eili relented, forgave Shmuel – and they lived happily ever after.

We can ask a powerful question: If Eili could have easily been *mochel*, absolve, his honor, why did he not do so immediately? Why would he have created such overwhelming anxiety for Chanah, who had gone through so much already? Why add to her travail? Just overlook it.

The reason is, explains *Rav Shapiro*, that we forget who Shmuel's ancestor was: Korach, who stood up to Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Eili feared that Shmuel's premature insolence was part of his character-deficient blood line. Thus, he was prepared to pray for another child for Chanah. Chanah replied, "I prayed for this lad." He is a miracle baby – not part of the original bloodline ascending to Korach! Eili listened, and we were blessed with Shmuel!

Things happen, and we wonder: Why? How? Why me? Can we begin to imagine what might have gone through the minds of our Matriarchs? Patience - and we see Hashem's answer. I could not pass by this story, related by Rabbi Henach Teller. At the

end of World War II, the Nazis saw that the end was near, but they still sought every which way to complete their diabolical Final Solution. They forced the surviving Jews to be taken (by foot or by cattle car) to Bergen-Belsen, the infamous concentration camp where over one million Jews were murdered. Following the war, it served as a Displaced Persons camp.

The situation in the camp was terrible. Hunger, disease, physical deprivation and emotional depression ran the course of the camp. Furthermore, housed in this camp were Russian soldiers, prisoners of war, who lacked the niceties of human decency, even on a good day – let alone when they were locked in a prison camp. This is what the hapless Jews were exposed to.

The hunger was indescribable. People had not eaten for weeks, existing on moldy soup and potato skins. The Nazis cared about public opinion. The English victors were coming to the camp, and the Nazis wanted their Jewish and Russian prisoners to speak “positively” of their Bergen-Belsen “experience.” One Jewish prisoner had hardly eaten solid food for almost five years. It got to the point that all he thought about was food. Had he been asked what he would rather have, food or freedom, his answer would have been food – a good meal. The Nazis lined up a group of prisoners, in which he was included. They would each be given a roll – until they ran out. This Jewish fellow saw that there were seven rolls remaining, and six men in front of him in line. He could hardly wait for that last remaining roll. Finally, he received the last roll. How excited he was. With shaking hands, he took hold of the roll. It was small, but it was bread! As he was about to take a bite, he noticed that they had dropped a large sack of rolls behind the counter. He figured, why not? There are so many rolls. What difference would it make if he took one more? So, he went back into line. “Who has not received a roll?” the Nazi called out. “Me,” the Jewish prisoner replied as he received his second roll.

At that moment, he felt a strong hand on his throat, “Jew! I saw what you just did. You might be able to fool the Nazis, but not me.” A Russian prisoner stood there with two “friends.” They pulled him into a cubby, and, after relieving him of his two precious rolls, began to pound him mercilessly. When they were certain that they had killed him, they left with the rolls.

The Jew’s “last” waking moments were filled with sadness: “Hashem, I survived five years of terror and death just to die at the hands of Russians over two small rolls? Is this fair? You could have taken me together with my family during these past five years. Why did You wait until now?” Then everything went black, and the prisoner became unconscious.

A while later, he woke up and the sun was shining. For five years, he had not experienced seeing the sun upon waking in the morning, since they had woken them at 4:00 a.m. when it was still dark, so that they could have another hour of pre-dawn labor. Heaven help he who did not immediately jump out of “bed.” Today, the sun was shining. It was unreal. He was alive. The last that he remembered, he was about to meet the *Malach HaMaves*, Angel of Death. He slowly rose from the floor. Without much strength, he began to slowly walk around, wondering why it was so quiet. The Nazis were gone. They had run away during the night, pending the emergence of the English victors. The Russians – where were they? He kept on walking and, wherever he went, he confronted bodies. Everyone was dead, but he. Apparently, the bread had been poisoned. That is why they were feeding them. Hashem had decreed that

he live. The Russians who beat him within an inch of his life were Hashem’s agents. Unknowingly, they had saved him from certain death. We never know. It is all a part of Hashem’s Divine Plan.

ייעתר לו ד'

Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated by him. (25:21)

Hashem “allowed” Himself: Was it so difficult to listen to Yitzchak *Avinu’s* pleas? We pray and pray, and, unbeknownst to us, what we ask for might not be good for us – or, it might adversely affect someone else, someone very dear to us. *Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl*, explains that this is what happened concerning Yitzchak *Avinu’s* prayer. Avraham *Avinu* lived to be 175 years old – five years short of Yitzchak’s lifespan. Why did Avraham live five years fewer than Yitzchak? *Rashi* explains that Hashem spared him the pain of watching his grandson, Eisav, go off the *derech*, renege the faith which had been taught to him in his home. On the day that Eisav became fifteen, Avraham became 175. That day Eisav committed a number of serious sins, cardinal sins, for which he deserved the death punishment. Hashem took Avraham from this world prematurely in order to protect him from such terrible news.

