



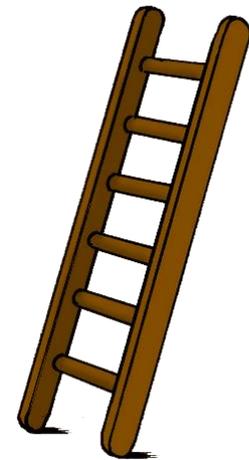
The Parsha in Practice

How Many Rungs Have You Climbed?

וַיַּעֲתָר יִצְחָק לְהַלְנִיחַ אֶשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא וַיַּעֲתָר לוֹ ה' וַתֵּהָר רֵבֶקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

Although our Parsha begins with the image of both Yitzchak and Rivka praying for children, it surprisingly implies that specifically “his” - Yitzchak’s - prayers were answered. Rashi quotes the *Gemara’s* famous explanation that Yitzchak’s prayers were more easily accepted because the prayers of a *tzadik ben rasha* - a righteous person who is the child of sinners - are not comparable to those of a *tzadik ben tzadik* - a righteous person whose parents were righteous as well. Therefore, the prayers of Yitzchak, son of the righteous Avraham, were more readily acceptable than those of Rivka, the daughter of the wicked Betuel.



Most people are surprised when they read this Rashi. We are naturally more impressed with the “self-made man” who had the determination and gumption to grow beyond the limitations of his youth to transform his life into one of his own making. Shouldn’t the *tzadik* who was given no support and no positive role models be considered superior to the *tzadik* who was blessed with the “silver spoon” of parental inspiration and devoted moral education? Isn’t that the classic “*Baal Teshuva*” story of a person who completely makes a break from one paradigm to adopt another?

Indeed, this seems to be what Rabbi Abahu means when he claims that: **מְקוֹם שֶׁבָּעָלֵי תְשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין**, that “In the place where *Baalei Teshuva* (penitents) stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand” (Berachot 34b). One who eschews his past to begin again achieves a level so lofty that even the always-righteous cannot attain. How can the prayers of the mere *tzadik ben tzadik*, the always-religious, even compare?

This *Gemara* about *Baalei Teshuva* does quote another opinion, that of Rabbi Yochanan, who disagrees with Rabbi Abahu. He felt that the always-righteous, the *tzadik ben tzadik* would indeed be at a greater level than the “*Baal Teshuva*” could attain. Again, how can we

understand this other perspective? How can Jew born with the spoon of *frumkeit* in their mouth be superior to the one who adopts a religious lifestyle and sacrifices for it themselves?

R' Eliyahu Dessler explains that we need to reevaluate what it really takes to be a *tzadik ben tzadik*. True, the *tzadik* who grew from challenging surroundings accomplished a great deal. But for a moment, let's imagine the course of the *tzadik ben tzadik*. What is it like to be born the son of a Rabbi, taught to do mitzvot from a young age, the behavior reinforced by your "righteous" environment year after year as you grow into adulthood? As you find yourself still doing the same actions and mitzvot you did as a child, have those actions become any more meaningful? Any less childish? Have you overcome our unfortunate human tendency to turn even the most important and significant behaviors into mechanical, uninspired, and rote tasks?

We're reminded here that whoever we are, however we were raised, and wherever we began our Jewish journey - whether at birth or at a later date - we are always challenged to "up our game" and elevate our observance and our intentionality when doing *mitzvot*.

Whether you were born as the *tzadik ben tzadik* or the became the *tzadik* yourself, the difference between these people is not **that** they are choosing, but **what** they are choosing. One person might be choosing to start to *daven* while the other is choosing to start to daven with *kavana*. One might be choosing to begin keeping *Shabbat* while the other is struggling to upgrade their observance by focusing on the study of *Shabbat's* detailed laws. One is pushing themselves to learn the basics of the story of *Chumash* while the other is challenging themselves to push their learning to the next subject, and the next *sefer*. Both are choosing, both are making moves.

I've often repeated the quote: "Life is a ladder. It's not about how high you get, it's about how many rungs you climb." That is the great test of the *tzadik ben tzadik*. To take what one has learned and to make it his or her own. To renew and find your own unique sort of righteousness. To not be religiously smug, superior, and self-satisfied by thinking that we are in good standing compared to others. To be constantly climbing, irrespective of our starting point.

Yitzchak's prayers are accepted to remind us that even if we are the son of Avraham, we also need to grow beyond learned behavior, complacency, and mechanical mitzvah performance to truly become the *tzadik* that only **we** can become. May we climb the ladder as high as we can, and may our prayers be answered as well!

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach