



TORAH ACADEMY
of Bergen County

קול תורה

Parashat Toledot

29 Cheshvan 5775

November 22, 2014

Vol. 24 No. 9

THE POWER OF SPEECH

by *Rabbi Josh Kahn*

“The best defense is a good offense” is a saying that is generally used in the context of military or sports strategy, yet also relates very well to Parashat Toledot. As Yitzchak prepares to give the special Berachah to his son, the Torah describes the dramatic exchange between him and Ya’akov. Ya’akov appears in front of Yitzchak, dressed in Eisav’s clothing and covered in hair to give off the feel of Eisav. As Ya’akov draws close to Yitzchak, Yitzchak feels Ya’akov and remarks, “HaKol Kol Ya’akov, VeHayadayim Yedei Eisav,” “The voice is the voice of Ya’akov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav” (BeReishit 27:22). Following this observation, Yitzchak then proceeds to give Ya’akov the blessing. This exchange is puzzling, though, because Yitzchak does not seem to have clarity regarding which son is in front of him. If he is unsure, why does he proceed to give the blessing anyway?

Rav Yoel Shurin, the Potlava Illui, answers the question by referring to the saying of Chazal that as long as the voice of Ya’akov is strong, the hands of Eisav cannot interfere. In this instance, where the voice of Ya’akov was strong, the hands of Eisav did not cause Yitzchak to hesitate. Although Yitzchak should have been confused, this confusion did not prevent him from blessing Ya’akov, since the voice was the voice of Ya’akov. This idea provides us with two powerful lessons to consider. Firstly, we are blessed with an amazing tool: the power of our voice. Whether that voice is used to learn Torah, engage in meaningful and passionate Tefillah, or be friendly and sensitive to people around us, our voice is our strength. Secondly, we often tend to look at others around us, whether because we are jealous of their talents or to compare ourselves to them. Instead of getting caught up in being too much like Eisav, Ya’akov allowed his voice to come through. This is because, ultimately, he did not need the hands of Eisav. As long as the voice was the voice of Ya’akov, the hands of Eisav became irrelevant. This ability to create our own destiny is the greatest gift we can have. The confidence to know that inside each of us, we possess the gift that is great enough to defeat any enemy is a reassuring and empowering thought. Like Ya’akov, we must have the self-confidence to actualize this tool of our voice and use it to bring Berachah to our nation.

THE POWER OF SIGHT

by *Yehuda Feman ('15)*

In the beginning of Parashat Toledot (BeReishit 27:1), we are told that as Yitzchak became older, his eyes aged, and he lost the ability to see. In last week’s Parashah, we are told that Hashem had blessed Yitzchak (25:11). Rashi (ad loc. s.v. VaYehi Acharei Mot Avraham VaYevarech) comments that Avraham was going to bless Yitzchak, but he saw that in the future Eisav would come from Yitzchak and was therefore afraid to give him a Berachah. Therefore, Hashem gave Yitzchak a Berachah instead. However, if Hashem blessed Yitzchak,

surely he would have prevented him from suffering this aggravation caused by blindness.

Rashi (27:1 s.v. VaTich’henah) presents three possibilities as to how Yitzchak lost his eyesight. The first possibility is that Yitzchak was constantly in the presence of Eisav’s wives who burned incense for their Avodah Zarah, and the constant presence of smoke diminished his eyesight. Alternatively, Yitzchak could have lost his eyesight when angels’ tears fell on his eyes by Akeidat Yitzchak. Rashi’s last explanation is that Yitzchak had to lose his eyesight so that later (27:23) when Ya’akov would approach Yitzchak to steal Eisav’s Berachah, Yitzchak would not be able to recognize who was approaching him and give Ya’akov his brother’s Berachah.

As an aside, if Yitzchak had lost his eyesight from old age, then it would be possible to think that Hashem’s blessings were lacking. However, if Yitzchak lost his eyesight as a result of bad treatment of his eyes, then we would not question Hashem’s Berachah, but rather assume that Yitzchak lost his eyesight as a result of his eye treatment. Therefore, none of the reasons given by Rashi as to why Yitzchak lost his eyesight were that he lost his eyesight in his old age, because that would cause us to think that when Hashem had previously blessed Yitzchak, the Berachah was lacking.

If one of Rashi’s three explanations had been perfect, then Rashi would not have had to come up with two other explanations. Therefore, there must be a fault in each answer which compelled Rashi to give another explanation. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains the advantages and disadvantages of each of Rashi’s explanations.

