

**Weekly Parsha TOLDOT**  
**Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

In the competition between the brothers Esau and Jacob, Esau originally downplays any long-range view of the situation. He demands immediate gratification and is therefore more than willing to relinquish his birthright – which is only a long-range asset – in favor of an immediate bowl of hot lentils. As the Torah dutifully records for us in this week's reading, Esau will come to regret this youthful decision later in life. But, like almost all of us, he will put the blame for the mistake on others – on the shrewdness of Jacob taking advantage of him – rather than on his own error and weakness.

By blaming Jacob for what was his own short sidedness, Esau compounds the original error of judgment on his part. After having tasted all the immoral pleasures of life, and after a career of violence, Esau remains unfulfilled, unhappy and frustrated. He now longs for the blessing and approval of his old father, a person who he has long treated as being completely irrelevant to him. His shout of anguish, when he realizes that the spiritual blessings of his father have already been bestowed on his brother Jacob and that what is left for him are the fleeting blessings of temporal existence and power, reverberates throughout human history. He realizes that the blessings given to Jacob are those of eternity and lasting memory while all physical blessings in this world are merely temporary and always subject to revision. The Torah always deals with eternal standards and never bows to current themes and ideas no matter how attractive they may seem at the time.

Every generation feels that it discovers new ways to propel humanity and civilization forward. Somehow, we always feel ourselves to be wiser than our elders, smarter than our ancestors. But, if one makes an honest review of human history, it becomes clear that the true principles of civilization – morality, kindness, education and individual freedom – remain constant throughout the story of humankind. Deviations from these principles, in the hope of achieving a utopian society, have always resulted in tragedy and destruction.

The cry of Esau reverberates through the halls of world history. And, what makes it most pathetic is that what Esau is searching for can easily be found in what he himself has previously discarded and denigrated. But, it is always the egotistical hubris of humankind that prevents it from seriously and logically examining its situation and thoughts. One has to admit to past errors and to restore oneself to the path of goodness and righteousness, which alone can lead to a lasting feeling of happiness and accomplishment in this world.

Esau would like to be Jacob, but without having to behave with the restraint and outlook on life that is the most central point of reference in the life and behavior of Jacob. It is as

Justice Brandeis once put it: "I would like to have the serenity and peace of the Sabbath but without its restraints." It is dealing with that fallacy of thought that makes Jacob Jacob and Esau Esau.

Shabbat shalom  
Rabbi Berel Wein

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**TOLDOT - A Father's Love**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

In this week's sedra, we see Isaac as the parent of two very different sons. The boys grew up. Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob."

Gen. 25:27-28

We have no difficulty understanding why Rebecca loved Jacob. She had received an oracle from God in which she was told:

"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

Gen. 25:23

Jacob was the younger. Rebecca seems to have inferred, correctly as it turned out, that it would be he who would continue the covenant, who would stay true to Abraham's heritage, and who would teach it to his children, carrying the story forward into the future.

The real question is, why did Isaac love Esau? Could he not see that he was a man of the outdoors, a hunter, not a contemplative or a man of God? Is it conceivable that he loved Esau merely because he had a taste for wild game? Did his appetite rule his mind and heart? Did Isaac not know how Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup, and how he subsequently "despised" the birthright itself (Gen. 25:29-34). Was this someone with whom to entrust the spiritual patrimony of Abraham?

Isaac surely knew that his elder son was a man of mercurial temperament who lived in the emotions of the moment. Even if this did not trouble him, the next episode involving Esau clearly did:

"When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca."

Gen. 26:34-35

Esau had made himself at home among the Hittites. He had married two of their women. This was not a man to carry forward the Abrahamic covenant which involved a measure of distance from the Hittites and Canaanites and all they represented in terms of religion, culture, and morality.

Yet Isaac clearly did love Esau. Not only does the verse with which we began say so. It remained so. Genesis 27, with its morally challenging story of how Jacob dressed up

as Esau and took the blessing that had been meant for him, is remarkable for the picture it paints of the genuine, deep affection between Isaac and Esau. We sense this at the beginning when Isaac asks Esau: "Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die." (Gen. 27:7) This is not Isaac's physical appetite speaking. It is his wish to be filled with the smell and taste he associates with his elder son, so that he can bless him in a mood of focused love.

It is the end of the story, though, that really conveys the depth of feeling between them. Esau enters with the food he has prepared. Slowly Isaac, and then Esau, realise the nature of the deception that has been practiced against them. Isaac "trembled violently." Esau "burst out with a loud and bitter cry." (Gen. 27:33-34)

It is difficult to convey the power of these descriptions: much is lost in translation. The Torah generally says little about people's emotions. During the whole of the trial of the Binding of Isaac we are given not the slightest indication of what Abraham or Isaac felt in one of the most suspenseful episodes in Genesis. The text is, as Erich Auerbach said, "fraught with background," meaning, more is left unsaid than said.[1] The depth of feeling the Torah describes in speaking of Isaac and Esau at that moment is thus rare and almost overwhelming. Father and son share their sense of betrayal, Esau passionately seeking some blessing from his father, and Isaac rousing himself to do so. The bond of love between them is intense. So the question returns with undiminished force: why did Isaac love Esau, despite everything; his wildness, his mutability, and his outmarriages?

The Sages gave an explanation. They interpreted the phrase "skilful hunter" to mean that Esau trapped and deceived Isaac. He pretended to be more religious than he was.[2]

There is, though, quite a different explanation, closer to the plain sense of the text, and very moving. Isaac loved Esau because Esau was his son, and that is what parents do. They love their children unconditionally. That does not mean that Isaac could not see the faults in Esau's character. It does not imply that he thought Esau the right person to continue the covenant. Nor does it mean he was not pained when Esau married Hittite women. The text explicitly says he was. But it does mean that Isaac knew that a father must love his son because he is his son. That is not incompatible with being critical of what he does. But a parent does not disown their child, even when the child disappoints their expectations. Isaac was teaching us a fundamental lesson in parenthood.

Why Isaac? Because he knew that Abraham had sent his son Ishmael away. He may have known how much that pained Abraham and injured Ishmael. There is a remarkable series of midrashim that suggest that Abraham visited Ishmael even after he sent him away, and others that say it was Isaac who effected the reconciliation.[3] He was determined not to inflict the same fate on Esau.

Likewise, he knew to the very depths of his being the psychological cost on both his father and himself of the trial of the Binding. At the beginning of the chapter of Jacob, Esau and the blessing the Torah tells us that Isaac was blind. There is a Midrash that suggests that it was tears shed by the angels as they watched Abraham bind his son and lift the knife that fell into Isaac's eyes, causing him to go blind in his old age.[4] The trial was surely necessary, otherwise God would not have commanded it. But it left wounds, psychological scars, and it left Isaac determined not to have to sacrifice Esau, his own child. In some way, then, Isaac's unconditional love of Esau was a tikkun for the rupture in the father-son relationship brought about by the Binding.

Thus, though Esau's path was not that of the covenant, Isaac's gift of paternal love helped prepare the way for the next generation, in which all of Jacob's children remained within the fold.

There is a fascinating argument between two mishnaic Sages that has a bearing on this. There is a verse in Deuteronomy (14:1) that says about the Jewish people, "You are children of the Lord your God." Rabbi Judah held that this applied only when Jews behaved in a way worthy of the children of God. Rabbi Meir said that it was unconditional: whether Jews behave like God's children or they do not, they are still called the children of God. (Kiddushin 36a)

Rabbi Meir, who believed in unconditional love, acted in accordance with his view. His own teacher, Elisha ben Abuya, eventually lost his faith and became a heretic, yet Rabbi Meir continued to study with him and respect him, maintaining that at the very last moment of his life he had repented and returned to God.[5]

To take seriously the idea, central to Judaism, of Avinu Malkeinu, that our King is first and foremost our parent, is to invest our relationship with God with the most profound emotions. God wrestles with us, as does a parent with a child. We wrestle with him as a child does with their parents. The relationship is sometimes tense, conflictual, even painful, yet what gives it its depth is the knowledge that it is unbreakable. Whatever happens, a parent is still a parent, and a child is still a child. The bond may be deeply damaged but it is never broken beyond repair.

Perhaps that is what Isaac was signalling to all generations by his continuing love for Esau, so unlike him, so different in character and destiny, yet never rejected by him – just as the Midrash says that Abraham never rejected Ishmael and found ways of communicating his love. Unconditional love is not uncritical, but it is unbreakable. That is how we should love our children – for it is how God loves us.

[1] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953).

[2] He would ask him questions such as, "Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?" knowing that in fact these were

exempt from tithing. Isaac thought that meant that he was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments (Rashi to Gen. 25:27; Tanchuma, Toldot, 8).

[3] See Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, pp. 107-124.

[4] Genesis Rabbah 65:10.

[5] Yerushalmi Haggigah 2:1.

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### ***Insights Parshas Toldos - Kislev 5783***

#### ***Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University***

*Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig*

*This week's Insights is sponsored in memory of Yitzchak Shlomo ben Manis Levi. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"*

#### **Dead Tired**

And Yaakov boiled a stew and Eisav came in from the field and he was exhausted (25:29).

This week's parsha relates the events that led to Eisav selling the birthright of the eldest son to his younger brother Yaakov. As Rashi explains (25:30), Hashem cut short the life of Avraham Avinu in order that he should not see his grandson Eisav develop into a wicked person and follow an evil path. On the day that he died, Yaakov was preparing a meal for his father Yitzchak (who was mourning the loss of his father), as is the custom today to prepare a seudas havrahah (the first meal eaten by mourners after the funeral).

Rashi (25:29), quoting the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 63:12), explains that when the Torah describes Eisav as exhausted it means that he was exhausted from murdering people. Chazal's interpretation of the possuk needs to be explained; what does exhaustion have to do with murdering people? Even though Rashi quotes a possuk that seems to show some correlation, it still requires clarification.

Even more perplexing: Why do we have to say that Eisav was exhausted from killing people? Perhaps he was just really tired from a hard day of hunting or working in the field. What forced our sages to reject the simple meaning of the verse and define his exhaustion as a result of murder?

