

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

The Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816-1893, dean of the yeshiva in Volozhin) made the astute observation that Isaac and Rebecca seem to suffer from a lack of communication. He noted that Rebecca's "relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem, they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca." (Ha'amek Davar to Gen. 24:65)

The Netziv senses this distance from the very first moment Rebecca sees Isaac, as he is "meditating in the field" (Gen. 24:63), at which point she fell off her camel and "covered herself with a veil" (Gen. 24:65). He comments, "She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy, as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind."

Their relationship, suggests the Netziv, was never casual, candid, and communicative. The result was, at a series of critical moments, a failure of communication. For instance, it seems likely that Rebecca never informed Isaac of the oracle she had before the twins, Esau and Jacob, were born, in which God told her "the elder will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). That, apparently, is one reason she loved Jacob rather than Esau, knowing that he was the one chosen by God. If Isaac had known this foretelling of their sons' futures, would he still have favoured Esau? He probably did not know, because Rebecca had not told him. That is why, many years later, when she hears that Isaac was about to bless Esau, she is forced into a plan of deception: she tells Jacob to pretend he is Esau. Why does she not simply tell Isaac that it is Jacob who shall be blessed? Because that would force her to admit that she has kept her husband in ignorance about the prophecy all the years the children were growing up.

Had she spoken to Isaac on the day of the blessing, Isaac might have said something that would have changed the entire course of their, and their children's, lives. I imagine Isaac saying this: "Of course

I know that it will be Jacob and not Esau who will continue the covenant. But I have two quite different blessings in mind, one for each of our sons. I will give Esau a blessing of wealth and power: 'May God give you the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth... May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.' (Gen. 27:28-29) I will give Jacob the blessing God gave Abraham and me, the blessing of children and the promised land: 'May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.'" (Gen. 28:3-4).

Isaac never intended to give the blessing of the covenant to Esau. He intended to give each child the blessing that suited them. The entire deceit planned by Rebecca and carried out by Jacob was never necessary in the first place. Why did Rebecca not understand this? Because she and her husband did not communicate.

Now let us count the consequences. Isaac, old and blind, felt betrayed by Jacob. He "trembled violently" when he realised what had happened, saying to Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully." Esau likewise felt betrayed and experienced such violent hatred towards Jacob that he vowed to kill him. Rebecca was forced to send Jacob into exile, thus depriving herself of the company of the son she loved for more than two decades. As for Jacob, the consequences of the deceit lasted a lifetime, resulting in strife between his wives and even between his children. "Few and evil have been the days of my life" (Gen. 47:9), he said to Pharaoh as an old man. So many lives scarred by one act which was not even necessary in the first place -- Isaac did in fact give Jacob "the blessing of Abraham" without any deception, knowing him to be Jacob not Esau.

Such is the human price we pay for a failure to communicate. The Torah is exceptionally candid about such matters, which is what makes it so powerful a guide to life: real life, among real people with real problems. Communication matters. In the beginning God created the natural world with words: "And God said: 'Let there be'". We create the social world with words. The Targum translated the phrase, "And man became a living soul," (Genesis 2:7) as "And man

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Nissim ben Miriam**

became a speaking soul." For us, speech is life. Life is relationship. And human relationships are built through communication. We can tell other people our hopes, our fears, our feelings and thoughts.

That is why any leader -- from a parent to a CEO -- must set as their task good, strong, honest, open communication. That is what makes families, teams and corporate cultures healthy. Everyone must know what their overall aims are as a team, what their specific roles are, what responsibilities they carry, and what values and behaviours they are expected to exemplify. There must be praise for those who do well, as well as constructive criticism when people do badly. Criticism must be of the act, not the person; the person must feel respected whatever their failures. This last feature is one of the fundamental differences between a "guilt morality" of which Judaism is the supreme example, and a "shame morality" like that of ancient Greece (namely, guilt makes a clear distinction between the act and the person, which shame does not).

There are times when much depends on clear communication. It is not too much to say that there are moments when the very fate of the world depends upon this.