The idea that Yitzchak lost his eyesight as a result of smoke damage from Eisav’s wives fits in very well with the previous Pasuk (26:35) which states that Eisav’s wives were a source of strife for Yitzchak and Rivkah. However, if this is the correct approach, then why was Rivkah not blinded by the smoke damage as well? The second explanation, that Yitzchak lost his eyesight when angels’ tears fell on his eyes, answers the question as to why Rivkah was not affected by the smoke damage. However, this answer is Midrashic and is a non-literal reading of the Pasuk. This compels Rashi to give the more literal explanation that Hashem actually took away Yitzchak’s eyesight. This answer fits in with the Pasuk, because we are told that Yitzchak lost his eyesight at an old age (27:1), which fits in with the idea that he lost his eyesight right before Ya’akov came to Yitzchak to receive his Berachah. According to Rashi’s first two answers, it seems that Yitzchak lost his eyesight at a younger age, and this does not fit in with the literal reading of the text. Therefore, Rashi’s third answer is the strongest.

However, according to Rashi’s third explanation, why did Hashem have to take away Yitzchak’s eyesight and make him suffer in order for Ya’akov to receive the Berachah? Why didn’t Hashem just tell Yitzchak to give Ya’akov the Berachah?

With this last approach, Rashi is teaching us the lengths that Hashem went to in order to avoid speaking Lashon HaRa about Eisav. Rather than telling Yitzchak directly to bless Ya’akov in place of Eisav, who would become a Rasha, Hashem decided to blind Yitzchak. Like Hashem, we must take great measures to ensure proper treatment of others.

God's UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

by *Matan Leff* ('16)

Parashat Toledot includes the birth and development of Ya'akov and Eisav. The Torah describes their respective personalities and who is favored by whom, which eventually leads to the selling of the Bechorah and Ya'akov's flight from Eisav. Was Eisav compelled to be the way he was? Was Ya'akov always meant to acquire the Bechorah? This whole episode leads us to ask how free will consistent with traditional Jewish philosophy. The Torah presents a system of reward and punishment; if free will did not exist then Hashem would not reward us for our Mitzvot. However, there are also situations in which Hashem forces man to do as He wishes, such as when he forced Rechavam to disregard the advice of the elders, which ultimately led to the split kingdom and the destruction of the First Beit HaMikdash (Melachim I Perek 12).

From the Middle Ages to modern times, there have been many explanations offered to help find a solution to this conundrum. One of the first, and seemingly problematic, explanations is offered by Rav Levi Ben Gershon, the Ralbag, who stated that while Hashem knows all the choices that we can make, He does not know which choice we will make. Many, however, disagree with this approach as it limits the Omnipotent Being's ability and knowledge. There are additional complexities to this answer which arise nowadays: knowing all of the potential choices a person could make, without assigning specific value to them, is not inherently impossible for man to figure out. As scientists discover that more of our actions are based on psychological and biological effects and super computers become more powerful, humans would, presumably, be able to know the same amount about our choices as Hashem.

A potential answer that modifies the Ralbag's approach is presented by the Shelah HaKadosh. The Shelah argues that although Hashem cannot know the future, this does not limit His omnipotence. He supports his position with a reference to a well-known paradox: can God create a rock so heavy that He cannot lift it? In broader terms, this question seeks to question God's omnipotence, since if he cannot lift the rock, he is not truly omnipotent, as by definition an omnipotent being can do anything; yet, if he cannot create one that is too heavy for him to lift, he is not omnipotent for the same reason. The Shelah responds that the fallacy in the paradox is that the rock was created by Hashem, and therefore anything originating from Him cannot thereafter be questioned for its logical compatibility with Hashem's omnipotence. As soon as Hashem creates something, in that exact period of time, the very nature of the universe and his omnipotence changes. By creating free will, Hashem changed the nature of His omnipotence, but that change, by virtue of it being as a result of his action, does not necessarily challenge his omnipotence. However, as was mentioned by the opinion of the Ralbag, if much of our actions are determined on a psychological and biological level, then how can Hashem not know our future? It is possible to suggest that just as a super computer, He can calculate and know the probabilities of every action we might take to almost exact certainty. It is that doubt, however, that makes us human and allows us to make our own decisions. With humans making thousands of choices and valued judgments every day, it is very plausible to say that in a certain case, our action will not match the "predictive model." The difference between this position

and the Ralbag's is that in the latter's approach, Hashem sees our full range of choices, but each option is equally likely to occur. The Shelah's approach accounts for the difficulties in his position by allowing for Hashem's infinite capability while effectively limiting Hashem's infringement on our free will. While it strikes a delicate balance, it helps answer many of the questions we had.