Chazal are bothered by the storyline. When a person is totally exhausted, what does he really want? He wants to collapse into a bed and go to sleep. Yet that isn't what happened in this parsha: The Torah relates that Eisav was exhausted and then Eisav tells Yaakov that he wants to eat but that he is so wiped out he can't even feed himself. The fact that the Torah first explains that Eisav came home fatigued indicates that he was tired from something other than pure physical exhaustion.

If a person spends a day working really hard and earns a substantial sum of money, unless he is totally bored at work, no matter how hard he worked he isn't tired – he comes home energized. Similarly, a person who is in an exciting new relationship isn't tired even if he stays out late and doesn't sleep much, because he is emotionally charged.

By contrast, when a person is emotionally drained or feeling unfulfilled, then he wants to eat because he is trying to fill an emotional void. There are several interrelated reasons why eating is a temporarily effective way of dealing with this emotional collapse. Experiencing one's physicality through eating provides some pleasure, which in turn gives some measure of comfort and is simultaneously distracting. In this way a person can superficially deal with the emptiness they are experiencing. However, when a person is truly physically tired they just want to sleep – eating is a secondary concern.

Rashi quotes a possuk from Navi that shows that this feeling of exhaustion from an internal emptiness can come from murder. A human being is the highest level of existence in the world; thus killing a person is essentially the most destructive act one can perform. Behaving in this way leaves a gaping hole in one's psyche. Since Avraham Avinu's life was shortened so that he wouldn't see Eisav's evil ways and the Torah describes Eisav as coming home emotionally drained, Chazal interpret his evil acts to be that of murder.

#### **For the Love of God**

And to him Hashem appeared and said, "Do not go down to Egypt, dwell in the land that I shall tell you" (26:2).

In this week's parsha we find that Hashem once again brings a famine to Eretz Yisroel, just as He did in the time of Avraham. Hashem tells Yitzchak not to descend to Egypt like his father Avraham had done during the famine of his time. Rather, Hashem tells Yitzchak that he may only travel to the place Hashem tells him to go.

Rashi (ad loc) explains the reasoning behind Yitzchak's travel restriction: "Yitzchak intended to descend to Egypt as his father had done during the famine of his time. Therefore, Hashem said to him that he may not go down there because he was a blemish-free offering and that the lands outside of Eretz Yisroel were not worthy of him."

In other words, since Yitzchak had ascended the altar as the purported offering by his father Avraham during the test of the akeida ("binding"), his physical body had achieved a very high level of holiness, one that is reserved for sacrifices on the altar of the Beis Hamikdosh. As the commentators (Mizrachi ad loc and others) explain, an olah offering cannot be taken out of the grounds of the Beis Hamikdosh and in the time of Yitzchak Avinu all of Eretz Yisroel had the status of the grounds of the Beis Hamikdosh. Therefore, Yitzchak was not to leave Eretz Yisroel.

But this interpretation of Rashi seems a little incomplete. If Rashi had solely meant to convey that there was a technical reason that he wasn't permitted to travel outside of Eretz Yisroel, he should have just stated that point. Why does Rashi add on at the end of his statement that the lands outside of Eretz Yisroel aren't worthy of Yitzchak? What's bothering Rashi in the verse that compels him to provide another aspect as to what Hashem was telling Yitzchak?

Rashi is bothered by the odd construct of the verse. Usually, when Hashem comes to speak prophetically to one of the forefathers the Torah will write, “And Hashem appeared to him,” yet here the Torah writes it differently, “To him Hashem appeared.” What’s the difference?

The difference is who is the true subject of the interaction. In general, Hashem is the focal point of every exchange and the message that He gives over is the point of verse. But here Hashem is clearly coming for the sake of Yitzchak – “To him Hashem appeared.” Yitzchak is given the primacy as the focal point of why Hashem is appearing to him.

Rashi is teaching us how to read the verses so carefully. If it was merely a technical reason that Yitzchak couldn’t leave Eretz Yisroel (because he had the holy status of an olah sacrifice), Hashem would have just told him that he was therefore forbidden to leave the land of Israel just like an olah offering cannot be taken out of Israel.

But Hashem was making the exchange with Yitzchak all about Yitzchak himself. Therefore Rashi is compelled to explain that Hashem was telling Yitzchak that it isn’t only that Yitzchak is forbidden to leave because of his status, but that more importantly leaving Eretz Yisroel isn’t good for him because the lands outside of Eretz Yisroel are not worthy for him.

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***Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair -***

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***Parshat Toldot***

***Leave the Lobbus to Grow***

*“And the lads grew up...” (25:27)*

To the best of my knowledge, the word ‘lobbus’ is a word that only British Jews recognize. I’m assuming it’s Yiddish but I’ve yet to meet an American Jew, or a Jew from anywhere else for that matter who knows what it means.

A lobbus is a naughty young boy, the sort who gets himself into scrapes and narrow escapes. He’s not bad but he’s ‘a bit of a lobbus.’

Why this word should be exclusively used by British Jews is a mystery to me. I can think of no other word in Yiddish (mind you that’s not saying a lot) that is local to only one region, especially since Jews from the States and the UK share English, the lingua franca of the world.

Yaakov was a ‘lobbus.’ Rashi says that until the age of Bar Mitzvah, he and Esav were similar to one another. Now, either this means that they were both angels, which I doubt, seeing as how Esav very shortly afterwards became an idol worshiper, rapist and murderer. (Ber. Rabbah 63:12). Therefore, it seems that young Yitzchak was not an absolute angel since he was ‘similar’ to his brother.

I think there is a lesson here for us parents. It’s easy to be panicked when our children don’t seem to be ‘toeing the line,’ especially when that line can be extremely narrow. With the inroads into our culture of the known new-age era’s ‘Weapons of Mass Distraction,’ our reaction is often to overreact and push our children in the direction we most fear.

The Brisker Rav was once asked how he had been successful in raising illustrious and holy children. He replied (in Yiddish), “Prayer with tears

Children, let us not forget, are people as well. One can only pray that they choose to dominate the Esav in them and follow their higher selves.

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***Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis***

***Dvar Torah Toldot: Are good deeds valid even when we don’t intend to perform them?***

***23 November 2022***

Are good deeds valid even when we don’t intend to perform them?

In Parshat Toldot (Bereishit 27:22) Yitzchak declares, “*Hakol kol Yaakov vehayadaim yedei Eisav.*” – “*The voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau.*”

Yitzchak was troubled because he was wondering who was standing in front of him, when his youngest son Yaakov was actually deceiving him.

But notice the way in which letters make a huge difference. ‘Hakol’ and ‘kol’ are the same word repeated one after the other, but with a different spelling. It’s a ‘maleh vechaseir’ (complete and incomplete) wherein sometimes a word includes a vav and sometimes it doesn’t. ‘Hakol’, the voice, is spelled kuf lamed (קל), without a vav and then the ‘kol’ coming afterwards is kuf vav lamed (קול), with a vav. What lesson emerges from this?

The Vilna Gaon teaches that if you read these terms literally it becomes ‘hakal kol’, which means ‘sound is weak’. How can we understand this?

The Rambam in laws relating to Pesach answers a fascinating question. What happens if you have somebody who doesn’t like matza, doesn’t want to eat the matzah, but those around this person insist that they have to eat it, and so they eat it, they digest it, and they have had no intention whatsoever of performing the mitzvah. Does it count or not?

The Rambam says yes, they have performed the mitzvah. However, elsewhere in laws relating to the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the following question is asked. If you happen to hear the sound of shofar, and you have no intention whatsoever for that to be your mitzvah, does it count?

During the coronavirus when we were all under lockdown, I blew the shofar at home for myself and my wife and then we went for a walk, and it was beautiful to hear the sound

of the shofar from so many homes in our area, because people couldn't go to shul.

Now what would have happened had somebody walked past a house, heard the shofar, and arrived home thinking, "Hey, I've performed the mitzvah of shofar!" although they didn't have the intention at the time. The Rambam answers that such a person is not yotsei – he's not fulfilled his obligations of shofar.

So what's the difference therefore between matza and shofar?

The Maggid Mishnah answers that when it comes to a mitzvah performed physically, it is a mitzvah but when it comes to sound, it is not. The reason is that in the case of the mitzvah performed physically – physically that person digested the matzah! You can't argue against that. But when it comes to sound it's only valid if you concentrate, if you appreciate the meaning of it and if it therefore uplifts you.

The Vilna Gaon's interpretation now makes so much sense and imparts to us a very relevant lesson for our times. It's not good enough to just perform mitzvot mechanically in an active and physical way. We also need to listen. And when we hear about our faith and strive to internalise its values, it needs concentration, it needs appreciation. Gone are the days where belief was just passed down automatically from one generation to the next. Unless we are convinced about what it is we're believing in, there is a danger it could be dropped.

Let us therefore strengthen the resonance of our tradition to enrich our lives and to guarantee the continuity of our faith. *Shabbat shalom.*

*Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.*

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***Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Toldos  
A Person's Word Is His Word!***

In this week's parsha, Hashem promises Yitzchak, "I will increase your offspring like the stars of the heavens and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your offspring. Because Avraham obeyed My voice and observed My safeguards, My commandments, My decrees, and My Torahs." (Bereshis 26:4-5). Rishonim marshal this last pasuk as a proof that Avraham kept the entire Torah even before it was given, and in fact claim that this was the practice of the other forefathers as well. The Ramban raises apparent counter-examples to this principle that the Avos kept the entire Torah prior to its being given. One of the points he mentions is that Yaakov Avinu simultaneously married two sisters, which is one of the Torah's arayos (forbidden marital relationships).

In a famous answer, the Ramban says that the Avos only fully kept the future laws of the Torah in Eretz Yisrael, "for the Torah is the rule of the G-d of the Land" and Yaakov's simultaneous marriage to two sisters ended before Yaakov

returned from Charan to Eretz Yisrael. This is how everyone reads this famous Ramban: He is trying to answer the question 'How can it be that the Avos kept the entire Torah before it was given, and yet Yaakov married two sisters?' The Ramban answers: His marriage to them was only in chutz l'Aretz!

