

Parshat Toldot 5777

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי? “And the sons struggled inside her, and she [Rivka] said, ‘If this is so, why am I like this?’” (25,22). לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי? is a difficult expression to translate. Literally: “why? Is this me?” We will return to this later.

Rashi adds: ותאמר אם כן: גדול צער העבורלמה זה אנכי: מתאוה ומתפללת על הריון:

In other words, Rivka is seemingly saying that had it been known how much pain pregnancy would entail, she and Yitzchak would never have expended so much effort davening for children. This is extraordinary. Having been desperate to reproduce for two decades, she is suddenly full of regret after a bit of kicking. How can this be? Perhaps the most famous *medrash* of them all, is brought by Rashi here on the word וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ

כשהיתה עוברת על פתחי תורה של שם ועבר יעקב רץ ומפרכס לצאת, עוברת על פתחי עבודה זרה עשו מפרכס לצאת

“When she [Rivka] would pass entrances of [the] *Yeshivas* of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would run and agitate to come out; when she passed entrances of idolatry, Esav would agitate to come out.” There is a Gemora in Sanhedrin (91b), at the beginning of Perek Cheilek, recording a conversation between Rebbi and his friend, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

ואמר ליה אנטונינוס לרבי מאימתי יצה"ר שולט באדם משעת יצירה או משעת יציאה א"ל משעת יצירה א"ל א"כ בועט במעי אמו ויוצא אלא משעת יציאה

“Antoninus said to Rebbi, ‘when is the *yetzer hora* existent in mankind – from the time of conception or from the time of birth?’ He [Rebbi] said to him, ‘From the time of conception.’ He [Antoninus] said to him, ‘If that is so, [the foetus] would always be destructive in his mother’s womb trying to get out - thus it must be from the time of birth.’” This is how the Gemora concludes, with Rebbi agreeing. The Maharsha (Rabbi Shmuel Eidels 1555-1631) asks a magnificent question. If that is the case, that the *yetzer hora* is only formed at birth, what was Esav thrashing around for whenever Rivka passed a place of *avoda zara*. It shouldn’t have bothered him either way. Another Gemora now needs to be considered, this time from Yuma (80b).

היא עוברת דארחא אתו לקמיה דרבי אמר להו זילו לחושו לה דיומא דכיפורי הוא לחושו לה ואילחישא קרי עליה בטרם אצרך בבטן ידעתין וגו... ההיא עוברת דארחא אתו לקמיה דרבי חנינא אמר להו לחושו לה ולא אילחישא קרי עליה זורו רשעים מרחם

“There was a pregnant woman who smelled food [on Yom Kippur] and was overwhelmed with desire to eat. They came to [ask] Rebbi who said to them, ‘Go and whisper to her that it is Yom Kippur’. They whispered to her, and she became composed. He [Rebbi] ascribed to this foetus the passuk, ‘Before I even formed you in the womb, I knew you.’ ...There was a pregnant woman who smelled food [on Yom Kippur] and was overwhelmed with desire to eat. They came to [ask] Rebbi Chaninah who said to them, “whisper to her [etc.]”. But it didn’t help. He [Rebbi Chaninah] ascribed to this foetus the passuk, ‘The wicked are formed in the womb’.”

This fits in with the Chumash, that babies do have a *yetzer hara* in the womb, but again, would be difficult with the previous Gemora in Sanhedrin that concluded they do not.

To try and solve all our difficulties, we need to consider the familiar concept of nature versus nurture. The Maharsha explains that a person’s characteristics are inherited, but only up to a degree. Thus a part of *yetzer hara* is already formed and codified in the womb. It is only our own contribution that emerges later on, from the time of birth. So Antoninus was asking Rebbe about the arrival of a human’s personal *yetzer hara*, whilst the Gemora in Yuma was talking about that which is inherited (which makes sense in the latter case; clearly the mother is also an important factor in deciding how overpowering her urge to break Yom Kippur is.)

Back to our *passuk*. Since he is still in the womb, it is the part of the *yetzer hara* inherited by Esav that is getting excited at idolatry. And this explains the first part of the expression that confused us earlier– the word לָמָּה - Why is this happening?? Rivka is puzzled as to how her unborn child has inherited such a *yetzer hora*. Look who his parents are! The apple has fallen into another orchard, let alone far from the tree.

And furthermore, if it is from his mother that Esav’s bad character has been transferred, she cannot understand why such impetus was put on her having children? וְהָאֲנֹכִי? Was I necessary for all this? Yitzchak could have taken another wife to reproduce the future of the Jewish people with (as his father and son both did).

This does of course throw up an even tougher question – from where did Esav actually inherit this allure to idolatry? This however must be left, to coin a phrase, as the topic for another *shiur*...

[Written in memory of Benjy Hockley z'l – a pillar of Ner who inherited the fine character of both his parents, and added his own unique qualities](#)