This modified approach of the Shelah can also answer the question of the manner in which Hashem performs miracles. When Hashem performs miracles in which he seems to influence a person's free will, he merely changes the context in which humanity makes that decision, but he does not deprive us of our ability to make one. When he hardened Par'oh's heart, he did not subvert him and remove his free will; rather, he created a situation in which his options were different than before, while leaving him the ultimate choice. When he made Rechavam raise taxes on Israel after Shlomo died, he did not force him to send a tax collector to placate Israel, nor did he force him to convene in Shechem for his coronation ceremony. He created a situation in which the split kingdoms could occur, but did not have to occur. When the Shelah asserts that Hashem cannot know the future, he does not mean that he literally cannot see an outcome, but rather, he sees all outcomes, how they could come to pass, and their likelihood of occurring.

Based on this answer, we can also develop a response to another major theological question—why Hashem created human beings. In grade school, the typical answer was, "To follow Torah and Mitzvot." With the answer presented above, we can modify the classic approach to human existence with a profound solution. A characteristic of Hashem by virtue of His omnipotence is that He is perfect. This means that both His options for action and His knowledge of them are infinite. To Hashem, there is no such thing as originality or creativity or second guessing. Therefore, Hashem created humans, and limited them accordingly, for this reason. He knows our course of action precisely, as well as all of the options that we have and what will happen if we make that choice. By creating humanity and endowing them with free will, Hashem introduced something into the universe that, by his very nature of His perfection, He can never achieve—uncertainty. This "uncertainty principle" is what makes humanity uniquely suited to receiving the Torah and worthy of being brought into this world, because, while Hashem conceived all inventions and all possibilities, it is ultimately humanity that chooses if, and when, options that Hashem cannot do by virtue of his perfection come into being. The very nature of free will, in essence, is not "going against Hashem." By being able to choose the correct path—one with creativity and emotion, and hopefully also with Hashem's Torah and Mitzvot.

HALACHIC PERSPECTIVES ON CIVILIAN CASUALTIES IN GAZA

— PART THREE

by *Rabbi Chaim Jachter*

Thus far we have presented two justifications for Israel attacking Hamas while risking collateral damage—the guilt of the population for failing to overthrow an evil government (Rambam), and license to wage a legitimate war against an entire nation if necessary (Maharal). We will conclude this week by developing a third approach and then discuss the vitally important question of Israel risking the lives of its soldiers in an attempt to reduce Arab civilian casualties.

Are We Waging War Against a Nation?

The question arises as to whether or not the State of Israel is considered to be waging a war against the Gazan community, as it

dictum that, “Chayecha Kodemim LeChayei Chaveircha,” “One’s life takes priority over another person’s life,” is most applicable and relevant to this situation. The lives of Israel’s soldiers enjoy precedence over the lives of enemy civilians.

Rav Shalom Rosner noted (during a Shiur I delivered in Woodmere, New York) that this is similar to the criticism leveled by Ya’akov Avinu to Shimon and Levi (BeReishit 34:30). He did not criticize the morality of their actions, but noted the pragmatic consequences of their killing of Shechem: “We are a tiny people and now the nations of Canaan will gather and massacre us.” Similarly, Israel is justified in risking their soldiers’ lives if the leadership’s role is not only to spare enemy civilians, but also to avoid an escalation of the Gazan war into an all-out war with its Arab neighbors.

Philosophical and Hashkafic Reflections

The Torah implores us to have a degree of compassion even for our enemies. For example, the Ramban (Mitzvat Asei 5 of those the Ramban omitted) cites the Sifri that requires that when besieging an enemy position, we should not completely encircle them. We should leave one side open in order to give the enemy a chance to escape. The Ramban explains that one reason for this rule is that we should have mercy on the enemy soldiers. He adds that it is our interest to do so, since it will encourage enemy soldiers to flee, thereby weakening the morale of our opponents. Thus, compassion for our enemies is appropriate only when it also furthers our legitimate interests of proper defense.