One such instance happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war. At the height of the crisis, as described by Robert McNamara in his film, *The Fog of War*, John F. Kennedy received two messages from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. One was conciliatory, the other far more hawkish. Most of Kennedy's advisers believed that the second represented Khrushchev's real views and should be taken seriously.

However, one man offered a different perspective. Llewellyn Thompson Jr. had been American ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 and had come to know the Russian president well. He had even spent a period of time living with Khrushchev and his wife. He told Kennedy that the conciliatory message sounded like Khrushchev's own personal view while the hawkish letter, which did not sound like him, had probably been written to appease the Russian generals. Kennedy listened to Thompson and gave Khrushchev an opportunity to back down without losing face -- and the result being that a potentially devastating war was averted. It is terrifying to imagine what might have happened, had Thompson not been there to establish which was and which was not the real act of communication.

So many aspects of our lives are impacted by misinformation and enhanced by genuine communication. This is why friends, parents, partners and leaders must establish a culture in which honest, open, respectful communication takes place, and that involves not just speaking but also listening. Without it,

tragedy is waiting in the wings. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Now Isaac loved Esau, because the hunt was in his mouth, while Rebecca loved Jacob" [Gen. 25:28]. The watershed moment in Jacob's life—the repercussions of which surface in every subsequent generation of Jewish history—is the act of deceiving his father, Isaac, in order to wrest the blessings of geopolitical family leadership apparently intended for Esau. What led the otherwise wholehearted Jacob, the studious dweller of tents, to conspire in this act of trickery, posing as his twin brother in disguise?

We cannot really understand the drama of our Torah reading, *Toldot*, without considering the emptiness in Jacob's heart, the aching angst with which only a child who feels unloved and rejected by a parent can truly identify.

From the very first verses in in the reading, the stage is set for the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. It is important to take careful note of how the Torah testifies that Isaac loved Esau "because the hunt (or entrapment) was in his mouth".

Based on the Torah's phrasing, our Sages note that Isaac did not know that Esau's entrapment skills extended to interpersonal manipulation. Esau knew how to deceive Isaac with his words, misleading the patriarch to assume incorrectly that his son was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments [Midrash *Tanchuma*, *Toldot* 8].

In contrast, although Isaac undoubtedly had feelings for his other son Jacob, the Torah is deafeningly silent on the matter. Every child yearns for—and deserves—unconditional love from his or her parents. After all, a child does not ask to be born into the world. The most potent armor he or she can receive as protection against the forces of both environment and society is protective, unconditional love from concerned, committed parents.

Jacob especially yearned for the warm embrace of his father. Tragically, he did not receive it. As a result, he felt unloved and rejected, by his father, who explicitly loved Esau. Understandably, Jacob craved this love, even if but for a brief period.

But how could he receive it? By supplying Isaac's requested venison meat [ibid., 27:3-4] and expressing the words, "I am Esau your firstborn," perhaps Isaac would love him just as Isaac loved Esau of the venison; just as he loved Esau of the mellifluous verbal entrapment.

Feeling Isaac's love and blessing was a crucial

necessity in Jacob's development, even if it entailed deceiving his father to achieve it.

Permit me to conclude with a fascinating anecdote about a beloved family friend, a survivor of the Holocaust, a beautiful and intelligent woman blessed with a strong sterling character, a stunningly frank but generous disposition, and a rare ability to express herself in prose and poetry.

During one of our many conversations in which she would reminisce about her childhood, she revealed that, paradoxically, one of the happiest recollections of her life was the day in which she was forcibly removed from her family and taken by the Nazis to an extermination camp.

Responding to our shocked expressions, she described a family situation in which her older sister was the favored, "frum" (religious) daughter and she was the rejected, rebellious one. If there was one pat of butter and one pat of margarine, her sister would get the butter and she would get the margarine.

What was even more difficult for her to bear was her mother's complaint whenever she was angered by her younger daughter's conduct: "You probably aren't my biological daughter! Your sister was born at home, whereas you were born in a 'clinic.' The doctors probably exchanged my real daughter with you."

Obviously, this was not a usual refrain spoken by the mother, but was only engendered by our friend's occasional rebellion. But as the Yiddish proverb goes "A slap departs; a word still smarts" (A patsch dergeht; A vort bashteht).

