



Rabbi Katz's Drashah for Parshat Toldot

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As you may already know, I really enjoy Jewish music. Even as a child, I took a liking to Jewish English songs, as I hadn't yet appreciated the depth of Hebrew lyrics. This may, however, be due more to nurture than nature. After finding a song called "A Conversation in the Womb" (by Abie Rotenberg) eerily familiar, my father said it was because he used to play that song to me when I was in utero with my twin brother. The lyrics of the song are essentially a profound conversation between two boys, a back and forth about whether there is, in fact, "a world to come".

One of the richest pictures that Chazal provide of the dynamic between Yaakov and Esav is derived from but one word in the beginning of Toldot. "Vayitrotzetzu" (25:22) could be translated in a number of ways, but the Midrash (quoted by Rashi) presents it as "running". The sons were "running inside [Rivkah]". Rashi famously explains that whenever Rivkah would pass a place of Avodah Zarah, the child would kick, as if wanting to enter that place. When she passed a center for Torah, (what she thought was) the same child kicked for that too. The confusion led her to "seek out Hashem", Who ultimately explained the situation.

Questions abound in regards to this Midrash. Why did Yaakov want to leave- was he not already learning Torah in the womb with an angel, as described in the Gemara (Niddah 30)? How was Rivkah consoled by the fact that only one of her two children enjoyed Avodah Zarah? Why was Rivkah walking near Avodah Zarah in the first place? Rest assured, all of these questions breed insightful discussions among the commentaries, but I like to fit my drashot on one paper.

Another, more theoretical question which adds a layer of peculiarity to an already peculiar scene, is: What was stopping them? Both Eisav and Yaakov wanted to leave... So why didn't they? According to the story, they were smart enough to know what was on the outside of the womb, but not capable of finding the exit? Of course, the Midrash means to portray a certain message in the symbolism of the scene, so what is the meaning of them not wanting to actually leave?

Rav Yechezkel Taub (d. 1856, student of the Chozeh of Lublin, founder of what is now known as "Modzitz", a Chassidic sect known for its music) explains simply that Yaakov couldn't leave because Eisav was in front of him. Being that he was born first, we can assume that Eisav was between him and the way out. If that was so, however, why didn't *Eisav* leave? If he desired so much for Avodah Zarah that he was "running" towards it, who was stopping *him*?

With an insight that is almost too on-the-nose for today's culture, Rav Taub explains a fascinating trait of human nature: Eisav cared more about stopping Yaakov than he cared about his own "beliefs". It's true, Eisav was an "Oveid Avodah Zarah", but more than his concern for idols was his campaign to belittle and undermine the values of anyone else. Put another way, his life wasn't worth living if he didn't have a Yaakov to fight against.

As difficult as it is to admit, we tend to be more passionate when we're fighting against something. When we take note of some impending threat or danger -physically or intellectually- we feel motivated to conquer the

task. We can mobilize the masses to fight “the man”. Chip and Dan Heath recall in their book “Switch” how there was a common strategy in the business world during the 1980’s to create what was called a “burning platform” in order to motivate employees to work harder (p. 121). In other words, we often feel a greater sense of accomplishment when we conquer or defeat an opponent than if we simply live out our values. But why? Why don’t we feel the same sense of accomplishment to live as we believe?

In an example that is perhaps closer to home, why aren’t we as passionate about our davening as we are about anti-semitism? Surely, both are of utmost importance, and both *should be* done passionately. But which one gets us more excited? Eisav was more passionate about undermining Yaakov because he wasn’t excited by his own beliefs. They were meaningful to him only inasmuch as they distinguished himself from “others”. (And let’s not even discuss what kind of motivation lies at the core of almost every political commentary or news article. Politicking has essentially become the science of finding or creating problems in order to convince others about how to fix them.)

So how can one overcome this urge? How can one develop a passion for what one has, and not simply for criticizing those who wish to challenge it? To truly answer that question, each person has to be sensitive to their own emotions; to figure out what *positive* feelings make them “tick”. To start, we find two examples within these few pesukim, about Yaakov and Eisav.

The commentaries try to explain why, if Yaakov was a “home-body”, does the Torah describe him as sitting in *tents*, plural (25:27). Rashi explains that he went to multiple Batei Midrash- of Shem and Eiver, to learn. Radak expands this explanation by saying that Yaakov was willing to “learn with any wise person he could find... he was ‘simple’, without any ulterior motives”. Yaakov lived with a sense of curiosity. He thirsted to know more. One way of cultivating a passion for one’s values is to find an aspect of it which is interesting. Look for topics, mediums, or books that pique your curiosity. In the same way that one’s motivated to stop the threats of others, one can be motivated to fill a void of information.

Rashi quotes a Gemara (57b) that explains why the word “goyim” (25:23) is spelled without a vav in the Torah (gimmel, yud, yud, mem). Chazal explain that it means “the proud”, or the prominent. It refers to the descendants of Yaakov and Eisav- Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and Antoninus. As Chazal explain, each of them were adamant that there should always be radishes and lettuce on their table, regardless of the season. The Maharal explains in his commentary to Rashi (Gur Aryeh) that this is the meaning of the Gemara (Ketuvot 104b) which retells how Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi said on his deathbed that he ‘never benefited from this world’. The radishes and lettuce weren’t on the table for his own pleasure, but rather as an expression for the high esteem and pride in which he perceived a position of leadership in the Jewish community. He was proud of his Judaism, so much so that he felt it was appropriate for it to be represented with the most regal of standards.

As Chip and Dan Heath explain in the continuation of the above-mentioned chapter, “The positive emotion of interest broadens what we want to investigate... we want to get involved, to learn new things... The positive emotion of pride... encourag[es] us to pursue even bigger goals” (p. 123). To avoid needing a burning platform to make Judaism meaningful, look for what interests you, find your curiosity. Alternatively (or additionally), figure out what makes you proud to be Jewish- what is it about the Jewish people and our traditions that makes you want to continue them? When we’re able to motivate ourselves by being sincerely intrigued by our Torah, and/or proud of our heritage, then we can hopefully avoid the need to “hunt” like Eisav, and instead we can “simply” live like Yaakov (25:27).

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Katz