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky takes issue with this understanding and argues that this is not the correct interpretation of this Ramban. Rav Yaakov says the question 'How could Yaakov marry two sisters?' never begins! The reason Yaakov married two sisters is because he made a commitment! He promised Rochel "I am going to marry you." Once he gave his word to Rochel, he had to marry her. A person is not allowed to go back on his word. The fact that he and the other Avos kept the laws of the Torah that would be given in the future was only a 'chumrah' (an act of optional piety on their part). However, if a personal chumrah contradicts my word to someone else, my word must take precedence!

"There is no justification for allowing Rochel to suffer because of my chumrahs!" This must be seen as a general rule with broad applications: When a person's personal stringencies impinge upon someone else, he needs to forego his stringency. Once Yaakov gave his word to Rochel, it was a 'no brainer' that he would need to marry her. Lavan pulled a fast one on him and he wound up marrying Leah, but that would in no way stop him from keeping his word to Rochel.

So, according to Rav Yaakov's explanation, what does the Ramban mean when he says that the Avos did not keep the entire Torah in chutz l'Aretz? Rav Yaakov explains that the Ramban is coming to answer a different question with that statement. We know that there is a rule: The Holy One Blessed Be He will not bring a takalah ('misfortune') through the actions of the righteous. For instance, if a Tzadik went into a restaurant and he had a steak and then it came out that this restaurant was selling neveilah (non-kosher meat) the piece of meat that the Tzadik ate could in no way be treife (non-kosher). Heaven would have seen to it that some other customer was given the non-kosher meat. It could not have entered the mouth of the Tzadik, because of the hard and fast rule that the Almighty would not allow a Tzadik to stumble.

Therefore, the Ramban is asking, according to Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, how did the Almighty let this happen to Yaakov? How did he let Lavan pull this fast one on Yaakov, if the Almighty will never allow a Tzadik to spiritually stumble? How could it be that Yaakov was put in a situation where he 'had to sin' by keeping his word to marry Rochel (who was now his sister-in-law). The Ramban answers by saying that it was in fact not an aveira (sin) at all, because they were living in chutz l'Aretz and only in Eretz Yisrael would it be considered an aveira for the Avos to marry two sisters.

The takeaway lesson from this interpretation of the Ramban's question and answer is that this is Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky l'shitaso (consistent with his life's major ethical behavior). Rav Yaakov's practice in life was that a person's word is sacred. If someone has given his word—that's it! There are very few things that trump a person's word, and certainly personal chumras do not trump a person's word.

I will cite two incidents from Rav Yaakov (the name of whose sefer is *Emes L'Yaakov*) to demonstrate how he personified and exemplified this attribute of truth and personal integrity throughout his life.

Rav Yaakov lived into his nineties. Towards the end of his life, he started putting on Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin (which have the parshiyos placed in a different order within the Tefillin compartments) in addition to the standard Rashi Tefillin. Rav Yaakov was a quintessential Litvak (Lithuanian Jew). He was born in Lita, he was raised in Lita, and he studied in the Slabodka Yeshiva. He was a full-bred Litvak and Misnagid. Misnagdim and Litvaks do not put on Rabbeinu Tam Tefillin (a practice more prevalent among Chassidic Jewry). So why at the end of his days was he putting on Rabbeinu Tam Tefillin?

Many years earlier—fifty or sixty years earlier—someone asked him, “Why don't you wear Rabbeinu Tam Tefillin?” He answered, “I don't wear Rabbeinu Tam Tefillin because I am a Litvak. I am a Misnagid. We don't wear Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin.” The fellow said to him, “But, the Chofetz Chaim, toward the end of his life, also started wearing Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin (even though he too was a Litvak and Misnagid). Rav Yaakov said something to the effect of: “When I get to be the Chofetz Chaim's age, I too will wear Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin.”

When someone is 25 or 30 years old, he can easily say “Yes, when I'm 85 I will put on Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin.” In those days, people's life expectancies were certainly not into their eighties or nineties. But because a young Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky said, “When I get to be the Chofetz Chaim's age, I will put on Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin,” he kept his word. That is why he wore Rabbeinu Tam's Tefillin. A person's word is his word.

The second incident is similar. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky did not eat 'Gebrochts' on Pesach. Now, this too is atypical of Litvaks and Misnagdim, who are not particular about eating matzah products that have come into contact with liquid on Pesach. It is a Chassidishe minhag. Litvaks generally eat kneidlach, matza-brei, matzah with butter and jelly, and all such good things.

Rav Yaakov did not eat 'Gebrochts'. He let his family eat Gebrochts, but he did not eat it on Pesach. How did that happen? Rav Yaakov learned in Slabodka. In those days, there was no such thing as a Yeshiva dining room. So how did Yeshiva bochrim eat? There was an institution known as 'teg.' Every day or every two days, various Yeshiva

bochrim would be assigned to a different host in the community, and they would be guests by that household.

In those days, it was not like today when everyone goes home for Pesach. Those were the good old days where men were men, and if you were in Yeshiva, you were in Yeshiva for years at a time without a break. Who had the money to travel back and forth from Yeshiva to home for Yomim Tovim (the holidays) and Bein HaZmanim (Yeshiva breaks)? So the Yeshiva assigned different bochrim to eat in different houses during Pesach as well.

Rav Yaakov was assigned to eat in a certain person's house. Rav Yaakov, for whatever reason, was not satisfied with the level of kashrus in that house. But what was he going to tell them? It would be insulting to say “I don't trust your Kashrus.” What did he say? He said, “I would love to come but I don't eat Gebrochts!” After all, this was Slabodka, where virtually everyone ate Gebrochts. The hosts bought his excuse. They were not insulted and he did not need to eat by them over Pesach.

But once Rav Yaakov said, “I don't eat 'Gebrochts' on Pesach” he did not eat Gebrochts on Pesach for the rest of his life. He kept his word. When you say something, you need to keep it.

That is Rav Yaakov's perspective in this vort on the Parsha. It is easy to 'talk the talk' but Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky also 'walked the walk.' He was a yafeh doresh (someone who expounded nicely) v'yafeh m'kayem (and who also put his nice words into practice).

### ***And Yitzchak Gave the Wells the Same Names as His Father Had Given Them***

The pasuk says, “All the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Plishtim stopped up, and filled them with earth.” (Bereshis 26:15). The Chumash continues: “And Yitzchak dug anew the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Avraham his father and the Plishtim had stopped them up after Avraham's death; and he called them by the same names that his father had called them.” (Bereshis 26:18)

Avraham dug wells and the Plishtim stopped them up. Yitzchak came along and re-dug those same wells. Not only did he re-dig the same wells, he renamed them with the very same names that Avraham had originally called them.

One might ask—although this is a somewhat irreverent way to state it—Who cares? Lech-Lecha, Vayera, and Chayei Sarah relate the life story of Avraham. Vayetzei, Vayishlach, Vayeshev and then Miketz, Vayigash, and Vayechi relate the life stories of Yaakov and Yosef. Yitzchak only gets a single parsha, Parshas Toldos. Is this event so significant? Do we really need the story of the wells in the one short parsha devoted to Yitzchak? Obviously, this must be significant if the Torah, which includes precious few words about Yitzchak, goes through the effort of including all these details. What is the deeper message here?

The sefer HaKesav v'HaKabalah explains that Avraham's digging of the wells was a tremendous public service. Society back then was not like it is today. Someone could not go to the faucet in his home, turn on the tap and get water. Having a well was a big deal. When people travelled, there were no rest stops where they could stop to get a Coke or lemonade. There was no indoor plumbing. There were none of these things.

What did Avraham do? He called each of the wells he dug by a specific name. The HaKesav v'HaKabalah writes that the names Avraham gave his wells all had to do with the Name of Hashem. He called Yerushalayim "Hashem Yir-eh" (G-d sees) and he called another city "Beis El" (the House of G-d). Avraham Avinu wanted to put the Name of Hashem into the mouths of people. He was a revolutionary, an iconoclast. His introduction of monotheism into a world of polytheism was a spiritual revolution. The Rambam writes that he was successful in bringing tens of thousands of people under the Wings of Divine Presence. He weaned the masses from idolatry and put the Name of G-d into their vocabulary. He did that through feeding people and being m'karev people. But he also did it by digging wells and giving each of them names that had to do with Hashem.

When a person would ask another traveler, "Where did you get your water?" he would answer, "Oh, I got it at the Well of Hashem, the Be'er Elokim, the Be'er Shakai. That had a tremendous impact on people because they had to think: G-d's Well! People associated water and public service with the Ribono shel Olam.

When the Plishtim stuffed up the wells, it was not just an act of vandalism. They had to have a motivation for doing this—as obviously they needed the water as well. They stuffed up the wells because they saw what effect those wells had on society. People were now abandoning the pagan gods and believing in the Ribono shel Olam. They stuffed up Avraham's wells to eradicate the Name of Hashem from the lips of the masses. Their goal was to reduce the mention of the Ribono shel Olam in the mouths of people.

The HaKesav v'HaKabalah writes that Yitzchak wanted to re-implement the original plan of his father. He re-dug those same wells AND—what is more important—he called them the same names that his father called them, to reintroduce the concept of "the Be'er of Hashem," "the Be'er Shakai," the "Be'er Tzivakos," or whatever he called them. These were not just water holes. This was a religious war, a cultural battle to wean people from avodah zarah.

Therefore, this is far from an insignificant act in the life of Yitzchak. It is a very significant and characteristic act on the part of Yitzchak Avinu.

### ***Yitzchak Trembled Twice in His Life***

The following is part of a Teshuva Drasha that Rav Yaakov Breish (1895-1976) said in Switzerland on the Yom Kippur following World War II.

Eisav came into Yitzchak and said, "...I am your first-born son Eisav." The very next pasuk says "Yitzchak trembled a great trembling..." (Bereshis 27:32-33) The Medrash Tanchuma notes that Yitzchak trembled twice in his life. The first time was when his father placed him on the Mizbayach at the time of Akeidas Yitzchak. The second time was when Eisav entered after Yaakov had taken the brachos (blessings).

