

Mockery is Never Good

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Leitzonus

“And these are the generations of Yitzchok the son of Avrohom; Avrohom gave birth to Yitzchok” (25:19). Rashi: the mockers of the generation were saying that Soroh had conceived from Avimelech

If these mockers were attempting to deny any miracle, this allegation would seem to be ineffective, since, even if it were true, Soroh was also far beyond childbearing age and could only have conceived with a miracle. The Brisker Rov noted that even when non-believers cannot explain away a phenomenon with natural causes, they still seek to attempt to minimize the extent of a miracle, or look for "natural" explanations for supernatural events. At the time that Yerushalayim was being bombarded, he said that the secular media would attribute the lack of casualties to natural sources, such as the might of their army, and, if forced to admit a miracle, they would endeavor to belittle it as much as possible, still finding natural causes.

Rav Moshe Schneider asked why this medrash quoted by Rashi refers to “mockers”. These people were seeking to uproot faith in Hashem and in miracles, so we would have expected them to be termed “wicked heretics” rather than “mockers”. He replied that this teaches us that the danger posed by those who mock and belittle talmidei chachomim (rabbinic scholars) or anything connected to kedusho (holiness) is potentially even greater than the danger posed by outright heretics. He said that even though they had no convincing intellectual arguments to offer, the successes of the maskilim in Russia and Poland were due to their venomous leitzonus, (mocking) which gradually seeped into the hearts of their victims, eventually transforming them completely.

Rav Schneider also recalled having heard when he was living in Memel, Prussia, that Rav Akiva Eger (who had been the rov of Posen not far from Memel) was once present at a wedding of one of his descendants when the mechutan (in-laws) spoke some words of leitzonus to him. Rav Akiva Eger was so

shocked that he left the wedding for a while, apparently in order to perform a chesbon hanefesh (introspection) as to how it had come about that his ears had become polluted by words of leitzonus.

Fatherhood

The apparent duplication in the above possuk (verse) may be explained as follows: And these are the generations of Yitzchok the son of Avrohom refers to the physical birth, whereas Avrohom gave birth to Yitzchok refers to a spiritual “birth”, as it says “Whoever teaches his friend’s son Torah is considered as if he has given birth to him” (Sanhedrin 19b). Avrohom too shaped Yitzchok’s internal spiritual growth and established his qualities of fortitude and self-dedication.

Many people imagine that the father’s main influence over his son is in the material sphere, but, in reality, the main aspect of “fatherhood” lies in the spiritual arena, in educating him from the outset in Torah and fear of heaven, and spending money generously on hiring teachers, and, if necessary, a chavrusa. That is when he is called a genuine father, because he thereby grants his son access to the afterlife, and his son absorbs his father’s spiritual character.

Eisov’s Hypocrisy

And the children struggled within her, and she said, "If it be so, why am I [like] this?" (25:22). Rashi: When she passed by the entrances of the Torah [academies] of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would run and struggle to come out; when she passed the entrance of [a temple of] idolatry, Eisov would run and struggle to come out

The late Klausenberger Rebbe asked the following question. Chazal note that Eisov was in the habit of concealing his wickedness and pretended to be righteous, such as when he asked his father how to take ma’aser (tithe) from salt, so why did he not hesitate to come out when his mother passed the entrance of a temple of idolatry, why did he not conceal his wicked intentions?

The Rebbe answered that a hypocrite like Eisov would claim that he only wanted to come out in order to fight the idolatry being practiced there; he would don a veneer of holiness and portray himself as a righteous “zealot” fighting the Battles of Hashem. Eisov’s wickedness ran very deep.

Keeping a Distance from Tumoh

The gemoro (Avoda Zoro 17a) says that it is forbidden to walk past the entrance of a house of idol worship, so how could Rivka have done so? It seems that the prohibition only applies when walking within four amos (arm's lengths) of the entrance, and Rivka did not do that, but only walked close to the entrance; and yet, even so, the spirit of tumoh (impurity) was still strong enough for Eisov to be attracted to it. This shows how much we must endeavor to distance ourselves from tumoh.

For this reason Moshe Rabbenu did not pray in a town filled with idols (See Rashi on Shmos 9:29). Similarly, the founders of Slobodka yeshiva chose to establish it there because there was no church in the vicinity. Rav Schneider would say that a house of minus was worse than one containing idols, and when he was forced to pass a location in which there was mixed dancing or speakers spewing words of heresy he would recite the possuk, "but you shall utterly detest it, and you shall utterly abhor it; for it is to be destroyed" (Devorim 7:26).

