

When Yitzchak grew old, his eyes weakened from seeing (27,1)

This verse sets the stage for the dramatic end of our Parsha: Yaakov “deceiving” Yitzchak and “stealing” the birthright blessings from Eisav. Rashi quotes from the Midrash three causes of Yitzchak’s blindness.

- 1) Because of the smoke of these [wives of Esav] (who would burn [incense] to the idols) (Tanchuma, Toledoth 8; Pesiktha Rabbathi 12)
- 2) Another explanation: When Isaac was bound on the altar, and his father was about to slaughter him, the heavens opened, and the ministering angels saw and wept, and their tears fell upon Isaac’s eyes. As a result, his eyes became dim (Gen. Rabbah 65:6)
- 3) A third explanation: to enable Jacob to take the blessings (Gen. Rabbah 65:8)

Each of these explanations help us understand something about Yitzchak’s character. They also help us understand why Yitzchak is best known for his attribute of Gevurah, strength.

If Yitzchak was blinded by the smoke created by the idolatry of Eisav’s wives, then that would mean that Yitzchak allowed Eisav and his family to remain part of his household, even as they were engaged in behavior of which Yitzchak disapproved. Contrast Yitzchak’s response to idolatry in the home with that of Avraham. Avraham’s father had an idol store, and Avraham felt compelled to destroy his father’s idols due to his awareness of One God. Yitzchak’s Gevurah, strength, is expressed in his ability to love Eisav and to tolerate his bad behavior. Instead of saying to Eisav “my house, my rules” or “if you don’t like my rules then get out”, the Midrash implies that Yitzchak was willing to “turn a blind eye” to idolatry in an attempt to keep Eisav part of the family and in the fold.

If Yitzchak looked up and saw into Heaven during the Akeida, then he may have acquired a heavenly perspective that he applied to life in this world. In Heaven, everything makes sense—even the Akeida. Those people that appear to be evil in this world, in Heaven they are understood to be part of the Divine Plan and therefore “good”. After perceiving this from Heaven, Yitzchak applied this perspective to his relationship with his son Eisav. Eisav was evil in many ways, yet Yitzchak was able to see the good in him, whether that good was latent or potential.

Lastly, if Hashem blinded Yitzchak in order to arrange that Yaakov receive the blessings, then the lesson for us is that everything that happens in life happens for a reason. We may not like it, and we may not understand it. But we should acknowledge that it all comes from Hashem. Such an attitude requires great humility, and great strength; the type of strength that we learn from our patriarch Yitzchak.

It emerges that Yitzchak’s blindness teaches us a lot about his strength of character, his love for his children and his faith in Hashem.