The Nazis came to her hometown of Bendine and rounded up the children. Only she and her parents were at home. Her father tried to steady his trembling hands by writing a kvittel (petition) to the Gerer Rebbe; her mother threw herself at the feet of the Nazi beasts, begging them to take her and spare the life of her precious child.

But our friend said she felt absolutely no fear, even when they loaded her onto the cattle car; she could feel only joy, joy in the knowledge that her mother truly loved her after all, joy in the confirmation that she was indeed her parent's own and beloved daughter, joy in the discovery that she was at last accepted and not rejected. It was such a moment for which the young Jacob desperately yearned. ©2020 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The question raised by all of the commentators who have dealt with this week's Torah reading is a simple one: How could it be that Eisav, a child who is raised in the house of great and holy parents, Yitzchak and Rivkah, could somehow turn out to be a terribly evil person – a murderer, rapist, thief and criminal?

It is difficult in the extreme to truly comprehend this issue. However, all the great commentators have attempted to deal with the matter in various forms and ideas. Some have attributed it to genetics – Eisav is a product of recessive genes inherited from Betuel and Laban and their ancestors, all of whom were pagan and evil. A recessive gene survives even when there are strong dominant genes present for many generations. And even the strong dominant genes of Abraham and Sarah, and Yitzchak and Rivkah cannot prevent the latent recessive genes from appearing and becoming dominant in one of their offspring.

There are others who ascribe the aberrant behavior of Eisav to the fact that he did not receive an education that truly fitted his personality. He was a man of the field, a hunter and physically athletic. He was not cut out, as was his twin brother Yaakov, to sit for hours on end and study. Because of this mismatch of education and personality, the tragic figure of Eisav emerged.

Another theme that is represented in the commentaries is that the opposing views of Yitzchak and Rivka regarding their children, created an atmosphere in the home that exacerbated the differences between the children and drove Eisav to the extremes of behavior recorded for us in the Torah.

There are many other ideas and thoughts about the matter that appear in our holy Torah and we know that everything in the Torah contains 70 different layers of understanding and perspective. So, everything that can be said regarding the issue has merit and should be carefully considered when studying the matter.

A simple and perhaps more profound understanding of the matter is simply to reiterate and reinforce the basic idea that human beings, no matter what their ancestry may be and in whatever environment they are raised, retain the power of freedom of choice, especially regarding moral issues. One is righteous and pious not necessarily because that person's parents or ancestors were righteous and pious but rather because the person himself or herself chooses a path in life and behavior that would lead to righteousness and piety.

We are all ultimately responsible for our behavior and our actions and basically all rationalizations and excuses regarding how we were raised, educated and trained are insufficient to remove from us the responsibility of our own personal choice of behavior and beliefs. The rabbis epitomized this in their statement that a human being is always responsible for his/her actions whether they be caused inadvertently or with malicious intent.

Eisav turns out to be Eisav because that is what he had chosen to be his goal in life. Like all human beings he may choose to rationalize and excuse his behavior, but ultimately, he alone is responsible for his life choices. ©2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian,

author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At the onset of this week's parsha the Torah states, "These are the generations of Yitzchak (Isaac), Avraham's (Abraham) son: Avraham begot Yitzchak." (Genesis 25:19) Would not the first half of the sentence been enough? Why the need to hammer home the point that Avraham begot Yitzchak?

The Midrash explains that the Torah wanted to make clear that Avraham and not Avimelech (the King of Grar) who had kidnapped Sarah, was Yitzchak's father. (Genesis 20:2; Midrash Tanchuma)

More generally the Torah may wish to stress that Yitzchak deserves to perpetuate the covenant given to his father Avraham because Yitzchak was most similar to him. Note these parallels:

- Both introduce prayer services. (Genesis 19:27; 24:63; Berachot 26b)
- Both, when experiencing famine, left Canaan. (Genesis 12, 26)
- Both achieve economic success. (Genesis 20, 26)
- Both went out of their way to ensure that their sons married properly. (Genesis 24:2-4; 28:1,2)

In next week's portion, however, when Ya'akov (Jacob) dreams – God introduces Himself as "the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak." (Genesis 28:13) Bearing in mind that there is only one God, why the God of Avraham and the God of Yitzchak, implying that there might be more than one God?