Which was the greater of the two frights? From the fact that the pasuk says by the second trembling "Gedolah ad me'od" (exceedingly great), we understand that Yitzchak trembling when Eisav entered after Yaakov took the brachos was the greater of the two frights.

Rav Yaakov Breish said an incredible thing in that Yom Kippur drasha, given the historical context:

Over the centuries, Klal Yisrael has lost millions of people. They have lost millions of people in two ways.

(1) They lost millions of people because people "were moser nefesh al gabay hamizbayach" – i.e., people were willing to give up their lives for Yiddishkeit. They did this throughout the millennia.

(2) Unfortunately, there was also another way how Jews have been lost and that is through assimilation. This is the expression we hear all too often today: We are witnessing our own holocaust. It is not a holocaust of people being killed; it is a holocaust of shrinkage through assimilation. The number of Jews in America has remained steady at approximately five million for the last fifty years. Simple demographics dictate that if there were five million Jews forty or fifty years ago, then there should be a significant geometric progression by now. It should not remain constant at five million.

Why are there still only five million? The answer is that people are intermarrying and we are losing people. It is not because our enemies are killing us, it is because they are embracing us. The major trembling that Yitzchak experienced here was that Eisav was bringing him delicacies. He was trying to win our favor. He was trying to be open to us.

Which is a greater fear—losing Jews who are martyred or losing Jews to the fact that Eisav is bringing delicacies and trying to win us over to his camp? That is the question the Medrash poses. And the Medrash answers that the latter fear is the greater of the two. Charada Gedola ad Me'od. This is a far greater tragedy about which one must tremble exceedingly.

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***The Spiritual Road to Material Riches (Toldot)  
Ben-Tzion Spitz***

*Riches do not consist in the possession of treasures, but in the use made of them. - Napoleon Bonaparte*

In one of the more dramatic scenes in the Torah, Jacob disguises himself to appear more like his hairy twin brother Esau, in order to receive the blessing that their blind father Isaac had originally intended for Esau. It seems that Jacob is successful and manages to convince an initially suspicious Isaac, that it is indeed the son who should receive this primal blessing standing in front of him, hairy arms and all.

Isaac proceeds to bestow a short but powerful blessing upon the disguised Jacob. The blessing is as follows:

“May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you; be master over your brothers and let your mother’s sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you.”

The Bat Ayin on Genesis 27:28 delves into the duality of blessings from the dew of heaven as well as from the fat of the earth. He connects heaven to spiritual endeavors and the earth to material efforts and provides guidance as to how we can connect to God. He suggests that we need to start with the spiritual endeavors, with our study of Torah, with prayer, with reaching out to God with our hearts and minds.

After we’ve established that connection to heaven, then we can better focus and succeed with our earthly efforts. Even then, the material activities need to remain connected to God and the Torah. By connecting our mundane, daily efforts to God’s will, we ensure that His blessings will be upon our work. By connecting heaven and earth, we ensure that our efforts will yield fruit, that we will enjoy from the fat of the earth and an abundance of blessings.

May we remember that our efforts cannot succeed without God’s blessing, and may we realize He’s given us lots of suggestions as to how to merit such blessings.

*Dedication - To the start of the World Cup.*

*Shabbat Shalom*

*Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.*

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**Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz**

**Parashat Toldot – 5783**

***Awareness and Making the Right Choice***

Parashat Toldot deals with the life stories of Isaac and Rebecca, the second pair of the Jewish nation’s patriarchs and matriarchs, and the complicated relationships of their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. The story begins with Isaac marrying Rebecca and Rebecca being unable to bear children. Isaac and Rebecca pray to G-d for redemption and children and G-d indeed hears their prayers. Rebecca gives birth to twins who we later get to know as Jacob and Esau.

The great biblical commentator, Rashi, following the sages of midrash, points out the unusual description of Rebecca at the beginning of the parasha. “And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebecca the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to himself for a wife.” What is the reason for mentioning her father, her brother, and her place of origin here? Anyone who read the previous parasha knows the story of Abraham’s servant who went to Padan Aram, met Rebecca, her father Bethuel, and her brother Laban and then took her to Canaan to marry Isaac. Why does the Torah repeat her biographical details here again?

Rashi’s answer is:

But this is to tell her praise, that she was the daughter of a wicked man and the sister of a wicked man and her place was [inhabited by] wicked people, but she did not learn from their deeds.

(Rashi on Breishit 25, 1)

Rebecca did not receive the kind of education suitable for one of the matriarchs of the Jewish nation. She was raised by idol worshippers, her brother was a well-known swindler, and the general culture that enveloped her was far from stellar. Despite this, Rebecca built and shaped her personality on her own. She did not grow up with positive traditions that she could emulate, but abandoned negative ones, choosing pure values that merited her becoming one of the matriarchs of the Jewish people.

But then, in the next verse, we read Rashi again and he seems to be expressing the opposite opinion!

As the story continues, Isaac and Rebecca pray to G-d. “And Isaac prayed to the Lord opposite his wife because she was barren, and the Lord accepted his prayer, and Rebecca his wife conceived.” Both Isaac and Rebecca prayed, and yet, it does not say “and the Lord accepted their prayer.” It was only Isaac’s prayer that was accepted. Why? Rashi explains:

But not hers, for the prayer of a righteous man, the son of a righteous man, does not compare to the prayer of a righteous man, the son of a wicked man. Therefore, [He accepted] his prayer and not hers.

(Rashi Ibid, 21)

Isaac was “a righteous man, the son of a righteous man.” He was raised in the home of Abraham and Sarah where he absorbed values of faith and holiness, righteousness and justice. Rebecca, on the other hand, was a righteous person, the daughter of a wicked man. Only a few moments ago, she was praised for building herself up from the diminished environment in which she was raised. And now, it seems from the words of Rashi, that there is another way of viewing this situation. It seems the person who received a quality education has an advantage over someone who got an inferior one and chose a positive path of their own volition. But we still can’t help but wonder why.

One of the leaders of the Musar movement in the yeshiva world in 19th century Lithuania was a man whose name is



not famous today but whose influence on his students was great. I am referring to Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the head of the yeshiva in the small town of Kelm in Lithuania where he nurtured the top spiritual leadership of Lithuanian Jewry before the Holocaust, in the spirit of the Musar movement that demanded a high level of self-awareness and deep introspection regarding one's motivations and actions. He was known as the Alter of Kelm, and one of his students conveyed his explanation of Rashi's commentary. Isaac indeed was raised in the home of Abraham and Sarah and got a good quality education, but the challenge he faced was greater than that faced by Rebecca. Isaac needed to pave his own path and not merely go on automatic pilot and follow his parents' path – as positive as it might have been. Isaac built his internal world independently based on the education he had acquired. Isaac did not seek to imitate his father or live a life of habit. He used the tools he was given to define himself, to make the right choices through self-awareness rather than inertia. And this, says the Alter of Kelm, is harder than making the right choice after getting a bad education.

Our ability to not merely function through inertia – to stop and give something serious, independent, and honest thought – is what leads us to a life of value, as we follow in the footsteps of our patriarch Isaac.

*The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.*

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### **Rav Kook Torah**

#### ***The Story of the Gold Watch***

#### ***Rabbi Chanan Morrison***

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook related the following story:

While living in Boisk (Bauska) in Latvia, Rav Kook and his family would occasionally take a late summer vacation at the Dobeln summer resort along the Baltic seashore. There he used to meet Rabbi Zelig Reuven Bengis — they had both been students at the famed Volozhin yeshiva — and the two would spend time together in the hotel and its surrounding woods.

Near the Dobeln beach, a small structure was designated as a makeshift synagogue, where the vacationers would gather for Minchah and Ma'ariv — the afternoon and evening prayers. One day, Rabbi Bengis had a yahrtzeit for one of his parents, and he wanted to lead the prayers, as is customarily done. However, only nine men showed up, making them one short of a minyan (a religious quorum). One of the men, a go-getter by nature, went outside to find a tenth for the minyan. As it happened, a rather domineering man of means also had yahrtzeit that day, and he was arranging his own minyan outside. Not noticing how many men were outside, the 'go-getter' asked one of them to come inside and join Rabbi Bengis' minyan, where Rav Kook was also waiting.

Unfortunately, the outside group had numbered exactly ten, and now they were short a minyan. (When Rabbi Bengis retold the story, he explained that he had no idea that this

Jew was the tenth man in the other minyan, otherwise, he would never have allowed this to happen.) When the domineering man realized what had happened, he stormed into the room where Rabbi Bengis was praying and berated him with a barrage of curses and insults.

When Rav Kook witnessed the humiliation of this great Torah scholar, he immediately approached the assailant and gave him a resounding slap across the face.

"In my presence," he declared, "no one degrades a Torah scholar!"

#### **The Court Summons**

The wealthy man was so angered that he summoned Rav Kook to court. Indeed, the news of a rabbi slapping someone across the face made a shocking impression on everyone who heard about it.

When Rav Kook returned to Boisk, some of his devoted followers approached him and expressed concern over the fact that he might be taken to prison. In an effort to avoid this, they advised Rav Kook to apologize to the man and beg forgiveness for slapping him. Rav Kook, however, refused. He explained,

"Concerning my own honor, I am permitted to forgive and forget. In fact, I am obligated to be humble and forbearing, as we say in our prayers, "Let my soul be like dust to all." However, if I apologize to this man, I am in effect condoning the affront to that great Torah scholar and consequently, the desecration of the Torah's honor."

Quite unexpectedly, the domineering man showed up at Rav Kook's door a short while later and begged forgiveness from the Rav. Thus the whole incident came to an end... for the time being, at least.

#### **The Gold Watch**

Many years later, when Rav Kook traveled to America on a fundraising mission, a man approached him and announced that he was the one whom the rabbi had slapped in Dobeln.<sup>1</sup>

He then pulled out a golden watch from his pocket and said:

"I hereby give you this watch, honored rabbi, in exchange for the slap that you gave me. You see, that whole incident brought me nothing but disgrace. I was so humiliated that I left town and came to America — where I have become extremely wealthy. Thus my good fortune is all thanks to you!"