Keeping good company

We can understand why Eisov wanted to come out, but Yaakov was being taught Torah by an angel at the time, so why would he have wanted to come out? The Brisker Rov is said to have commented that even being taught Torah by an angel is not worthwhile at the cost of having to live in close quarters with an evil person. Even though there was no obvious detrimental effect, just being in close proximity to a person like Eisov is damaging, especially for someone like Yaakov, whose image is engraved underneath the Kisei Hakavod.(heavenly throne)

Rav Sternbuch was once asked whether a child should be sent to a cheder with excellent teachers and a very high academic level, but the class in question also had some boys with bad middos, (character traits) or to another institution with a much lower level of learning but in which the boys in the class did not have bad middos and came from strong homes. Rav Sternbuch instructed the parent to choose the institution with the better boys because that was the most important issue, since even a minority of children with bad middos can have a very detrimental effect on their friends.

“And the youths grew up” (25:27). Rashi: As long as they were small, they were not recognizable through their deeds, and no one scrutinized them to determine their characters. As soon as they became thirteen years old, this one parted to the houses of study, and that one parted to idol worship

Some people are not particular about the company their young children keep, or about the quality of their teachers, in the mistaken belief that at a young age, children are not so vulnerable. They are making a grave mistake, because the precedent of Yaakov and Eisov teaches us that even at the youngest age a child's character is developed, even though it may not manifest itself until he becomes thirteen years old.

Similarly, Rashi (on 27:1) cites the medrash that Yitzchok became blind because of the smoke of Eisov's wives who would burn incense to the idols. Tosfos wonder why according to this explanation Rivka's eyes did not suffer too, and they answer that she was already used to the incense of the idols in her father's house. Even though many years had passed, and even though she was only three years old at the time, she became desensitized, and this still had an effect on her many years later.

Hence, even a very small child (or a fetus for that matter, which is already endowed with a soul) has to be protected from coming into contact with any form of tumoh.

If a child keeps bad company, is exposed to immodesty, or is taught by teachers who do not serve as positive role models, this is absorbed by the child, even though the harmful effects may not become apparent until he grows older.

Valuing Every Moment

“Eisov was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Yaakov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents” (25:27).

Rashi says that Eisov, the man of the field, was an idler. This was the source of his tumoh. By contrast, Yaakov dwelt permanently in tents. Even though he was not subjected to trials like Avrohom ovinu or Yitzchok with the akeida, (the binding of Yitzchak) Yaakov is still considered the “choicest” [bechir] of the ovos, because of this quality of valuing time and utilizing every moment for Torah and avodas Hashem. This demonstrates what an essential quality this is, since it is the source of all other qualities.

Tents are temporary structures hinting at the fact that Yaakov lived with the awareness of the temporary nature of this ephemeral world. On the other hand, he “dwelt” permanently in them. Gedolei yisroel (great rabbis of the generation) throughout the generations immersed themselves completely in their Torah studies, and they considered worldly matters to be complete vanities. They valued every moment.

For example, Rav Yechiel Michel Epstein, the Oruch HaShulchon, did not have chairs in the room where he received visitors, fearing that if they would sit down, they might stay a few moments longer than they would if they remained standing, and he would then be disturbed from his learning for a few moments longer than necessary.

Someone once told the Brisker Rov about a certain talmid chochom who was completely immersed in Torah, but the person relating this did not know whether he was a tzaddik. The Brisker Rov responded: “For me the greatest form of righteousness is hasmodo”.(continual learning)

Learning from Our Erring Brethren

“Eisov was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Yaakov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents” (25:27).

By comparing the two brothers’ way of life, the possuk is telling us that just like Eisov invested all his energy and dedicated himself completely to hunting, so too did Yaakov do the same with regard to Torah study, as it says, “Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies” (Tehilim, 119:98).

The same principle applies to future generations. Just like our erring brethren invest their energy into devising sundry schemes to reduce the amount of Torah learners, so too must we do our utmost to create plans for increasing Torah learning. The Chofetz Chaim already complained: “The wicked fight on behalf of falsehood with truth, whereas we fight for the truth with falsehood”. Meaning to say, that the wicked fight for their wicked “values” with their very beings, whereas we fight on behalf of the holy Torah, which is the Torah of truth, without sufficient self-dedication.

Keeping Errant Children in the House

And Yitzchok loved Eisov because [his] game was in his mouth, but Rivka loved Yaakov” (25:28)

Yitzchok knew that Eisov was wicked (see the Alshich Kakodosh), and his love was not permanent and fixed like Rivka's love for Yaakov (that is why it says Rivka loved (oheves in the present tense) but Veye'ehav Yitzchok – he loved in the past tense. The point of his love was to draw Eisov closer to avodas Hashem. However, why did Yitzchok do this instead of banishing him from his house as Yishmoel had been banished by Avrohom Ovinu?