The holy Baal Shem Tov offers this answer. There is, of course, only one God, but everyone travels a unique path in finding the Lord. Avraham and Yitzchak worshipped the same God but their approach to God may have been different – even as their life experiences were not the same.

And so, the tefillah Yitzchak introduces – Mincha – differs in motif from Avraham's Shacharit service. So, too, their life experiences:

- Unlike Avraham, God forbids Yitzchak from going to Egypt. (Genesis 26:2)
- Unlike Avraham who was a shepherd and well-digger, Yitzchak was also a farmer. (Genesis 26:12)
- Unlike Avraham's arranging who his son Yitzchak should marry, Yitzchak sends his son Ya'akov (Jacob) to find a wife on his own.

The upshot: on the one hand, parents hope that their children follow in their footsteps. On the other, parents should allow their children to express their own uniqueness. This is the challenge of parenting: encouraging our children to follow in our ways, while

giving them space to walk their own individual walk. ©2020 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And the youths grew; and Eisav became a man who knew the hunt, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a straight man who sat in the tents [of Torah.]" (Beraishis 25:27) After many tears and prayers, Yitzchak and Rivka were blessed with twin sons. However, the two boys could not have been more dissimilar. As they grew, their personas were clearly defined. Eisav was a hunter and Yaakov was studious.

However, there was more than meets the eye. Eisav did not merely hunt animals. Chazal tell us that he hunted people. Sometimes he did so literally, like accosting married women in the fields where none could hear their screams for help. Other times he did so figuratively, as when he "stole" Yitzchak's affection by tricking him with questions that made him seem highly interested and sensitive to spiritual matters.

On the other hand, Yaakov was more transparent. What you saw was what you got; a straightforward man interested in coming close to Hashem.

What is meant by the word "yodea," that Eisav "knew" the hunt? Why not simply call him a hunter and we can still infer the trickery and deception he employed in ensnaring whatever prey he had?

What this word does is expand the concept and give us an important insight into Eisav, his descendants, and his archangel, the Satan. [He is mentioned later when Yaakov wrestles him and overcomes him.]

When it came to the hunt, sometimes the prey knew it was being hunted, and sometimes it did not. While Yitzchak proudly answered Eisav's questions about tithing salt and other matters, Eisav alone knew this was all simply a ploy. It was a façade, intended to benefit Eisav and trick Yitzchak. Apparently, it worked.

Therefore, the word "yodea," implies that only Eisav knew a hunt was happening, while the unsuspecting victim would not realize it until it was too late. Therefore, when dealing with Eisav's children, we must be cautious and aware that things may not be as they seem. There may be malicious intent and we must be on our guard.

Similarly, Eisav's angel, the Satan, constantly approaches us and tried to befriend us. He gives us ideas and pretends they are for our benefit when, in fact, we're one step from the abyss and he's giving us a push. The only way to protect ourselves is to learn from Eisav to "know" the hunt and identify that this is all just a trick. Then we can protect ourselves from the pitfalls

of his traps.

The King's minister approached him with a shocking report. "There is a plague contaminating the water," he said, "which causes insanity in all who drink of it."

"That's terrible!" exclaimed the king. "What do you suggest we do?"

"Well, your majesty," replied his minister. "I have secured a supply of uncontaminated water that will be sufficient for you and me to exist on until the problem is resolved. That way, we will not become insane."

The king pondered this advice for a moment, then responded: "No, you and I will drink the water like everyone else. However, we will make marks on our forehead so that when I look at you, and you look at me, we will both know that we are crazy." ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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Dew

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

A special blessing is associated with dew (*tal*) and not with rainfall (*matar*). When Yitzchak blessed his son Yaakov, he said, "May G-d give you of the dew of the heavens" (*Bereishit* 27:28). The blessing did not mention the rain of the heavens, because rain sometimes makes people unhappy. In contrast, everybody is happy with dew. Furthermore, dew appears all year long, without fail. Perhaps because it is ever-present, many do not mention it in the second blessing of the *Amidah* (as a parallel to the mention of rain, "*mashiv haru'ach*"). Others do mention dew during the summer months, inserting "*morid ha-tal*" in the second blessing.