Rav Kook refused to accept the gift, but the wealthy man would not take 'no' for an answer. He kept on insisting until Rav Kook finally agreed to take the watch. Still, Rav Kook had misgivings about accepting the gift. He felt very uneasy benefiting, even indirectly, from the humiliation of a Torah scholar.

Years later, there was a knock on the Rav's door in Jerusalem. An elderly man entered with a heartrending story. A close relative had fallen gravely ill, and the old man required a large sum of money in order to transfer the patient from his home to a hospital.

Rav Kook searched his drawers but found only small change. What did he do? He took the gold watch and told the man: “Use this watch as a pledge, and you will surely receive a sizeable loan in no time. Then, with God’s help, I will try to raise enough money to redeem the watch from the money-lender.”

The old man hurried off to a well-known financier, who was friendly with Rav Kook, and asked him for an urgent loan against the security of the gold watch. The wealthy financier looked at the watch and immediately recognized it as the Rav’s. Without delay, he gave his visitor a loan; and the following day, he returned the valuable watch to Rav Kook.

(Adapted from “An Angel Among Men” by R. Simcha Raz, translated by R. Moshe Lichtman, pp. 76-78. Photograph by Isabelle Grosjean / CC BY-SA 3.0)

In May 1919, near the end of his stay in London, Rav Kook wrote an informal will before undergoing a medical operation (printed in *Igrot HaRe’iyah* vol. III, letter 959). At the end of the note, the rabbi added that he had received a gold watch as a present, but he had misgivings about the gift. If this was the same watch, then in fact he had received it several years before his 1924 trip to America.

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### **Shema Yisrael Torah Network**

#### **Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Toldos**

פרשת תולדות תשפ"ג

ויעתר לו ד' ותהר רבקה אשתו

#### **Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated by him, and his wife, Rivkah, conceived. (25:21)**

Yitzchak *Avinu* and Rivkah *Imeinu* both prayed for a child. Hashem replied affirmatively to Yitzchak’s prayer – rather than to Rivkah’s. *Rashi* explains: “There is no comparison between the prayer of a *tzaddik ben tzaddik*, the righteous child of a righteous person, to that of a *tzaddik ben rasha*, a righteous person, the child of a wicked person.” The question is well-known; the answer is also well-known; the “why” however, is not. One would think that after all that Rivkah endured in the home of her youth, she would achieve greater recognition. She achieved *tzaddeikes* status, despite being the daughter of Besuel, the sister of Lavan, and having been raised in an immoral, pagan culture. One would think that having successfully navigated the obstacles placed before her by her ignoble family, her prayer would achieve even more attention than that of her husband, who, for all intents and purposes, benefited from a spiritually correct and inspiring upbringing.

The simple answer is that the *tzaddik ben tzaddik* has much more to live up to. Having hailed from such a wonderful family background, he has a more difficult and demanding legacy to which to adhere. Failure on his part is not countenanced. The anxiety that accompanied him as he climbed to the top was palpable. The *tzaddik ben rasha* has it much easier. For him, whatever he achieves is an

accomplishment beyond anything that has been expected of him. To be slightly better than his murky background does not take much effort, nor does it involve disgrace if he fails. After all, he descends from *reshaim*. Whatever he observes is for him a great achievement and does not involve much stress.

*Horav Mordechai Mann, Shlita*, offers a powerful insight. It may be compared to two professional archers, the best of the best, who were competing to see who can bag a deer first. They both have the best archery implements; both are at the top of their game; both sight the deer at the same time; and both let their arrows loose at the same time. Yet, one’s arrow achieves its goal mere seconds before his competition. What happened? Apparently, one archer was standing 500 yards away, while the other one (whose arrow took down the deer) was standing 100 yards away. He was closer to the target; thus, his arrow reached it a few seconds earlier.

A similar idea applies to the dichotomy between the *tzaddik ben tzaddik* and *tzaddik ben rasha*. The one whose father was a *tzaddik* is closer. He is not praying from as far as his colleague, who must overcome family obstacles and peer pressure to achieve his goal.

Perhaps I am treading on sacred ground, but, instead of giving an answer to the question, I would like to ask a question. The *tzaddik ben rasha*’s father is referred to by a derogatory – almost ignominious – term. Why? When he sees his son or daughter embrace an observant lifestyle, how can a decent, self-respecting parent ignore, and even go to such lengths as take him to task, and even prevent him from adhering to his new lifestyle? Quite possibly, the problem is with the parent, who sees his own lifestyle disrespected. Alternatively, it might be that the son/daughter is so smug and arrogant about his/her choice that the parent feels inadequate and demeaned. It is just a question, but one worthy of discussion. A *tzaddik* whose parent is still labeled a *rasha* might be doing something wrong – or, at least, not right.

When a person prays to Hashem, he is speaking directly to the Almighty. As such, it should be reflected in his appearance and demeanor – not only during the prayer, but also after he has concluded his supplication! *Horav Tzvi Eliach, Shlita*, asks a question concerning one of the *tefillos* recited on *Yom Kippur* at the end of the *avodas Yom HaKippurim*, which recounts the sacred service in the *Bais Hamikdash*. One of the beautiful *tefillos* (*Mareh Kohen*) relates the *Kohen Gadol*’s leaving the *Kodesh HaKodoshim*, Holy of Holies, and how impressive and awe-inspiring it was as the scene unfolded: *Emes mah nehedar hayah Kohen Gadol b’tzeitso mibeis Kodshei HaKodoshim b’shalom b’li fega*; “How majestic does the *Kohen Gadol* appear when he leaves the Holy of Holies in peace without blemish.” Why is the emphasis on when he leaves? The attention should be upon his entering and remaining in the Holy of Holies. Is anything more awe-

inspiring than being inside the holiest place on earth? He explains that to cohere the glory and majesty associated with being within the environs of the Holy of Holies does not require *Kehunah Gedolah*. Anyone who is not cognitively impaired would tremble and shudder with awe at being empowered to bask in the sacredness of this unparalleled experience. Being inside does not reflect the transformation of the individual's spiritual persona. It is when one exits the chamber and senses the fiery countenance and transformed demeanor manifested by the *Kohen Gadol* that he perceives true glory and majesty. Owing to the *Kohen Gadol's* unparalleled spiritual refinement, he is better equipped to grasp and connect with the sanctity that permeates the chamber. The *Kohen Gadol* who enters within and exits is a new, spiritually-enhanced person.

This very same transformation should occur when one offers up his *tefillah* to Hashem. Regardless whether the *tefillah* is a personal supplication, or an expression of adulation, the petitioner's appearance, mood and demeanor should reflect that he had just spoken with Hashem. This spiritual encounter should catalyze a personal reconfiguration. Otherwise, it is just rhetoric.

Perhaps we might extend this idea further. The Torah refers to Yaakov *Avinu* as *ish tam yosheiv ohalim*; "a wholesome man abiding in tents," which is a reference to the tents of Torah. In other words, Yaakov was always learning. Eisav *ha'rasha* is called an *ish tzayid, ish sadeh*, a hunter, a man of the field. He was not simply an outdoorsman. His life was the field, the hunt. It was all about plunder and killing. Why does the Torah add the word *ish*, man, when it could simply have said that he learned Torah/he hunted game? I think the Torah is alluding to what defined each brother. The Torah defines Yaakov as one who studied, to the point that wherever he might be – even in the field, the market place -- it was obvious that he was a man of Torah. Likewise, Eisav manifested his hunter/man of the field status wherever he was. Even if Eisav were to step foot into the *bais hamedrash*, it was obvious from his appearance and uncouth demeanor that he was just "visiting." He did not belong.

ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי

**And she said, "If so, why is it that I am thus?" (25:22)**

Rivkah was experiencing what she perceived to be a strange pregnancy. Something unusual was occurring in her body. When she walked by a house of (monotheistic) prayer, a house of learning, she felt the fetus within her womb gravitating toward it. Likewise, when she passed by a house that catered to idol worship, she once again felt a pulling to leave and embrace the idols. What kind of child was she carrying? *Rashi* explains the words, *Lamah zeh anochi*; "Why is it that I am?" Why is it that I am desiring and praying for pregnancy? Had I known that I would be

carrying a child whose values would be mixed, I would have been better off not becoming pregnant.

*Ibn Ezra* explains that as this was Rivkah's first pregnancy, she asked women who had given birth whether her experience was normal. When they said that it was not, she asked, "If this is unusual, why is it so? Why is my pregnancy unlike that of others?"

*Ramban* rejects the expositions of both *Rashi* and *Ibn Ezra*. He explains that Rivkah mused, "If this is the way that it will be for me, why am I in this world? I wish that I would no longer be." According to *Ramban*, *anochi* does not refer to the pregnancy, but rather, to Rivkah herself. [Rivkah felt that if she could not achieve her purpose in life, what purpose would she serve in living?] Clearly, these expositions, which are expounded by the *gedolei ha'Rishonim*, reflect their varied approaches to understanding Rivkah's lament over her condition. Each exposition is holy and profound, far beyond anything we can understand.

*Horav Nissan Alpert, zl*, offers a powerful approach, one which delves deep into the psyche of our Matriarch and simultaneously mandates us to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask the question: "Am I the problem?" He suggests that perhaps (quite possibly), the inner conflict which we observe in our children – the agitation, uncertainty, anxiety, their acting as if they are being pulled in opposing directions – is all a reflection of what is taking place in the psyche of their parents.

A child that suffers from uncertainty and inner conflict might be acting out what he perceives upon observing his parents. Perhaps the parents' personal conflict, being torn between opposing value systems, is carried over to their child. This might be what troubled Rivkah when she sensed that the child she was carrying was conflicted, torn between paganism and monotheism. Her first reaction was: "Why am I thus? Is something wrong with me, my soul, my spirituality? What is the discord that I am feeling in my womb telling me about myself?" She wondered whether something about her *anochi* was conflicted, something which required re-evaluation and resolution before she could continue. It was not enough to just serve Hashem. It was necessary that every aspect of her service be perfect and irreproachable.

