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Toldot 5781

Beyond Cynicism

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm ז"ל (Originally delivered November 8, 1975)

This morning I want to share a mood with you--not analysis, not criticism, only a feeling; more a perception than a conception. Perhaps, more truthfully, I wish to share my confusions with you or, more charitably, my movement from cynicism to something beyond that.

Surely, the contemplation of the Jewish situation in the world today leads to cynicism, dejection, and even disgust. It is hard not to be a cynic.

The history of this period is like something out of the theatre of the absurd. It is what our Rabbis called עולם הפוך, a topsy-turvy world, a crazy world. Consider this: Black countries, until recently ravished by Arab slave traders, become the zealous advocates of Yasir Arafat. Nations whose nationals are expelled from Uganda in a most merciless fashion offer a rising ovation for that psychopath, Idi Amin. New countries with little geography and less history, but recently liberated are enthusiastic anti-Israel, denying the Jews the kind of national liberation movement which made them free. And the International Women's Conference in Mexico City last June failed to report out a resolution against sexism, but managed easily to vote a resolution against Zionism!

So it is easy to be a cynic, especially as a reaction to the cynicism in the world about us. Indeed, the choicest piece of contemporary cynicism has an ancient history indeed.

We read ואלה תולדות יצחק בן אברהם אברהם הוליד את, את "These are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham: Abraham begat Isaac." But if we know that Isaac is the son of Abraham, is it not superfluous to tell us that Abraham was the father of Isaac? Rashi here quotes a well-known but puzzling Midrash: The generation, ליצוני הדור, the cynics of the generation, spread an obscene rumor that מאבימלך נתעברה שרה, that Isaac was not the son of Abraham, but rather the son of Abimelech, into whose harem Sara had briefly

been taken. In order to counter this rumor, the Almighty fashioned פניו קלסתר, the form of Isaac's face, to be identical with that of Abraham's, thus giving the lie to the ugly gossip.

But why would the Rabbis want to repeat this ancient obscene rumor? The answer is, because while it may be obscene, it is not really ancient! It is as modern as today's newspapers. The idea behind the pagans who circulated this choice bit of pornography, was that Isaac may very well be carrying on the faith of Abraham, worshipping the same God and carrying out the same cultic and moral principles, but he was not really the son of Abraham. Isaac--the Jewish people--has a thousand fathers, they maintained. Hence, Isaac was not really the heir to Abraham, and could not lay claim to the divine promise to ברכת הארץ, the peoplehood of Abraham's descendants, and their right to Canaan or Palestine. They were willing to grant us a religion but--not a peoplehood.

That same obscenity has now been repeated in the United Nations, where the struggle against Israel and against Zionism has moved from the realm of politics to that of ideology. The attack now is against us at our most sensitive crucial level. Listen to the delegates from Syria, Saudi Arabia, and other countries as they maintain, with the unctuous sanctimoniousness of hypocrisy dripping from their lips, that they respect Judaism as a religion, but they deny that Jews are a people with a right to their own land. Not only non-Jews, but the Chancellor of Austria, Mr. Kreisky, this past week delivered himself a pronouncement that the Jews do not constitute a people, probably based upon what has been called "transferred authority," i.e., his assumption that political position confers upon him the right of making statements of historical scholarship.

So that the U.N. vote in the Third Committee that Zionism is a species of racism, is really that old rumor about Abraham and Abimelech and Sarah in a modern dress.

The ליצוני הדור are alive again. The sneer and snort of ancient cynics has been disinterred and resurrected and is abroad in the land.

And what is more cynical than President Sadat, who was accorded all the honors of the United States this past week, who made the statement that in 1950 he wanted to buy a radio from a Jew in a store in Cairo, but the owner refused to sell it to him “on orders of the Zionist in Israel.” This story is so ludicrous, that if it were not tragic it would be laughable. It comes right out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion . In truth, this is a half truth: The half-lie is Sadat’s contention that in 1950, two years after the creation of the State of Israel, the economy of Egypt was in the hands of the Jews. The half-truth is that the merchant probably refused to sell it to him--and for good reason! Egyptian Jews refused to deal with Egyptian Nazis, and Sadat was one of the leaders of an organization Misr al-Fatat, and was the editor of that group’s paper, the slogan of which was, “Death to the Jews!” Sadat himself was a Nazi, and collaborated with the Germans during the war.