Nevertheless, everyone includes dew in a later blessing in the *Amidah*, when we petition G-d: "*ve-tal u-matar li-verachah*." The need to specify that we want dew and rain for blessing (*li-verachah*) may be because dew is not always a blessing. For example, if a person places fruit on his roof to dry them out and get rid of any insects inside them, he does not want dew to wet the fruit. Though dew is one of the seven liquids that normally make fruit susceptible to defilement (*mekabel tum'ah*), nevertheless since the person who placed the fruit on the roof does not want dew to form on his fruit, they do not become susceptible.

The laws pertaining to dew and water are the same in almost all ways (including causing susceptibility to defilement). Nevertheless, dew is considered a liquid in its own right. Thus in the list of seven liquids that make crops susceptible to defilement (wine, honey, oil, milk, dew, blood, and water with the Hebrew mnemonic "*yad shachat dam*"), water and dew are listed separately. This is because there are some differences between the two. For example, the amount of water a person would need to transport in order to be

liable for carrying on Shabbat is different from the amount of dew that would make him liable. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

"Eisav's" Two Blessings

One of the most vivid scenes in the Torah is the story of Ya'akov disguising himself in order to receive the blessing from his father, Yitzchak, that was intended for his brother, Eisav. Though we can understand Rivka's motive in insisting that Ya'akov fool his father to receive this blessing, it is somewhat puzzling that Yitzchak was fooled by Eisav into giving him the blessing in the first place. Still, how fooled was Yitzchak? An examination of the blessing that was intended for Eisav and the blessing that was eventually given to him when the subterfuge was discovered may shed light on this question.

The first blessing was prepared for Eisav, but given to Ya'akov instead. "And he said, 'See, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed. And may the Elokim (Judge) give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth, and abundant grain and wine. Peoples will serve you, and regimes will prostrate themselves to you; be a lord to your brothers, and your mother's sons will prostrate themselves to you; may those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you be blessed.'" There are several striking omissions from this blessing which must be addressed. We must first understand the character of Eisav and some of his history to spot these omissions.

When Eisav and Ya'akov reached bar mitzvah age, the distinction between the two became established. Eisav became a hunter while Ya'akov devoted his time to the study of Hashem and His ways. The Midrash tells us that on the day that Eisav sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup, he had killed King Nimrod and taken possession of Nimrod's hunting vest, the same one that Ya'akov used to trick his father for the blessing. When Eisav turned forty, the same age at which his father had married, he sought to imitate his father and took two Canaanite women as wives. He did not think to mirror his father's ways and to return to Avraham's family in Aram to search for a wife. Instead he married these Canaanite women who continued to worship idols while in his house. A Midrash tells us that the smoke from their worship is what caused Yitzchak's blindness. The two omissions in the blessing prepared for Eisav purposefully deal with these two bad decisions he made with his life.

The first omission is that there is no mention of many children from this blessing. Avraham blessed Yitzchak and even Lavan blessed Rivka with many children. Yitzchak also later blessed Ya'akov with the same blessing of children. Yet here Yitzchak is silent on this topic in his blessing to Eisav. HaRav Zalman

Sorotzkin suggests that Yitzchak was concerned for the children that Eisav and his idol-worshipping wives might bring into this world. Yitzchak understood that these children could not become the leaders of the spiritual foundation of the Jewish People. Yitzchak was not fooled by Eisav's behavior but still wished to bless him first.