Yishmoel behaved badly when he was still in Avrohom's house. Chazal tell us that he quarreled with Yitzchok. Hence, Avrohom had no choice but to expel him from his house. Eisov, on the other one, was completely immoral and wicked outside the house but behaved properly at home. In fact, he even made a point of honoring his parents. Therefore, there was no danger involved in keeping him at home, and so Yitzchok wanted to act lovingly towards him in the hope that he would repent his ways.

This teaches us that if a family member starts adopting an irreligious lifestyle, he should not be kept at home if he behaves like a wicked person inside the home, because there is a great risk that he will influence other members of the household. Only if he acts like all the others in the house should he be allowed to remain at home, and everything done to bring him closer to a life of Torah and mitzvos.

Upside-Down World

And Eisov said to Yaakov, "Pour into me some of this red, red pottage, for I am faint" (25:30)

It is amazing to behold how Hashem orchestrates events in this world in order to perform His will. Yaakov ovinu was constantly immersed in Torah and lived with the bare minimum. All he asked for was "bread to eat and a garment to wear" (28:20). Eisov, on the other hand, was totally preoccupied with worldly matters. It was therefore a completely unnatural occurrence for Eisov to suddenly become dependent on Yaakov's kindness for worldly affairs. And yet, Hashem orchestrated events in such a way that the wicked Eisov would become tired and hanker for lentils, which he could only obtain from Yaakov. He was so desperate for the lentils that he was willing to sell the bechora to Yaakov. Completely unexpectedly, Yaakov became the giver and Eisov the taker, so that Hashem's will that Yaakov should merit the bechora would become fulfilled.

In future generations too, even when the glory of Torah is degraded in this world, when the redemption comes Hashem will show us "an upside-down world", in which the apparent success of the enemies of

Torah will evaporate like smoke, and the glory of Torah will become elevated, in fulfillment of the possuk “to make you superior over all the nations”, the holy Shechinah will dwell amongst us when moshiach comes, and those who toil in Torah will lead the way.

Following in Eisov’S Footsteps

“Thus Eisov scorned the birthright” (25:34)

Eisov was not the equivalent of a modern-day heretic. He dressed the part of an observant Jew, and by performing mitzvos in the presence of his father, he managed to deceive him. Having been brought up in the home of Yitzchok and Rivka, he knew all about what awaits those who fulfill the Will of Hashem, and about the consequences of not observing mitzvos. However, he wanted "cash" here and now, preferring to enjoy even the smallest benefit in this world rather than wait for any rewards in the world to come. Thus, if he was very hungry and felt like a pottage of lentils, then giving up the bechora and all the holiness associated with it, of which he was well aware, that was a small price to pay in his eyes.

Unfortunately, there is an element of Eisov inside most of us. Whenever we give up the opportunity of acquiring priceless eternal life for the sake of momentary pleasure, such as engaging in idle chatter, we are following in his footsteps. If we do this consistently, we will end up, like him, wailing "a most loud and bitter cry" for having exchanged eternal existence for the sake of ephemeral pleasure, when it is already too late, and we no longer have the opportunity to amend our deeds.

In this context, it should be noted that some bnei Torah, finding it difficult to make ends meet, are faced with the test of leaving kollel to go out to the workplace. If they would be fully aware of the significance of eternal life gained through Torah study, they would be happy with their lot as bnei Torah and would not want to leave the Torah world, realizing that it is preferable to give up “cash benefits” in this world for the sake of eternal pleasures in the next one. Even if an avrech is indeed unable to meet his kesubo obligations which he undertook when he got married, he should consult with daas Torah, because a person has many personal biases, and therefore cannot make decisions on his own.

Eternal Investment

And I will bless you for the sake of Avrohom, My servant. (26:24)

The Moshav Zekeinim (written by the Baalei HaTosafos) asks why this blessing is attributed to the merit of Avrohom; surely Yitzchak himself was worthy of these blessings in his own merit? He proves from this that if someone is righteous, learns Torah, and instructs his sons to learn and follow the proper path, the mitzvos performed by his descendants after his death are attributed to him as if he himself had performed them. That is why it says “For the sake of Avrohom My servant,” because all of the mitzvos that Yitzchak performed were performed in the wake of the education he had received from his father. Therefore, Hashem deemed them as having been performed by Avrohom himself.

We would do well to be cognizant of this fact whenever we experience any emotional pain or frustration when raising our children. Putting our hearts and souls into our children’s education and serving as positive role models is not only an important mitzvah in and of itself, but an investment bearing short-term, long-term, and eternal benefits.