When things do not go as we had planned, we often look for a scapegoat to blame for our personal failure. Those who play the blame game shy away from responsibility. If something goes wrong in our life, someone else must be to blame. It is our way of avoiding the truth. It is so much easier to place the onus of guilt on someone else, rather than to accept one's own mistakes. I cite a powerful quote concerning laying blame on everything and everybody, rather than where it really belongs, "You can get discouraged many times, but you are not a failure until you begin to blame someone else and stop trying." When we lay blame on others, we provide ourselves with a

distraction – from ourselves. We would rather focus on others than do some serious introspection into ourselves. By projecting our negativity at others, we make them appear to be the villains, thus taking the heat off ourselves. One more quote that hits home: “People who have trust issues need only to look in the mirror. There, they will meet the one person who will betray them most.”

Rivkah *Imeinu* teaches us that the first place one should look is at himself/herself. Introspection does not come easily, but nothing of value comes easily. If all parents would look inside themselves before laying blame at the feet of their children, we might have children who are much less conflicted.

#### ויגדלו הנערים

#### The lads grew up. (25:27)

*Rashi* writes that when the twins turned thirteen-years-old they went their separate ways. Yaakov *Avinu* gravitated to the *bais hamedrash*, while Eisav *ha'rasha* leaned toward idol worship. It must be noted that their transformation (especially in Eisav) did not just happen in a moment. Their spiritual destination was not a fate accompli. They neither ran nor walked – they gravitated to their respective choices of worship. Indeed, growing up, Eisav was far from being a devoted idolater. On the contrary, he viewed himself as a *tzaddik*, a righteous and virtuous person. After all, he was so meticulous in his *mitzvah* observance that he sought his father's guidance on how to give *maaser*, tithe, from salt. This was, however, all a sham. Eisav was a fraud, a swindler, whose greatest victim was none other than himself.

*Horav Aharon Schiff, Shlita*, of Antwerp, observes that every fraudulent act has its parameters (it is soon discovered). The parameters depend mostly on the relationship one has with the swindler (the more distant one is, the greater the difficulty in seeing the truth). A wise man can be duped for a few months, until he discovers the deception. One's family sees through the ruse within a few weeks. One's wife can tell the signs within a few short days. All, sooner or later, see the swindler for the charlatan that he is – only the timing is different. The swindler himself, however, is the victim of self-deception, for which there are no parameters. A person is capable of living a lie, and believing it, throughout a lifetime.

Eisav's downfall occurred because he was not *piv v'libo shavin*, expressing what one appears to be. He was a double-dealing hypocrite, for whom deception was a way of life. Such a person fools not only others; he is his own greatest victim. Eisav talks the talk, but does not walk the walk. Nonetheless, he believes what he says, despite acting contrary to the words that he expresses. He sought to emulate his father's actions superficially. As his father married at the age of forty-years old, Eisav also married at that same age, but he married a pagan woman. The only thing his marriage had in common with his father's was their age.

A Jew in Pressburg, who, despite hailing from a distinguished, observant family, decided to live a secular life, both inwardly and outwardly. He dressed as a secular person, shunning the black frock that every member of his family had worn for generations. They had been wholly committed Jews. He was committed to everything but religious observance. When his father passed away, he seemed to undergo a metamorphosis of sorts. He moved into his father's home and began to dress in traditional garb. People thought that, perhaps he might have repented. Unfortunately, this, too, was part of his hypocrisy. He explained that he wanted to emulate his late father; thus, he dressed like him. *Frumkeit*, religious observance? Never! The outer appearances may change, but the heart remains the same.

*Horav Gedalyah Elsmann, zl*, posits that it was specifically Eisav's penchant for emulating the superficial that earned him the appellation *rasha*, wicked. Rather than emulate Yitzchak *Avinu's* laudatory attributes, Eisav decided to add one more wife to his harem of idol worshippers. His father married when he was forty. He, too, would marry when he was forty. This is to what *Rashi* alludes when he compares Eisav to the *chazir*, pig. It prides itself with its split hooves, which is one of the symbols of *kashrus*. The hidden symbol, regurgitation, however, does not apply to it. Eisav copied his father, because he wanted to continue sinning. He conjectured that, if for all outward appearances he was acting appropriately, no one would ever notice his many sins. Thus, emulating Yitzchak was his segue to sin.

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (*Bereishis Rabbah* 65:16) said, “All my days I served my father. However, I did not ever perform *kibbud av* one percent of what Eisav did. I would serve my father with whatever clothes I was wearing. If they were soiled, I would serve him anyway.” In contrast, Eisav, would don *bigdei malchus*, clothes suited for a monarch, when he served his father. The *Imrei Emes* of Gur asked, “What prevented Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel from also wearing princely garb when he served?” He explained, *Nuch gemacht is gornisht*, “Copying is nothing.” The *Rebbe* is teaching us that the superficial, which is not motivated by internal emotions, is of no value.

This does not mean that all emulation has a negative, vacuous connotation. The following two instances cited by *Horav Eliezer HaLevi Turk, Shlita*, show that one can demonstrate positive forms of modeling oneself and his lifestyle, emulating a great *Rebbe*. After his marriage, *Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, Mashgiach Kaminetz*, decided after his marriage to exchange his American suit/short jacket for authentic *Yerushalmi* clothing. Once, when his revered *Rebbe, Horav Yisrael Chaim Kaplan, zl* [*Rav Yisrael Chaim* was the son-in-law of *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, and father-in-law of *Horav Baruch Dov Povarsky, zl*] saw his student (from *Bais Medrash Elyon, Monsey*) wearing a long frock, he commented, *Ah, a*

*fartiger talmid chacham*, “Oh, a finished Torah scholar. Are you there yet?”

A short while later, when Rav Moshe Aharon related the comment of his *Rebbe*, he said, “At first, I felt slighted. When I ruminated over the *Rebbe*’s aphorism, however, I realized that he was telling me that imitation that is not motivated by an inner desire for growth is nothing, and it will not last.

Following the wedding of his granddaughter, *Horav Yisrael Gustman, zl*, began to wear a *gartel*, silk wrapped-around belt designated to be worn during *davening*. A *chassidic* man, to whom the *gartel* was part and parcel of his *davening* preparations, asked, “Why does the great *gaon* wear a *gartel*?” (He was probably alluding to the fact that a *gartel* was not part of the *davening* dress code in the Lithuanian *yeshivos*.)

*Rav Gustman* replied, “My *Rebbe*, *Horav Shimon Shkop, zl* (Grodno), began putting on *Rabbeinu Tam Tefillin* one day after *davening*. When one of his students questioned this practice, *Rav Shimon* said, “I have constantly spent time and exertion in an attempt to explain the expositions of *Rabbeinu Tam*. Can you imagine that when I will go up to Heaven and be greeted by *Rabbeinu Tam*, I do not want him to rebuke me for being a *karkafta d’lo monach Tefillin*, a man who did not wear *Tefillin* (since, according to *Rabbeinu Tam*, the sequence of the placement of the *parshiyos*, differs from that of *Rashi*).” Likewise, when *Rav Shimon* reached a certain age, he began to wear a *gartel*. When he was queried for a reason for this practice, he said, “That he wanted to prepare for the *davening*.” (*Hikon l’kraas Hashem Elokecha*, “Prepare to meet your G-d.” One should perform a preparatory act prior to *davening*. The *gartel*, belt, is used by many as a garment set aside for prayer.) “Like my revered *Rebbe*, I have reached an age at which I would like to accept a new *mitzvah* (manner of serving Hashem) upon myself.

#### ***Va’ani Tefillah***

**אשרי יושבי ביתך – *Ashrei yoshvei Veisecha*. Fortunate are those who dwell in Your house.**

We are privy to countless miracles every day. We do not recognize them as miracles, since they are cloaked in the guise of what we call “nature.” There is no such thing as nature. Everything is a Heavenly miracle. Every now and then, Hashem will perform an overt miracle for all to see and acknowledge. The purpose of this miracle is to instruct us that everything in life which we view as nature is actually a miracle. The *Meshech Chochmah* (*Parashas Emor*) explains that this verity is to be derived from the *tefillah* of *Ashrei*, in which we detail all of Hashem’s goodness and caring for us. It intimates Hashem’s “role” in our everyday lives. One should acknowledge this by living his life with the understanding that, without Hashem, we would simply not function – nor even be here for that matter. One who lives this way in *olam hazeh*, this world, will merit a portion in *Olam Habba*, the World-to-Come.

*In memory of Mrs Helen Gelb*

הענדיל לאה בת יצחק אייזיק ע"ה - ט"ז מרחשון תשע"ב

*Ruthie & Sam Salamon and Family*

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*prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum*

**The Torah teaches that Yitzchak loved Esav because בפיו צ"ד**

#### **Conflict of Interest**

**By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Question #1: Conflict of Interest

Does the Torah discuss a government official having a conflict of interest?

Question #2: Cash or Credit?

Is there any violation of *shochad* if someone receives a service that does not have a market value?

Question #3: Friend or Enemy?

Are you permitted to judge a case in which a friend of yours is one of the litigants? What about someone who davens in the same shul? Or someone who consistently rubs you the wrong way?

Introduction

There are three places where the Torah mentions the prohibition against accepting a bribe, once in *parshas Mishpatim*, a second time at the very beginning of *parshas Shoftim* and again in *parshas Ki Savo*. In *parshas Mishpatim*, the Torah states: “Do not accept a bribe, because bribery blinds those who see clearly and corrupts just words” (*Shemos* 23:8). In *parshas Shoftim*, the Torah states: “Do not pervert justice... do not accept a bribe, because bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and corrupts just words” (*Devorim* 16:19). And in *parshas Ki Savo*, the Torah states: “Cursed is he who accepts a bribe.” Thus, we see that not only is there a *lo sa’aseh* prohibition, mentioned twice in the Torah, for accepting a bribe, it is also accompanied by a curse, one that was declared by the entire people of Israel.