The second omission was a blessing for the hunt and the animals which were already a large part of Eisav's life. Instead, the blessing is for fields and rain, blessings of the farmer, not the hunter. The Ramban believes that the mention of fields refers to the hunt, but the majority of commentators refer to it as a "field of apples", a Kabbalistic term used to describe the Garden of Eden. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that we are to understand this sentence to mean, "see, my son already exhales the fragrance, not of the wild, not of the forests, but of the cultivated fields that Hashem has blessed; so may Hashem then give thee all the blessings of productivity and abundance." Yitzchak understood that the important aspect of inheriting the land was the cultivation of the land and experiencing the produce in abundance. Eisav would need to put away his hunting and become bound to the land. While this was not a challenge for Ya'akov, it would clearly have been nearly impossible for Eisav. He was destined to travel wherever the hunt was plentiful. Still, the blessing that Yitzchak gives him was necessary for the Jewish people. It was a sign to "Eisav" to adjust to the needs of the People.

After Eisav entered and Yitzchak understood what Ya'akov had done, Yitzchak blessed Eisav with a slightly different blessing. "Behold, of the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling and of the dew of the heavens from above. By your sword you shall live, but your brother you shall serve; yet it shall be that when you will be aggrieved, you may remove his yoke from upon your neck." Hirsch emphasizes that the introductory phrase "and may the Elokim give you" is not found in the direct blessing to Eisav. Elokim indicates Judgment, and Yitzchak did not want Eisav to be judged other than by Mercy. Hirsch comments that Eisav's blessing will not come as a Divine gift but as a normal result of Nature. This may also be the reason for the reversal of the "fatness of the earth" and "the dew of the heavens" from the first blessing to the second. The Kli Yakar explains that Ya'akov's eyes were to the heavens, so he was blessed first with "the dew of the heavens". Yitzchak wished to direct Eisav to the blessings from above in the first blessing. Yitzchak reversed the order once he realized Eisav's true nature.

The last line of the blessing has been interpreted in different ways. Rashi speaks of the word "tarid" as pain, and translates this to mean "aggrieved". Rashi explains this sentence as a warning to Ya'akov. If Ya'akov observes the laws and follows the directions of Hashem, only then will Eisav serve him. But when

Ya'akov abandons the law, Eisav is set free and will dominate Ya'akov since he is aggrieved that Ya'akov stole his blessing. Hirsch places the onus on Eisav. As long as Eisav places his status as the elder and does not "tarid, lower himself" to the level of his brother and submit himself to the ideals of his brother, he cannot rid himself of the yoke that is foretold. If he does submit, he will then emancipate himself and stand on an equal footing with his brother.

Yitzchak understood both his children; he knew that Eisav could not lead the Jewish People without changing his very character. At the same time, he understood that passing him over for the blessing would only destroy his family. The blessing that he intended for Eisav but that was given to Ya'akov did not speak of children or inheritance but of leadership and blessing in agriculture. The blessing was realistic and proper but limited in scope to the needs of the People.

Our children are different, each with his own strengths and weaknesses. Each adds to the family in his own way. May we appreciate and know each of them from a perspective of understanding and love. And may we guide them to their own recognition of Hashem and His Torah. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

As Americans watch the 2020 presidential election slowly fade and disappear in the rearview mirror, all have to deal with the fact that polarization is probably the defining legacy of American politics in 2020.

Dr. Vaile Wright, a clinical psychologist and senior director of health care innovation at the American Psychological Association (APA), explains; "In recent years, Americans have started to fuse their identity with their political affiliation, which was not seen in 2016. We curate our social media for the things we like -- as a result, we are only being exposed to information we want to see."

In 1960, only 4% of Democrats and 4% of Republicans said they would be disappointed if their child married someone from the opposite political party, but by 2018, 45% of Democrats and 35% of Republicans said so, according to the APA.

As Jews, we are no strangers to disagreement. I remember once overhearing a high school senior advising his younger brother who was entering his freshman Talmud class, "If you find yourself drifting off or not paying attention in class and the teacher calls on you with a question, just answer that it's a machloket (a matter of dispute) -- you will almost always be right."

Still, Judaism's view of disagreements is very enlightening and can certainly give us direction in coping with the polarization brought on by arguments as well as present us with tools to begin to diffuse it.

In the classic work on Jewish values known as

Pirkei Avot -- "Ethics of our Fathers" -- we find the following statement: "Any dispute that is for the sake of heaven shall endure; a dispute not for the sake heaven shall not endure. What is a dispute for the sake of heaven? The disputes of Hillel and Shammai" (Ethics of our Fathers 5:20).