Rav Hershel Schachter and Rav Yuval Sherlow cogently note that Israel is morally obligated to emerge victorious in its battle against the Amaleik-like Hamas. The compassion we must have for our enemies cannot impinge upon our ability to win a war. Indeed, Rav Sherlow suggests that the IDF’s code of ethics’ first clause should state that it is a moral obligation for the Israeli army to win its justified battles. He believes that the failure to recognize victory as a fundamental moral principle significantly contributed to the lack of success in the Second Lebanon War of 2006.

The Jewish leadership in Eretz Yisrael has made extraordinarily generous offers for peace towards its Arab neighbors throughout the past decades. It accepted the Peel Partition Plan of 1937, the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, offered to exchange land for peace immediately after the Six Day War in 1967 and, in 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered stunning concessions to Yasser Arafat at Camp David (as is fully documented in Dennis Ross’ work, *The Missing Piece*). Arab leaders have rejected every one of these concessions and have responded with wars intended to destroy the State of Israel and exterminate its citizens. Israel undoubtedly possesses the right to defend itself and enjoys the ethical right and obligation to wage war successfully. Misplaced compassion for enemy soldiers and civilians cannot hamstring our efforts to effectively wage war.

Our patriarch Avraham experienced moral anguish over the enemy soldiers that he killed in the successful war that he waged against four Mesopotamian kings (see BeReishit Rabbah 44:5 and Rashi to BeReishit 15:1). However, this emotion did not prevent him from executing his moral obligation to wage war vigorously and properly against the Mesopotamian aggressors.

Avraham teaches timeless lessons about misplaced compassion towards our enemies. Similarly, the consensus Rabbinic opinion regards the risking of Israeli soldiers and restraint from waging war properly in order to reduce Arab civilian casualties as misguided unless it is also done in order to avoid an escalation of the war. May Hashem bless His nation with peace and render this discussion an entirely theoretical concern.

Conclusion

Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer is absolutely correct in saying during the Gazan war that the IDF deserves a Noble Peace Prize for the extraordinary efforts and sacrifices it makes to reduce non-combatant deaths among Gazans. No nation in the history of warfare makes the efforts² Israel does to spare enemy civilians, which often cause the loss of its soldiers. Condemnation of Israel’s inadvertent killing of Arab civilians is itself evil since it strengthens the resolve and efforts of the evil Hamas. The blame for civilian deaths in Gaza lies completely with Hamas for attacking Israel with no justification.

We hope that just as the drastic measures taken by the Allied nations during World War II convinced the people of Germany and Japan to embrace democracy and reject evil governments, so too Israeli pummeling of Hamas in the summer of 2014 will lead the residents of Gaza to spurn Hamas in favor of leadership that will live in peace with Israel and focus on the building of a better life for its residents instead of allocating most of its resources in a futile effort to weaken the State of Israel.³

²Such as engaging in a ground war instead of “carpet bombing” Gaza, and warning civilians to evacuate before an attack thereby losing the critical element of surprise and facilitating Hamas’s deadly ambushes in the Gazan War of 2014.

³An issue raised by this past summer’s Operation Protective Shield needs to be addressed. Israel’s air force uses computer guided bombs to insure pinpoint accuracy to reduce civilian casualties but the infantry fires thousands of shells that do not have these expensive computers attached to them and therefore does greater harm to non-combatants. The question is whether Israel is required to make a huge expenditure in computer guided bombs in order to reduce collateral damage. One could argue that making this investment may cause the loss of Israeli lives in that less money will be available for Israel’s defense and other lifesaving expenses such as health care.

Editors-in-Chief: Moshe Pahmer, Matthew Wexler

Executive Editor: Gavriel Epstein

Publication Editors: Binyamin Jachter, Yosef Kagedan, Hillel Koslowe, Yehuda Koslowe, Simcha Wagner, Noam Wieder

Business Manager: Azi Fine

Publishing Managers: Yehuda Feman, Amitai Glicksman

Staff: Ari Fineberg, Avi Finkelstein, Ezra Finkelstein, Zack Greenberg, Dani Hagler, Alex Kalb, Shlomo Kroopnick, Eitan Leff, Zach Lent, Jonathan Meiner, Binyamin Radensky, Tzvi Dovid Rotblat, David Rothchild, Yehoshua Segal

Rabbinic Advisor: Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Questions, comments? Contact us at:
koltorah@koltorah.org

To subscribe to Kol Torah via email, message webmaster@koltorah.org

This publication contains Torah matter and should be treated accordingly.