Is this the man who is the great “moderate” whom we are asked to trust? And how weird is our generation that not only is Sadat not reprimanded, but when Ambassador Toon says in Israel that Sadat embarrassed the American Government by this anti-Semitic remark, he is reprimanded by the State Department--whose chief is a Jew! And when the Mayor of New York refuses to accord honors to Sadat, it is not Sadat who is excoriated for his anti-Semitism, but Mayor Beame for his “parochialism!”

It is such a situation which leads me to ליצנות (cynicism), and worse--almost despair. In my darker moments, I think that maybe the world has “had it,” maybe the new anti-Semitism is only the old anti-Semitism made more “respectable”--and ready to erupt world-wide in all its old ugliness if the political and economic and social conditions warrant it. Maybe the Holocaust did not teach us anything at all! It obviously did not teach much to the Gentiles. Young Germans tell us to stop reminding them of the Holocaust, that it was only their parents who killed six million Jews, not they. The French resort to legalisms in order to avoid having to imprison the butchers of the Jews of France. But much worse. Let us not forget for a moment about Jews. Where was the world when the lonely and isolated Kurds were crushed by Iraq? And where is the compassionate and merciful Christian West when the Maronite Christians in Lebanon are drowning in a sea of

Arab Moslems who are out to destroy them?

I also do not think Jews have learned enough from the Holocaust. I find embarrassing resistance even amongst Jews to remember the Shoah . In The Center, we make some modest efforts to remember the Holocaust martyrs: We stand while reciting the אב הרחמים (the prayer for martyrs), and recite a special memorial prayer for them before the Yizkor--and even here there are some who object to it! Of course, we shall ignore such objections. What bothers me most and is to me a source of great chagrin is that The Jewish Center, together with three other major synagogues of the West Side, have several years ago decided to sponsor a Yom Hashoah celebration--at least one day a year to memorialize the victims, in response to the constant and correct challenge, “What are the Rabbis doing to remember the victims of the Nazis?” I am deeply pained to say that the major attendance comes from those who experienced the death camps themselves. Where are all our American Jews?--especially those who were adults in America, while the slaughter was going on in Europe?

So maybe the Holocaust had no or little effect on our world. If that is true, it is the stuff of which despair is made. If that is the case, then I must conclude that history is over, that civilization is finished.

And yet--and yet I invite you to join me in going beyond cynicism and beyond despair to an attitude based on faith, reaching out for hope, and daring to be optimistic.

I believe that the heady days of 1967 are not standard for the Jewish destiny in this unredeemed world, and we ought not to measure our condition against those unusual days; that 1973 and 1975 are a continuation of 1948, and together they represent the gradual and halting development and unfolding of Jewish independence and dignity; that the Declaration of Independence in 1948 was the beginning and not the end of the struggle for Jewish survival and statehood and triumph; that what is happening now is part of a much longer process of ישועת ישראל, the salvation of Israel, the divinely inspired liberation; that God works surely but often slowly, and that the slowness is part of the sureness; that gradualness is of the essence of the divine design--as Abudraham (the great Sephardic medieval sage) put it: even in nature God works gradually and not abruptly, for if He would end the night with a sudden, blazing sun as it is on high noon, people’s eyes would burn out and their minds and bodies could not acclimate themselves to daytime, and hence--in our daily prayers--we

say, *God brings sunshine to the earth and its inhabitants* “in compassion,” for His compassion expresses itself in the gradualness of His benevolence.

And so, despite our impatience, we must hope and we must be confident that the little pieces of peace will cumulatively overcome the large chunks of disappointment and frustration; that we shall recapitulate what was told to us this morning of Isaac when he dug the three wells and named them, consecutively, עשק (strife), שטנה (hatred), and רחובות (room, peace). We are now in the first or maybe the second stage of that development--the level of strife or hatred; but we shall surely arrive at רחובות, at full peace.