The disputes between the school of Hillel (Beit Hillel) and the school of Shammai (Beit Shammai) were legendary -- there are over three hundred recorded disagreements. Yet regarding these arguments the Talmud (Eruvin 13b) makes a remarkable statement; "Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The law is in accordance with our opinion; and these said: The law is in accordance with our opinion.

"A heavenly voice emerged and proclaimed: 'Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.'" The Talmud then asks: "Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have to have the law established in accordance with their opinion?"

The Talmud answers that the reason the law follows Beit Hillel is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted. In addition, when they taught a subject they would teach both their own opinions and the opinions of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.

According to the Talmud the arguments of the schools of Hillel and Shammai never devolved into personal attacks. They actually got along and had a deep respect and fondness for one another. The ultimate proof to this is that the Talmud records they often married into each other's families.

Thus, the key to an "honest" dispute is trying to see the issues from another perspective. Whether one agrees or not is not nearly as important as admitting there might be another viewpoint. It is often difficult to see things from another perspective but the crucial point is to try and accept the fact that there are other valid ways of looking at an issue.

Of course, this week's Torah portion has a relevant lesson and contains a prime example of seeing things from another's perspective. In this week's Torah reading we find, "Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rifkah for a wife, the daughter of Besuel the Aramean from Padam Aram and sister to Lavan the Aramean" (Genesis 25:20).

The famous biblical commentator known as Rashi wonders why the Torah feels it necessary to reiterate that Rifkah was the daughter of Besuel the Aramean and the sister of Lavan the Aramean. After all, last week's Torah reading (just a few sentences earlier) clearly identified Rifkah's lineage and from where she

came. Why does the Torah repeat it again?

Rashi answers that the Torah is teaching us that even though Rifkah grew up with a wicked father and brother, and came from a place of wicked people, she didn't learn from their evil ways.

Still, this explanation requires further clarification. In last week's parsha we already saw that Rifkah was a kind and generous person, as well as one of great modesty. Why is it necessary to once again highlight the difference between Rifkah and her wicked relatives from a wicked place?

In addition, it is odd that the Torah repeats by both her father Besuel and her brother Lavan that they were Aramean. Why is there a special emphasis on their Aramean nationality?

Jewish law is derived from the Talmud, the ancient compilation of discussions regarding all areas of Jewish Law. The Jewish people have two different versions of the Talmud: The Babylonian Talmud is written in Aramaic, the language of Aram, while the Jerusalem Talmud is written in Hebrew, the language spoken in the land of Israel.

Yet the Talmud that is written in a foreign language is the one that enjoys a much wider popularity; it is studied far more than the Jerusalem Talmud and even today comprises the bulk of the curriculum in Jewish schools of higher education all over the world. The Babylonian Talmud is also the foundation and source of all Jewish Law. Why is it that the Babylonian Talmud became more widely accepted than the Jerusalem Talmud, which is written in our native tongue?

The Aramean language is one of understanding another's perspective. As an example, the word chessed in Hebrew means kindness, yet Rashi tells us (Leviticus 20:17) that in Aramaic it means shame. How can the same word mean both kindness and shame? It's all a matter of perspective; the giver feels that he is doing a kindness, but the recipient feels shame at having to accept charity. The Arameans focus on the other individual's perspective -- hence in Aramaic chessed means shame.

The Babylonian Talmud is the most widely accepted authority for this very reason. When we have an argument in law, we want each opinion to be sensitive to the other's perspective before we decide on the proper approach. Only in understanding the other sides' perspective can we properly distill our own perspective. This was precisely Beit Hillel's approach as well, and the reason we almost always follow their view.

This ability to see something from another's perspective is deeply rooted in the very essence of the Aramean culture. Unfortunately, like every great talent, this incredible ability can be used for good or for evil. Both Rifkah's father and brother used this ability to become confidence men ("con men"). A con man

enters the reality of the "mark" and knows exactly how to manipulate him to gain "confidence" and get his desired end result. This comes from an uncanny ability to see the world from another's perspective.