Now, imagine had Eisav been born five years later; had Hashem delayed in listening to Yitzchak, Avraham would have been able to live out his life. He would still be walking around healthy and vibrant. He died prematurely as a result of Yitzchak’s emotional entreaty. Hashem could not tell Yitzchak why He was delaying Eisav’s birth, so He “allowed” Himself; He gave in. Eisav was born; the parents were overjoyed, and, fifteen years later, Yitzchak sat *shivah* prematurely! We pray and pray, and, at times, we know neither for what we are praying, nor the far-reaching effect of our prayers.

ייעקב איש תם ישב אהלים

But Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents. (25:27)

Rashi explains that a *tam* is wholesome, a person who is not adept at deceiving. Thus, Yaakov *Avinu* is called a *tam*, because he did not deceive. Deception went against his grain. We find, however, in the following *parshah*, when Yaakov meets Rachel *Imeinu, Va’yaged Yaakov l’Rachel ki achi avihah hu*, “And Yaakov told Rachel that he was her father’s brother” (*Bereishis* 29:12). *Rashi* clarifies this statement, quoting the *Midrash*, “If he (Eisav) comes for deceit, I, too, am his brother in deceit; but, if he is a decent person, I am also the son of Rivkah, his decent sister.” In other words, Yaakov could be deceitful when necessary. If he was an *ish tam*, who was unable to deceive, how would he claim to be Lavan’s brother in deceit?

In his *Divrei Yechezkel*, the *Shinaiav Rav, zl*, distinguishes between a *tam* and an *ish tam*. A person who is not adept at deceiving is a *tam*. Yaakov, however, is described as an *ish tam*. This is a more inclusive designation, whereby he is, above all, an *ish*, a man, a person who is in complete control of his *middah*, attribute of *tam*. When it was necessary and appropriate to behave in a wholesome manner, Yaakov exemplified *tam*, wholesomeness at its epitome. Deception was foreign to him. When Yaakov was challenged by a *rasha*, evil person, however, such as Eisav and Lavan, Yaakov was compelled to extract and retrieve what they had stolen from the realm of *kedushah*, holiness. In order to achieve this goal, he had to outdo them and actually beat them at their own game. Under such circumstances, he was forced to bend the truth, and he became adept at deception.

It all depends upon with whom one must deal. When

one is compelled to deal with *reshaim*, wicked people, we must realize that *sheker* employed in the pursuit of *emes*, truth, is, in fact, *emes*. This does not by any stretch of imagination suggest that the end justifies the means. It does, however, posit that the “means” which on the surface appear deceitful, when used against a *rasha* – are not. They are *emes*. Yes, true and false are defined by the circumstances. To deceive an evil person who is bent on deceiving us is not deception. It is very much like saying: I never speed. If there is an emergency – does one speed? He certainly does. Otherwise, he is a fool. It is only considered “speeding” if one travels too fast for an inappropriate reason. If it is a matter of life or death, it is not defined as speeding. In fact, he who observes the speed limit might be called a murderer, if, as a result of his adherence to the law, someone who is in need of medical help succumbs. Did he drive fast? Yes. Did he speed with the negative connotation? No.

With this idea in mind, we have a pathway towards understanding one of the Torah’s greatest ambiguities: Yaakov *Avinu* surreptitiously received the *brachos*, blessings, from Yitzchak, in what Eisav considered to be a swindle. First, some background. Yitzchak *Avinu’s* original intention was to bestow the *brachos* upon Eisav. At Rivkah *Imeinu’s* instruction, Yaakov entered clothed in Eisav’s finery. When Yitzchak asked, “Who are you?” Yaakov responded, “I am Eisav – your firstborn.” In this way, Yaakov successfully wrested the *brachos* from Eisav. Clearly, even to the uninitiated, Hashem wanted Yaakov – not Eisav – to receive the blessings. The question which gnaws at the reader is why it had to take place in what appears to be a deceptive manner. Why should we eternally be blamed by Eisav’s descendants as deceivers who are descendants of one who committed an act of treachery against an unsuspecting brother? Could Hashem not have arranged for the blessings to be transferred to Yaakov in a more dignified manner? Furthermore, Yaakov is the Patriarch most associated with the *middah*, attribute, of *emes*, truth. As the *ish tam*, wholesome man, prevarication was to him an anathema. *Chosamo shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu emes*, “The seal of Hashem is truth.” Obviously, if Hashem orchestrated events in a deceptive manner, it was for a good reason.