Even more: if we are truly Jews, we not only fully believe that we shall “make it” and emerge safely, but we must reaffirm the Jewish faith that the Jewish destiny is to serve as a light to the nations of the world, to save the world from itself. A distinguished colleague of mine (Rabbi Avigdor Cyperstein) once said that this is the meaning of the very

first thing we learn about our father Jacob, in today’s Sidra, that in his fetal position וידו אוחזת בעקב עשיו, that his hand was holding on to the heel of Esau: it is the destiny of Jacob and his children to act as a moral restraint on Esau, to hold him back from following the murderous intentions in his pagan breast, to act as a goad and as a prick of conscience to remind him of that aspect of his own character that is more virtuous and more worthy.

ועלו מושיעים בהר ציון לשבט את הר עשו והיתה לה המלוכה
“*And saviours will go up on Mt. Zion to judge Mt. Esau, and the kingdom will be to the Lord.*”

The salvation of Zion will lead to the restoration of sanity and peace of the world, and the acknowledgement of the Kingdom of God.

And on that day, God will recite not a Kaddish for his world, but a *Mi-she’berakh* for all mankind.

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I Will Choose Free Will

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The world of religious ideas was steadily coalescing. Gradually, G-d introduced humanity to fundamental principles of religion. The horrific flood demonstrated the rule of moral “cause and effect”: if humans descended into moral chaos the world would literally collapse. Subsequently, the selection of Avraham confirmed that a mortal man could actually represent G-d in this world and speak in His name, while receiving His prophetic word. Avraham’s migration to Israel highlighted that although G-d is omnipresent and spans all reality, His presence is more intensely felt in the land of Israel. The akeidah lessoned the world that we cannot always understand Divine purpose, but must forever submit to G-d’s higher wisdom. Furthermore, the akeidah underlined that G-d doesn’t desire human sacrifice; Avraham was dragged to the brink of human bloodshed so that the very notion that G-d desires human blood could be clearly and unmistakably debunked. Step by step, humanity learned the lessons of monotheism- lessons which we take for granted.

The birth of Ya’akov provides an additional lesson in this “course” about religion. Ya’akov’s birth is described in elaborate detail – more so than any other pregnancy in the entire Torah. Interestingly, the pregnancy is depicted in very physiological terms. The pregnancy is detailed in three

consecutive verses, each of which refer to Rivka’s stomach. We are all familiar with the course of pregnancy and the section of the human body which carries the fetus; why does the Torah continually underscore the female anatomy and its role in Rivka’s pregnancy?

The Torah’s vivid anatomical description showcases a conspicuous detail of this particular pregnancy- for the first time in the Torah’s account, two identical twins share the same womb. Highlighting the two embryos in Rivka’s abdomen, emphasizes that both Ya’akov and Esav shared the same genes and were born from the same woman. Despite their identical origins, Ya’akov and his twin Esav each charted diametrically opposed paths- one choosing sedentary study in religious tents while the other choosing violence and a world of aggression. The development of these twins- born alike but paving different paths- illustrates that Man is forever free to mold his life and shape his trajectory- regardless of his origin. The “pregnancy narrative” showcases the unlimited power of unrestrained free will.

The tale of free will doesn’t end with Ya’akov’s choice of lifestyle. As the brother born last, Ya’akov is ineligible to be the chosen one. Undeterred by his handicap, he preserves, and, with his mother’s assistance overtakes his brother and sets history right. The legacy of representing G-d in

this world should be endowed to a man whose lifestyle supports this grand mission. How can a vicious hunter whose lives by the principle of survival of the fittest, hope to model the religious principles, the nobility of the human condition and the great gifts of intellect, emotion and spirit which G-d handed to Man. Ya'akov's early development, as well as his subsequent personal ascent, each highlight the unlimited power of human free will.

About a year ago I spoke with 22-year old Israeli students about how their bold future decisions could impact our world. A boy politely interjected " Rebbe we don't see the world that way – it doesn't feel that free and open to us". This was a sad epiphany to me- that the younger generation saw our world as immovable and unchanging. Evidently, scientific developments over the past two centuries have had their way and have eroded our belief in human free will. Darwin proved that species evolved, transplanting genetic material in an endless race for survival. It seemed as if our lives were shaped more deeply by random genetic events than they were by human decisions. In the 20th century the mapping of the human mind and the tracing of human behavior to electrical stimuli suggested that human activity was compelled by neurons rather than human will. Modern Psychology argued that we are driven by deeper and sometimes darker forces which we cannot control. The legal system has exonerated criminal behavior instigated by uncontrollable psychological forces. This displacement of free will has absolved us of personal guilt and conscience: if we are driven to action by evolutionary forces or by powerful brain waves can we bear responsibility for our actions? Are we all just faceless and spineless creatures pinballing from decision to decision based on forces larger than our own small existence? Two centuries of mapping the human heart and mapping the human psyche has convinced us that we aren't free. The saga of Ya'akov and his twin brother Esav- born in the same chamber but occupying vastly different worlds- debunks this dangerous myth.