Material Blessings

“He called Eisov, his elder son” (27:1)

What was the argument between Yitzchok and Rivka regarding Eisov? In the siddur "Otzar Hatefilos" at the end of Veyiten lecho the commentary "Tikun Tefilo" suggests that Yaakov advocated the Torah-only method of Rabi Shimon Bar Yochai, whereas Eisov lived in accordance with the maxim in Pirkei Ovos (2:2) that it is beautiful when Torah and making a living go together. Yitzchok was fully aware of the superior qualities of Yaakov, but he felt that someone who enjoys the labor of his own hands is greater than someone who fears Heaven (Brochos 8a). Rav Moshe Schneider was very upset that this explanation had been printed in the siddur, and he felt that it should be deleted, since it was forbidden to even entertain the thought that Yitzchok Ovinu would have such views. He said that such “explanations” stemmed from the sort of leitzonus (mockery designed to lead to heresy) practiced by the maskilim.

The simple explanation is that both Yitzchok and Rivka loved Yaakov more because he was steeped in Torah, and they both realized that it would only be to Yaakov's detriment to receive material blessings in this world, since those would be deducted from his eternal reward in the world to come. However, Yitzchok, in the mistaken belief that Eisov was basically observant, felt that if he were to receive material blessings this might lead him to come closer to Hashem by increasing his faith and fear of Heaven.

Rivka, on the other hand, had heard the prophecy about the two progenitors of great nations in her womb, one of whom had the potential to become wicked, and who had unfortunately fulfilled that potential, so that it seemed to her preferable for Yaakov to obtain those blessings furtively under the guise of Eisov, so that nothing would be deducted from his eternal reward.

Long Davening

“Perhaps my father will touch me, and I will appear to him as a deceiver” (27:12)

Rav Yerucham Levovitz, the mashgiach of Mir, would daven a very long Shmone Esrei on Rosh Hashono night. When the Yeshiva had already finished the whole tefila as well as the meal, he was still standing and praying. His student, the bochur Nosson Wachtfogel, later to become mashgiach of Lakewood, wanted to see what his mashgiach did after such a long davening, and so he hid in a place nearby, and then he heard the mashgiach singing to himself repeatedly, many times and excitedly, the above possuk. He sang to a mussar tune.

Rav Yerucham’s behavior may be explained on the basis of the warning contained in the literature that sometimes prideful thoughts may enter the mind of a person who spends a long time on his tefila, telling him what a righteous person he is, and if he listens to those thoughts his reward is offset by his pride. Therefore, the mashgiach told himself immediately after finishing his tefila: “Who knows if Hashem is satisfied with me, perhaps my Father will examine me and find me unworthy of spending so much time in prayer, and I will appear to Him as a deceiver”.

The test of prosperity

“And Yitzchok became exceedingly afraid” (27:33)

The Medrash on this possuk says that Yitzchok became afraid twice, once when he was tied up to become a sacrifice on the altar, and the second time when Eisov brought him the tasty food, and he realized that the recipient of his blessings had not been Eisov. The Medrash notes that the fear felt by Yitzchok on the latter occasion was greater (as it says, "exceedingly afraid").

The fear he felt at the time of the akeido may have been similar to that experienced by Soroh before she died, i.e. he may have been worried about whether his descendants would possess the same fortitude as him to withstand physical persecutions throughout the generations (see last week's article).

Yitzchok intended to bestow material blessings upon Eisov in the hope that this would be for his spiritual benefit. Upon learning that that it was Yaakov who had become the recipient of those material blessings, Yitzchok felt an exceedingly great fear, because he knew that the test of material abundance would be even greater than that of physical persecutions. He knew that it would be easier for his descendants to march to the stake or the gas chambers with joy reciting Shema Yisroel or singing ani maamin, than it would be to withstand the trials of material abundance.

For example, notwithstanding our enemies' determined attempts to dehumanize us during the Second World War, the Holocaust brought out the best in most Jews. By contrast, since the Second World War, they say that about 5 million Jews have become assimilated in the United States, due to the prosperity and freedom for Jews prevalent there.

Similarly, the main danger from our erring brethren does not stem from their decrees directed at our way of life, because most of us can withstand such tests with mesirus nefesh, but rather from the danger of our seeking to become assimilated into their way of life.

Wealth is not evil

On the other hand, Rashi says (on the possuk "Two nations are in your womb" (25:23)) quoting the gemoro (Avodo Zoro 11a) that the two nations refer to Antoninus and Rebbi, from whose tables neither radishes nor lettuce were lacking, either in the summer or in the winter. Rivka was being told that sometimes the descendants of Yaakov would also enjoy material success in this world. We do not negate wealth per se. However, whereas the descendants of Eisov usually use their wealth entirely for material purposes, we use it for the sake of Heaven to help talmidei chachomim and so on. The example set by Rebbi, who before his death raised his fingers heavenwards and declared that he had not partaken of the pleasures of this world even with his small finger, shows that even the wealthiest people can be avdei Hashem of the highest degree.