The *Sfas Emes* (cited by *Horav Pinchas Friedman, Shlita*) writes the following: “Regarding the matter that Yaakov took the blessings by means of deception with the approval of the Almighty, we derive herein that, in order to achieve the truth, we are indeed permitted to do so by means of deception, since the desire to arrive at the truth is in no way considered *sheker*, falsehood. On the contrary, this constitutes the *tikkun*, spiritual repair, of *sheker* – using deceptive methods in order to arrive at the truth. By using *sheker* as a means of unearthing the truth, *sheker* is rectified.”

We must add that it is not everyone who is able to decide when *sheker* may be employed in order to rectify or abolish *sheker*. Yaakov *Avinu* was the epitome of *emes*. Only someone of his truthful standing could render the decision to use *sheker* to battle Eisav’s *sheker*, in order to retrieve the *brachos* that were rightfully Yaakov’s.

Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl, would constantly exhort his *chassidim* to speak only the truth. Truth was the pillar of his *Chassidus*. He insisted that, if all Jews had been free of falsehood, *Moshiach* would have long ago arrived. The primary obstacle to our final Redemption is the lack of truthfulness.

Rav Pinchas had a number of *talmidim*, disciples, who exemplified the *middah* of *emes*, but none so like *Horav Raphael, zl, m’Bershid*. He was careful to limit his speech, and,

when he did speak, it was with carefully measured, well-thought-out words. The following vignette is an indication of his total commitment to veracity in speech. He entered a room during a rainstorm. Someone asked him if it was raining. *Rav Rapahel* replied, “When I was outside, it was raining then.” He had just that moment crossed the threshold, but he was not outside. He could not, in all honesty, attest to the current pouring rain. Truth had to be pure and adulterated; otherwise, it was not the truth. Ninety-nine percent true is one hundred percent false!

The following story is frightening in the sense that it demonstrates to the reader to what lengths someone can go to adhere to the truth – regardless of the circumstances. A certain member of the Jewish community was caught by the authorities while dealing with illegal merchandise. [We must add that the term “illegal” was then an arbitrary term which was decided by any official who needed an excuse to bleed the Jewish community.] The charges were serious, and the chances of his escaping serious punishment were, at best, slim. The judge had told the defendant’s lawyers that the evidence was so damaging that no testimony in the world could change the outcome. The judge asserted, “Only if *Rav Raphael* were to testify on his behalf is there a possibility of a positive outcome.”

The judge trusted *Rav Raphael* due to his sterling character. The lawyers, willing to grasp at any straw, told their client that if the *Rav* could be “convinced” to testify on his behalf, he had hope. The defendant proceeded to *Rav Raphael’s* home and poured out his heart, describing what would happen to him personally and the repercussions that would affect his wife and young children. It was clearly a case of *hatzolas nefashos*, saving a life!

Rav Raphael was confronted with a life-altering decision. For his entire life, he had gone to great lengths to maintain veracity in every area of life. How could he now, in his advanced age, turn his back on the *middah* of *emes*. On the other hand, how could he allow another Jew to fall prey to the punishment that was in store for him? The gentile wanted nothing more than to set an example of the thieving Jew. How could he look into the crying eyes of the man’s wife and children, knowing that he could have saved their husband and father and had not done so? *Rav Raphael’s* pure heart was torn between his love for a fellow Jew and his commitment to integrity. How much could his heart handle?

The night before the trial, *Rav Raphael* locked himself in his room and, throughout the night, he prayed with extra devotion and ceaseless bitter weeping. He cried out to Hashem, “*Ribono Shel Olam!* Take my *neshamah* away! It is better that I should die than utter a lie!”

Hashem listened and accepted *Rav Raphael’s* request [obviously it was his time, and this holy man merited to die *Al Kiddush HaShem*, sanctifying the *middah* of *emes*]. That very night, the holy *Rav Raphael’s neshamah* came home to a better world, a world in which truth reigned supreme. He had given his life to maintain the *middah* of *emes*. [What is most frightening to me is how many people will not understand this story – or *Rav Raphael*.]

יהיה כי זקן יבחק ותכהין עיניו מראות

And when Yitzchak grew old, his eyesight failed and he could not see. (27:1)

One is hard pressed to believe that our *Avos*, Patriarchs, succumbed to the natural frailties of ill health and