We all recognize that paying a judge to rule in one’s favor is forbidden and, in the contemporary world, can lead to fines, imprisonment or both, as well as a tarnished reputation. We will soon learn that what halacha prohibits under the category of the taking of *shochad*, bribery, is much more far-reaching than what anyone would consider bribery in today’s world. Virtually all cases that we would consider “conflict of interest,” which is a lesser crime in today’s world than straightforward bribery, are prohibited by the Torah as *shochad*. In other words, making a decision on the basis of a “conflict of interest” is just as forbidden in halacha as receiving a direct bribe on the matter. Both are severe Torah prohibitions; violating either invalidates the individual from being permitted to be a judge or even a witness, and both are included in the curse that the Torah metes out in *parshas Ki Savo*.

A very exclusive club

We see in Chazal that even minor reasons were considered sufficient for a judge to disqualify himself. The Gemara (Kesubos 105b) notes several instances in which great scholars excluded themselves from being judges:

1. Shmuel was crossing a stream, probably on some type of unsteady rope bridge (or, according to the Rambam, he was exiting a ferry), when a passerby extended a hand to steady him. Shmuel, realizing that the passerby was not someone he knew locally, inquired as to what brought the visitor to town. The passerby replied that he had a din Torah with someone.

Shmuel informed the visitor that, since he had assisted Shmuel on the rope bridge, Shmuel was excusing himself from being a judge in the case (Kesubos 105b). Shmuel pointed out that it is inappropriate to be a judge in any situation when the judge has a tendency to look at one side more favorably than the other. Note that there was no conflict of interest or any implied bribery in this case, since there is no indication that the service was rendered in anticipation of better treatment in beis din. Also note that Shmuel would not gain anything if he ruled in favor of the passerby or against him. From this we see how careful a judge must be to avoid a case where he may have a conflict of interest, even as little as a debt of gratitude for a minor favor, which might influence his decision.

According to the Rambam (Hilchos Sanhedrin 23:3), in this case, and the three cases I will be quoting next, the judge is invalid min hadin, whereas, according to Tosafos, these dayananim were permitted to judge the situations, but chose not to.

2. Ameimar was sitting as a judge, probably in some outdoor venue, when a feather landed on his head. A well-doer quickly removed the feather from Ameimar's head. Ameimar asked him what brought him to beis din, to which he replied that he was waiting his turn for his own litigation. Ameimar then informed him that he, Ameimar, now did not consider himself objective enough to be the judge in the case, since the well-doer had performed a chesed for him. In this case, Tosafos rules that Ameimar was halachically permitted to be the judge, since we do not assume that such a small kindness would render it more difficult for the judge to maintain his objectivity. However, Ameimar withdrew himself from litigating, considering it difficult for him to judge the case objectively, since the well-doer had done him a favor.

3. Some spittle was lying on the floor in front of Mar Ukva, when a passerby saw and covered it. When Mar Ukva asked the passerby what brought him to town, he answered that he had some litigation. Mar Ukva then replied that he (Mar Ukva) could no longer serve as a judge in the passerby's litigation, since the latter had helped him and he would be inclined to favor him.

At this point, we can address the second of our opening questions: Is there any violation of shochad if someone receives a service that does not have a market value?

The answer is we see that there certainly could be a violation, if it was done intentionally to influence the decision that a dayan will be making.

4. The sharecropper of Rabbi Yishmael the son of Rabbi Yosi paid his rent with a basket of fruit, brought every Friday. One time, he showed up with his fruit on Thursday, instead. When Rabbi Yishmael inquired why the rent was paid a day early, the sharecropper answered that he had some litigation to attend to, and since the beis din was open only on Monday and Thursday, he brought his rent money early, to save himself the trip.

Rabbi Yishmael was a judge in the beis din in this town. Notwithstanding that the sharecropper had paid a day early because of his own convenience and was completely forthcoming that he was not expecting any favors in the litigation as a result, Rabbi Yishmael notified the sharecropper that, because the payment was earlier than required, he was not accepting it. In addition, Rabbi Yishmael disqualified himself from judging the case. Instead, Rabbi Yishmael appointed two other scholars to serve in his place as the judges. (The commentators discuss why he replaced himself with two other judges, but answering that question takes us away from our topic.)

Rabbi Yishmael remained in the courtroom as a spectator. While the two parties were sparring with their claims and counterclaims, Rabbi Yishmael found himself thinking of legal arguments that the sharecropper could use – in other words, he felt himself reacting to the litigation as the sharecropper's advocate, rather than as a bystander who could judge objectively. This, of course, justified Rabbi Yishmael's earlier decision to withdraw from judging the case. In summary, he noted: "Those who accept bribes should have their bodies swollen. Look how I lost my objectivity, notwithstanding that I did not accept the early payment, and it was money that was legitimately owed me. How can anyone possibly expect to judge properly any matter in which he has a conflict of interest?"

The Gemara points out that bribery does not necessarily have to be cash, but can be a different form of benefit. It also explains that any time a judge receives benefit from one side in litigation, this creates a conflict of interest that distorts the judge's objectivity and may disqualify him from rendering objective judgment.

Note that had the sharecropper not brought payment a day earlier, there would be no halachic problem for Rabbi Yishmael to judge the case, even though it involved a person who worked on his field.

Conflict of interest

At this point, let us discuss our opening question: Does the Torah discuss a government official having a conflict of interest?

Several major authorities rule that anyone with communal responsibility must be very careful not to receive any remuneration from an interested party in an issue that he is deciding (Pilpula Charifta, Sanhedrin, 3:17; Shu't Chasam

Sofer; Pischei Teshuvah, Choshen Mishpat 34:27; Aruch Hashulchan, Choshen Mishpat 9:1). This should also affect issues of conflict of interest when fundraising for political purposes.

Friend or enemy?

The Gemara (Kesubos 105b) states that a person should not be a judge for a case involving a close friend or an enemy. The rishonim dispute whether this law is true only when the party to the case is a very close friend or a true enemy (Tosafos ad loc.), or even if he is not his best friend or biggest enemy (Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 23:6). The Rambam adds that the best situation is when the judge does not know either party.

It is permitted to be the judge for a case involving a business associate or a neighbor, provided the judge feels that he can be truly objective. If he feels a bias toward one side or the other, he should refrain from judging the case.

Paying a bribe

It is interesting to note that the violation of bribery applies only to the judge who receives the bribe. Unlike interest, where the Torah prohibits not only the lender from receiving interest, but also the borrower who pays interest with a specific *lo saaseh*, the individual who bribes a judge or official to provide him with a benefit to which he is not entitled violates only the Torah's general prohibition of causing someone else to sin (*lifnei iver lo sitein michshol*) [Tur and Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 9:1].

Visual acuity

The Gemara makes a very interesting comparison regarding the foolishness of people. It is not uncommon for a person to expend copious sums of money on the possibility of finding a cure to alleviate some visual issues from which he is suffering. Yet, the same person will allow himself to have a conflict of interest, notwithstanding that he has blinded his ability to see the matter objectively (Kesubos 105a).

Poor judge

There is another situation in which someone should not be a judge because of a subtle conflict of interest. If a person always needs to borrow things and has nothing to lend in return, he is disqualified from being a dayan (Kesubos 105b), even if he has not yet borrowed anything. If the judge has something that he can lend when the lender needs it, then he (the judge) feels no outstanding obligation to that person. However, if he has nothing to lend him, he feels a sense of debt to the person who assisted him that makes it difficult for him to be objective when he is forced to judge him.

“If the judge is comparable to a king who has no need ever to borrow an item from someone else, he will succeed in holding up the world through proper justice” (Kesubos 105b, based on Mishlei 29:4). However, the opposite is true if the judge is poor. As the Gemara expresses it, he can be compared to a kohein who visits the silos of those who have recently brought in their harvest, in the hope that he

will receive the gifts coming to the kohein because he is in the right place at the right time. Ultimately, having a dayan who is very poor may easily result in justice being skewed.

Salary?

The Gemara discusses whether the judicial practice of the amora Karna was acceptable according to halacha. Karna was not a salaried judge, but a Talmudic scholar whose livelihood came from smelling wine to determine whether it was beginning to sour. In order to judge a case, Karna would charge each litigant one sela (Kesubos 105a with Rashi). The Gemara, in discussing why Karna could charge this money, rules that payment for judicial services may fall under three categories, two of which are always forbidden, and the third of which is sometimes permitted. They are:

A. Bribery

Someone being paid for a favorable decision involves *shochad*, even when both litigants pay him. According to the Derisha (Choshen Mishpat 9:1), this means that both litigants paid the judge to be certain to rule correctly, if their argument is justified; yet, this is forbidden *min haTorah*, because it is still considered a form of *shochad*.

B. Wages to rule

The Mishnah (Bechoros 4:6) rules that a judge is forbidden to be paid money for the expertise of rendering a judicial decision, even when both litigants pay him equally (Kesubos 105a). This is forbidden because we are required to observe *mitzvos* without financial remuneration. This is a vast topic germane to many other areas of halacha, which we will leave for a different article.

C. Lost time

It is possible that the dayan is paid what is called *sechar batalah*, payment for the time he has lost while involved in the case. The Gemara's conclusion is that if taking time off from his livelihood to judge the case caused him to lose money, the dayan is entitled to *sechar batalah*.

The Gemara chooses a couple of examples of this ruling. In addition to the above-mentioned case of Karna, another case it mentions was the practice of Rav Huna, who told the litigants that they should hire a workman who would take his (Rav Huna's) place and water his fields while he was judging their case.

If it is unclear whether he suffered any loss, he should *lechatchilah* not collect *sechar batalah*, but if he received payment, the ruling is nevertheless valid. An example would be where it is possible, but uncertain, whether a customer will arrive while he is busy judging. Since it is uncertain that he loses anything by judging, *lechatchilah* he should not collect *sechar batalah*, but if he received payment, the ruling is nevertheless valid.

The Rambam emphasizes that he can receive only the amount that he is actually losing, and no more (Hilchos Sanhedrin 23:5).

The Rambam adds another condition to the case of *sechar batalah*: The dayan must take from both litigants, and when

both of them are in front of him. This is to avoid anyone from thinking that the dayan is receiving illegitimate or inappropriate compensation (Kesef Mishneh).