The reason that Rifkah's lineage is repeated in this week's parsha is because it becomes very relevant to the story line. The Torah is teaching us that Rifkah too had this ability. After all, it was her idea that her son Yaakov enter into Yitzchak's reality and, through a subtle subterfuge, receive the blessings that were intended for her wicked son Eisav. Thus Rifkah, being from Aram, had the innate ability of insight into another's perspective, but she used it to make sure that her righteous son prevailed over her wicked son.

When we try to see issues from another's perspective we end up validating them as people. Validating them does not itself mean agreeing with them, approving of them, or waiving your own rights. You can still take appropriate actions to protect or support yourself or others. You are merely accepting the reality of the other person. You may not like it, you may not prefer it, you may feel sad or angry about it, but at a deeper level, you are at peace with it.

That alone is a blessing, and usually your shift to acceptance of that reality can help resolve conflict and polarization. After all, God created every one of us differently -- as the sages in the Midrash point out; "Just like their faces are different so too are their viewpoints." God didn't create a world with a monolithic society. The differences in opinions gives us a collective strength. God created a world in which we can come to appreciate our differences and still work together in building a better world. ©2020 Rabbi Y. Zweig & torah.org

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrاند

We read in this week's Parsha "And it was when Yitzchak became old his eyes dimmed and he summoned Esav his older sun..." [Bereshis 27:1] We know the rest of the story. As a result of his blindness, he was not able to discern whether he was talking to Yaakov or Eisav. Therefore, Yaakov was able to receive the blessing destined for his brother, Eisav.

The Medrash tells a story that Avraham requested an elderly appearance. Avraham said: "Master of the universe, a father and son will come into a town and people will not know who the father is and who is the son, in order to give proper respect to the elder of the two." Up until the time of Avraham, people did not show their age. No one had gray hair, no one had arthritis, and no one had to walk with a walker. It was not apparent that people were aging. Avraham complained about the situation and demanded, as it were, that G-d institute a new phenomenon in the world-that of old age. Avraham argued that if an older person was crowned with the physical signs of old age, then people would give him the respect he deserves vis

a vis his son.

The Almighty acquiesced to Avraham's request and told him that this phenomenon would begin with him. The first place where "ziknah" is mentioned in the Torah is the pasuk "And Avraham was old (zaken), coming of days" [Bereshis 24:1].

As we get up there in years and we see and feel the signs of old age, we might begin to wonder-was this such a great idea that Avraham came up with after all? Obviously, it was a good idea because the Almighty responded to Avraham "You have asked for something worthwhile." (Davar tov ta'va'ta). Why is it so important that old age be recognizable? Why would it not have been sufficient if the world had continued as it began-with no difference in appearance between one who was 17 and one who was 75?

Rav Simcha Zissel notes the following: The Torah is replete with the concept of "Ask you father and he will tell you; your elders and they will relate it to you" [Devorim 32:7]. It is taken for granted that a certain wisdom comes with old age. This is so axiomatic that the Gemara in Kidushin teaches in the name of Isi ben Yehduah that the principle "You shall get up before an old person" [Vayikra 19:32] applies to any old person. The great Amora, Rabbi Yochanan, used to get up when an elderly Gentile would pass him by. Why? The Gemara explains that even such a person has witnessed many events in his lifetime. A person with many decades of life experience has been through so much that inevitably he achieves a degree of wisdom. The Torah wants us to recognize that wisdom which accrues only through old age.

As a young man, when I have a question what to do, I am directed to consult with an elderly person. Now if everybody looks like they are 20 years old, how will I know who to ask? The Torah wants us to recognize elderly people easily. The Torah wants us to honor elderly people and in order to do so, it is necessary to recognize them first. This is so important for the welfare of society that G-d instituted the concept of old age, that had not existed at the beginning of Creation. "It is a good idea, Avraham. It is an INDESPENSIBLE idea!"

With all of our complaints about old age and all the troubles associated with it, it is worthwhile for society that the younger generation be able to recognize the elders. This is important so that they can give the elders the respect and courtesies they deserve by virtue of the fact that they have experienced so much. They can give the new generation insights that they would not otherwise possess.

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