

United We Stand

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Parshas Toldos

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The Parsha's Path

As the Jewish people anxiously await redemption from the fears and anxieties of this war, there is another anxiety that looms ominously in the background, inching closer and closer as we process the events unfolding around us. But, unlike the immediate fears of war, which civilians can only do something about in largely indirect ways, this fear is something we are all directly empowered and mandated to alleviate.

I refer, of course, to the future unity of the Jewish people. We all draw tremendous strength from the tremendous outpouring of love and unity that the Jewish people are experiencing right now; by and large, the kind of support for each other and connection we feel with one another in the last few weeks has been perhaps almost unprecedented in our nation's history. Nevertheless, this unity is largely based on circumstances for which we hope and pray are extremely fleeting - a threat from the outside. Just beneath the surface of this unity are deep divides that, it seems, will only grow far more exacerbated after the war. Suppressing the issues do not solve them, and while some may be hopeful for changes within the communities they disagree with as an outcome of the war, the actions of others are completely beyond our control. Furthermore, such an attitude reflects an arrogance that not only doesn't help the cause of unity, it can help exacerbate tensions. Until we look to ourselves to see how we can help build bridges and come together, we can't possibly expect that of others.

Unity is not about getting everybody else to agree with what we have to say; it's about being able to humbly come together in love and respect, despite our very weighty disagreements. The way we will overcome the division brought on by our disagreements will not be by simply getting everybody to come around to our way of thinking; it will be by overcoming the division despite our very different ways of thinking. Only once we show our unconditional love, respect, and desire for peace can we have meaningful, fruitful discussions about our disagreements.

The only question is, how? How do we love and respect those we so fundamentally disagree with, who seem to be on such completely different wavelengths regarding some of our most fundamental values? How do

we show them affection when they often treat us with such harshness? Doesn't it take two to save a marriage?

To help answer these questions, I'd like to turn to the very puzzling family dynamic at the heart of this week's Parsha. The Parsha recounts the births and early lives of Yaakov and Eisav. One of the most strange and striking aspects of this narrative is Yitzchak's preference for Eisav. How could Yitzchak, a perfectly righteous individual, favor his wicked son over his righteous one?

The pasuk tells us the answer, but it is difficult to decipher what it means. The pasuk reads: "Yitzchak loved Eisav *ki tzayid bifiv*". Rashi explains that this should be translated as "*for there was game in his (Yitzchak's) mouth*" meaning that the game Eisav brought Yitzchak from his hunting expeditions essentially bribed Yitzchak to love him. This follows the principle that "A bribe blinds the righteous"; one who receives a gift or favor will inevitably cause one to be more favorably inclined towards one benefactor. Rashi also quotes the midrash which interprets the pasuk "*for there was trapping in his (Eisav's) mouth*", meaning that Eisav deceived Yitzchak with his words into thinking he was righteous.

However, Ramban favors a third approach: "*because (Eisav was) a hunter in the mouth of his father*", meaning that Yitzchak understood Eisav to be a hunter. According to this approach, the only reason Yitzchak loved Eisav more than Yaakov was that Eisav was a skillful hunter, while Yaakov was a simple man who stayed at home. Yet this still leaves us with our original question: How is it that Yitzchak could judge his sons so superficially, failing to realize or take into account the wickedness of Eisav and the righteousness of Yaakov? Why is it that Rivka could see the truth, but Yitzchak couldn't?

In order to answer this question, we need to understand who Yitzchak is. Yitzchak is raised in the tent of Avraham, who epitomizes the Love of G-d and its natural corollary, spirituality. Yitzchak's older brother is named Yishmael, which means "G-d will hear". His very name embodies a deep spiritual relationship with G-d, yet Yishmael's spirituality gets out of control as he directs it towards idolatry and radicalism. Yitzchak sees the dangers of an over-emphasis on love and spirituality and forges a path for himself where he doubles down on Fear of G-d, which manifests itself more naturally in the world of physical and concrete observance. Ultimately in practice, Yitzchak leads a life that mirrors his father, digging the same wells, amassing cattle, and going to many of the same places. He manages to follow in his

father's footsteps, yet with an outlook that emphasizes the importance of utilizing the physical world in one's *avodas H'*.

What Yitzchak takes for granted, given his upbringing, is that the physical always goes together with the spiritual. There was no question in the home of Avraham that all of one's dealings and material accomplishments are nothing but a means with which to serve G-d; since Avraham's entire essence radiated spirituality, Yitzchak doesn't appreciate that this element of serving G-d doesn't come as naturally to others. His whole life is about the importance of directing one's spiritual energies through one's material existence; it does not occur to him that his own son may need the very opposite approach, that is, revealing and reinforcing the spiritual in the physical.

It is perhaps for this reason that Yitzchak loves Eisav. Eisav is, like his father, a man of the field. He proves himself to have a great mastery of material pursuits and his name even means that he was "made"- already physically developed from birth. Yitzchak takes it for granted that Eisav must be spiritually adept, as well. Of course, if he's a skilled workman, he must be using his talents to glorify G-d's Name and do His will. Yaakov, on the other hand, has spirituality, but doesn't show much physical prowess. Yaakov is literally named for the fact that he clings to his brother's heel, in a sense living in his shadow. To Yitzchak, for whom spirituality is a given, it is clear that Eisav has far more potential.

Rivka, however, grew up in a home where spirituality could not be taken for granted, and she was able to see Eisav right away for what he was.

This tragic dynamic poignantly reveals the subjectivity of our perception of the world based on our own experiences. We naturally assume that the qualities we take for granted in ourselves and the way we were raised are present in others, and we therefore may fail to fully appreciate their presence or be sensitive to their lack. Conversely, those qualities which we feel more sensitively about, which we really worked on and took ownership of, are those which we will appreciate most acutely in others and which we will be most sensitive to their lack. A baal teshuva has a much richer appreciation of the religious lifestyle than most people who never knew anything else, and a religious person who was taught the value of integrity will be most sensitive to hypocrisy. We are sensitized and desensitized to different values and causes all the time; hopefully, the Torah helps sensitize us appropriately. As the story of Yitzchak and his sons illustrates, the subjectivity of our sensibilities can sometimes result in gross misperceptions of other people, which can also have a deep effect on who they become.

I believe that this idea is crucial in developing love and empathy for those we disagree with. First, we have to step outside of our shoes and into theirs, learning to appreciate the values they excel in which we may not be as sensitive to, and understand how they may not be as sensitive to some of the values we hold so dear.

Secondly, we have to reveal our common root. Yitzchak and Yaakov were fundamentally coming from the same place: a complete commitment to serving G-d with all of their energies and resources. Yet to that end, they each had somewhat different approaches and different values that they emphasized. Likewise, we have to uncover the common yearning for good, the common desire to connect to G-d, which lies at the roots of all our fellow Jews, recognizing how our different experiences have led each of us to prioritize different values and perspectives which we feel will help us pursue that end. We may have fierce disagreements about those values, and not everyone will be right about everything, but fundamentally, we all want the same thing. By acknowledging our different sensibilities and sensitivities and pushing past that to get to the common core, we can embrace all our fellow Jews at the deepest levels and pave a meaningful path forward.

Goal of the week

Step into a friend or family member's shoes and try to understand their perspective.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rachel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Ephraim Melech ben Tzilah, Yitzchok Elimelech ben Channah Sarah, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, and Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

OUR MISSION

To Bring The Third Beis - Hamikdash By Facilitating Jewish Unity Through Torah