In the contemporary world, the most common application of this principle is when a dayan is paid to be available to serve on a beis din, such that he can no longer seek employment or other income during the time he has reserved for a din Torah. The Gemara rules that whether this is permitted or not lechatchilah depends on whether he will definitely be losing money or not.

Here is an example which is certainly permitted. A dayan I know does well-paying consultancy work. He instructed the beis din that sought his availability that he usually earns a certain amount per hour, and that he would definitely lose this amount of money while preoccupied with a din Torah. In this case, he is entitled to compensation from the two litigants, provided the two sides pay him equally. According to the Rambam, the two litigants should pay him in front of each other.

To avoid any appearance of impropriety, the proper approach is that a Jewish community hire dayanim and provide appropriate salaries. To quote the Shulchan Aruch, "It is a requirement on the Jews to provide their judges with a livelihood" (Choshen Mishpat 9:3). The community is permitted to accept private donations for this purpose, without concern that the dayanim will favor those who made major donations for this cause, which is, after all, their salaries.

It is preferred that all fundraising for these salaries be at the beginning of the year for the coming year, to avoid any conflict of interest (Tur and Rema, Choshen Mishpat 9:3). If the funds are raised at the beginning of the year, then the money is available when dinei Torah occur without the donors having direct influence.

Still, an individual judge who feels a bias in favor of one of the litigants, because of benefits that he has received in the past or because the litigant is a prominent member of the community, should excuse himself from judging the situation. A similar halacha is true if a litigant is a prominent member of his shul – the dayan or rav should withdraw from being the dayan if he feels that he cannot judge the matter objectively.

#### Conclusion

As we now see, the details of not taking sho Chad are far more extensive than what we usually call "bribery" or even "conflict of interest." The Chasam Sofer rules that when the membership of a community or congregation votes to elect a rabbi, the members have the halachic status of dayanim and must be concerned about any issue of sho Chad. They must be careful that they vote for whom they think will be best for their community and not because of a personal interest.

This mitzvah helps us highlight the importance of being responsible for other people and for their property and rights. We should pray to be successful messengers,

whenever we are entrusted with carrying out Hashem's will for our community.

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#### [CS addition – A colleague sent me this.]

from: Michael Hoenig <MHoenig@herzfeld-rubin.com>  
Subject: Mitzvah Connections -- LAVAN HaARAMI ; HaARAMI

The following are Mitzvah Connections on the terms "LAVAN HaARAMI" and "HaARAMI", found in Midrash and ubiquitously used by Chazal in referring to Lavan, the son of Besuel.

Lavan was Rivkah's brother and father of Leah and Rachel, Yaakov's wives.

Lavan also was the father of Yaakov's wives, Zilpah and Bilhah, "bondwomen" he gave, respectively, to Leah and Rachel. Their mother was a Pilegsh, concubine, of Lavan, as Rashi notes at 31:50.

Lavan figures prominently in the episode where Rivkah agrees to marry Yitzchak. And Lavan, throughout, is a deceptive, fraudulent, scheming, vexatious father-in-law to Yaakov during his 20-year sojourn with Lavan and working for him. Despite outward appearances, Lavan PRACTICES DIVINATION, a form of idolatrous behavior (30:27). In addition, Lavan is a master magician, a practitioner of Kishuf, the black arts of "the East."

His idol worship is further disclosed to us when Rachel, intending to separate her father from idolatry (Rashi, 31:19), took Lavan's Terafim with her during Yaakov's flight from Lavan. The latter gives chase and accuses Yaakov of the theft of these little household gods, a scenario described at 31:19-54, along with other dramatic events.

The Midrash, Gemara, Kabbalists and Chazal identify Lavan as closely connected to Bilaam, the "Curser for Hire" retained by Balak to curse Moshe and Israel. In Parshas Balak, Bilaam is described by our Sages as a gentile Prophet with great powers. The Midrash and Chazal identify Bilaam as one of Paroh's advisers in Egypt during Yisrael's bondage. Bilaam hated Yisrael and longed for its destruction. Bilaam is also identified by Chazal with perverted sexual bestiality (e.g., Sanhedrin 105a).

So, if the evil Bilaam is closely related or connected to Lavan, that casts another dark shadow over Lavan. Sanhedrin 105a says that Lavan was Be'Or which would make Bilaam be Lavan's son. On the other hand, Midrash Tanchumah (VaYeitzei 13) and the Targum ascribe to Yonason Ben Uziel (BaMidbar 22:5) that Bilaam was Lavan. The Zohar, reportedly, suggests that Bilaam ben Be'Or was Lavan's grandson or a Gilgul, reincarnation, of Lavan. These Kesharim, family connections, will contribute to our further study of Lavan and the Remozim, hints or clues, inhering in his name.

MITZVAH CONNECTION -- LAVAN HaARAMI --



LAVAN HaARAMI equals 338. Mitzvah Number 338 (VaYikra 25:17) is : VeLo Sonu Ish Es Amiso -- AND YOU SHALL NOT DECEIVE A FELLOW JEW.

It is forbidden to offend a fellow Jew with words . This Mitzvah is known as the prohibition of Ono'as Devarim. One should not cause his fellow undue distress or hurt feelings. Deceitful or injurious speech or words is at the core of the transgression.

Lavan was a master DECEIVER, fraudster and charlatan. He repeatedly DECEIVED Yaakov for 20 years. Yaakov angrily specifies a brief bill of particulars (at VaYeitzei 31: 31, 36-42).

Yaakov says he fled because he feared Lavan might STEAL his daughters (31:31). Yaakov had to absorb economic losses that were really Lavan's . Yet, as Yaakov charges, they were "STOLEN BY DAY , OR STOLEN BY NIGHT" (31:39). Further, "You Changed My Wage And Ten Countings." Indeed, had Hashem not protected me, says Yaakov, "You Would Surely Have Now Sent Me Away EMPTY HANDED." (31:42). The Mitzvah Connection is quite strong. LAVAN was, at his core, a deceiver.

MITZVAH CONNECTION-- HaARAMI --

HaARAMI equals 256 . Mitzvah Number 256 (VaYikra 19:31) is : Al Tifnu ... VeEl HaYidonim -- DO NOT TURN ... AND TO WIZARDS . ( the omitted words refer to not turning to the practices of Mediums, OVOS , which is the preceding Mitzvah.)

IT IS FORBIDDEN TO PRACTICE ANY ACTS OF A WIZARD.

Lavan was not only an idolator but also a master of Kishuf, magic, the black arts . He practiced DIVINATION, an idolatrous form of divining the future -- even proudly admitting it (30:27). The YIDONI or WIZARD performs rituals, falls to the ground in alleged mystical absorption, and then speaks and "predicts the future." Hashem commanded us to avoid all these wizard/divination practices "because of their idolatrous roots." (Rabbi A. Y. Kahan , The Taryag Mitzvos, Number 256). Yet another quite strong Mitzvah Connection on the term, HaARAMI .

LAVAN -- WHAT'S IN A NAME ? --

Chazal often note that the descriptive "HaARAMI" added to Lavan's name also contains the Osiyos, letters, of the word or term RAMO'ii , a fraud, cheat, trickster, dishonest person -- projection of a strongly negative image that aptly describes Lavan.

But what about the name LAVAN itself ? Well, here too, the letters, Osiyos, of LAVAN suggest evildom. LAVAN's three letters in reverse spells the word NAVOL . In modern Hebrew the word NAVOL refers to a scoundrel, a cheat, terms that aptly describe LAVAN (the ARAMI/RAMO'ii). But, even further, NAVOL was the name of the Carmeli estate owner who mistreated King David's messengers and

refused to provide food for David and his famished army fleeing from King Saul. The episode is detailed in Shmuel I (25:2 - 30). The wealthy NAVOL, mistreating and spurning David's men at a time of need, is copiously described in the text as a scoundrel, a person of revulsion. Even NAVOL's wife and servants are contemptuous of NAVOL's Midos, character and behavior. King David marches towards NAVOL to punish him . Avigayil, the latter's wife, immediately rushes to David with abundant foodstuffs to stave off retribution. In her dialogue with David, she says NAVOL is a BeLiYa'al, a base man (Shmuel I, 25:25). She says NAVOL "is his name and revulsion is his trait". (NAVOL SHEMO U NEVOLAH IMO . Ibid.) Shortly later, NAVOL dies and David marries Avigayil.

Of interest, LAVAN is professionally involved heavily with sheep production. That is NAVOL's predominant profession too. He raises sheep. Note too that LAVAN mistreated Yaakov, a leader of Yisrael, in fact THE original Yisrael . And NAVOL mistreated King David, a leader of Yisrael. Yaakov married LAVAN's daughters ; and Dovid HaMelech married NAVOL's wife . HaSheim Goreim and the interchangeability of the Osiyos, letters, connects the two for all time . Two scoundrels, two repulsive persons, two sheep merchants.

In addition to the foregoing, a Talmid Chacham , has pointed out that Rav Od Yosef Chai quotes the Arizal as saying that NAVOL was a Gilgul, reincarnation, of Bilaam. ("NAVOL HaCarmeli She'Haya Gilgul Bilaam.") Amazing ! Above we noted some startling family connections between LAVAN and Bilaam , truly close connections. And the Arizal, per Rav Od Yosef Chai, teaches that NAVOL was a Gilgul of Bilaam -- tying LAVAN even closer to the scoundrel who shares the letters of LAVAN's name .

In Torah, nothing is recorded by coincidence. There are deep insights to be unearthed, to be revealed . What's in a name ? Plenty! HaSheim Goreim, names are influential . Arami/Ramo'ii ; LAVAN/NAVOL ; Mitzvah Connections on the words LAVAN HaARAMI and HaARAMI that go to the core of LAVAN's character traits (and NAVOL's as well). Amazing family connections to Bilaam, who learned the black arts from LAVAN, whether directly or indirectly. That our Patriarchs and leaders, such as Yaakov and Dovid HaMelech , had to deal with such scoundrels is not surprising. Torah specifies their names and Chazal amplify the significance. Torah wants us to learn from these encounters. The Mitzvah Connections help enhance our understanding.

M.H.

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה  
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה