

## Parashat Toldot, Rabbi James Proops

In the Holocaust memoir *The Yellow Star*, Simcha Unsdorfer recounts his experiences having been transported to Auschwitz at the age of 19. It is his harrowing yet inspiring story of survival through both Auschwitz and Buchenwald describing how he withstood unspeakable horrors with courage, moral defiance and the incredible “strength of the Jewish spirit”. He recalls that in December 1944 in the labor camp of *Nieder-Orschel* he realised that Chanukah was nearly upon them and he decided that he and his fellow inmates should light a Chanukah *Menorah*. He writes, “We knew, of course, that Jewish law did not compel us to risk our lives for the sake of fulfilling a commandment. But there was an urge in many of us to reveal the spirit of sacrifice implanted in our ancestors throughout the ages. We who were in such great spiritual, as well as physical distress, felt that a little Chanukah light would warm our starving souls and inspire us with hope, faith, and courage to keep us going through this long, grim, and icy winter”. Despite certain death if caught, Simcha together with those in his barrack, gathered together an empty shoe polish tin, some oil and some threads from a blanket. They traded some soup rations for a cigarette, which was in turn exchanged for a box of matches, and they succeeded in their mission of lighting the *Menorah* on the first night of Chanukah. He concludes, “Tears poured down our haggard cheeks. By now, every single inmate in the room sat silently on his bunk, or near mine, deeply meditating. For a moment, nothing else mattered. We were celebrating the first night of Chanukah as we had done in all the years previous to our imprisonment and torture. We were a group of Jewish people fulfilling our religious duties, and dreaming of home and of bygone years.”

There are many other stories from throughout the ages of similar experiences of remarkable Jews who against the odds managed to adhere to Jewish practise.

Where did Jews like Simcha Unsdorfer get their love, passion and commitment to *Mitzvot* from? At a time when their lives were at stake, how could it be that all they were thinking of was whether they would be able to light the *Menorah*?

Although we have many *Parshiyot* discussing in great detail the lives of both Avraham and Yaakov, we don't find as much written in the Torah about the life and character of Yitzchak. It is well known that Avraham is the epitome of *Chessed*, devoting his life to being kind and merciful to others. When the recipients of Avraham's kindness would thank him, it is told that he would explain to them that he was merely mirroring the *Chessed* that Hashem bestows upon all of us. This attitude and philosophy appealed greatly to many people and he therefore managed to inspire multitudes, who in turn become devoted to Hashem.

Similarly, Yaakov is characterized by his devotion to *Emet* (truth) and spent his life spreading and teaching Torah. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that although *Emet* does not have the same attraction to the masses as *Chessed*, it still appeals to many people and therefore, like his grandfather, he too inspired others. Yitzchak however is known to be personified by *Gevurah* (strength) and *Din* (judgement). This is demonstrated most clearly through the episode of the *Akeidah* at which he willingly went to offer himself to Hashem. It is clear that this approach to *Avodat Hashem* does not always attract others to follow suit and can be seen as less inspiring than the pursuit of *Emet* or acts of *Chessed*. We can understand therefore that unlike Avraham and Yaakov, Yitzchak did not draw a large contingent of followers. Rav Yaakov notes that the *Avot* not only teach us how to serve Hashem, but they also created the 'spiritual DNA' for the Jewish nation that was to follow.

The fact that Klal Yisrael continue to demonstrate incredible feats of *Chessed* is due to the effort that Avraham Avinu invested into this middah which spilled over to future generations. Similarly it was Yitzchak Avinu who passed on devotion to Hashem and the ability to be *Mesirat Nefesh*, to sacrifice or be willing to sacrifice one's life for Hashem.

The fact that throughout the generations, Jews have been devoted to Torah and *Mitzvot* even in their darkest hours is all due to Yitzchak's devotion and strength in serving God. Despite not having as many followers in his life-time as Avraham and Yaakov or stories told about him in the Torah, his influence can be traced throughout Jewish history and his legacy is everlasting. May we look to the life of Yitzchak Avinu, together with the incredible stories of individuals like Simcha Unsdorfer and be inspired not to give up our adherence to Torah values and *Mitzvah* observance despite the challenges we may face.

Shabbat Shalom