The principle of human free will has also been crushed

The Scent of Eden

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Toldos, Yaakov and Eisav are born to Yitzchak and Rivka after twenty years of marriage. The parsha progresses quickly from their

by the outsized world we inhabit. We live in a "Big" era – our institutions and personalities have swelled and seem larger than life. Rapid technological revolution has created supersized corporations such as Apple, Google Facebook and Twitter which supersede the natural size of a "company" and have the appearance of shaping our reality. As they control our information flow, these mega-corporations appear to shape our minds and hearts. It is difficult to sense freedom when your ideas flow through such large and controlling info-canals. Likewise, celebrities have achieved godlike status making average people who don't command the attention of millions, feel small and insignificant. Free will is meant to swell human identity; we are meant to feel empowered by the free will gifted by G-d. In the modern world we feel small and we feel driven by inchoate forces beyond our control. It is crucial to magnify free will and amplify human potential in a world which shrinks our stature and mutes our personal voice.

Although Judaism asserts unlimited freedom of choice, we still believe in a predetermined collective future. Western civilization views history as progressive, human progress as evolutionary, and the future as unknown. Judaism acknowledges a predetermined conclusion to history: the world will be redeemed and humanity will flock to Yersuhalayim and to G-d in a state of spiritual awakening. We know exactly how it ends and where it ends; the only remaining question is how soon it will end and whose shoulders will carry history toward its inevitable conclusion.

On a personal level each individual has the unlimited capacity to act freely and to shape an otherwise undetermined future. On a grand scale the general future of humanity is preset and unchangeable. How our freely determined decisions contribute to a predetermined historical future is G-d's domain. He possesses sufficient algorithms to amass all our personal decisions and calculate the predetermined future. On a personal level it is crucial we act completely free undistracted by our confidence of how history will inevitably conclude

births (Bereishis 25), when Yitzchak is sixty years old (25:26), to Yitzchak's old age, when he is ready to bless his son(s) before his death. וַיְהִי כִּי-יָגֹן יִצְחָק, וַתְּבַרְכֵהוּ עֵינָיו מִרְאֵת;

וַיְקַרָא אֶת-עֵשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל - and it was when Yitzchak had become old, and his eyes dimmed from seeing, that he summoned Eisav, his older son and he said to him ... וַיְעֲשֶׂה-לִּי מִטְעָמִים כְּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּתִּי; וְהָבִיֵאָה לִּי--וְאֶכְלָהּ: בְּעִבּוֹר תִּבְרַכְךָ נַפְשִׁי, בְּטָרָם אֲמוֹת, And make delicacies for me such as I love and bring it to me and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die (Bereishis 27:1,4).

Though Yitzchak requests that Eisav, the eldest son by birth, prepare him tasty foods to eat so that he may bless him before he dies, Rivka - who overhears Yitzchak's instructions to Eisav - orders her son, Yaakov, to take Eisav's place, so that he should receive his father's blessing.

Rivka prepares tasty delicacies for Yaakov to take to his father and dresses Yaakov up in both Eisav's special cloak, as well as in hairy goat skins, so that Yitzchak would not know that it was Yaakov standing before him (27:15-16).

When Yaakov presents himself to his elderly father, the pasuk says: וַיִּגַּשׁ, וַיִּשָׁק-לוֹ, וַיֵּרַח אֶת-רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו, וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ; וַיֹּאמֶר, וַיִּגַּשׁ הַ אֶת-רִיחַ בְּנֵי, כְּרִיחַ שָׂדֵה, אֲשֶׁר בְּרָכּוּ הוּא - and he (Yitzchak) drew Yaakov close and kissed him; he smelled the fragrance of his garments and blessed him; and he said, 'See the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of the field that Hashem has blessed' (27:27).

Rashi comments: וַיֵּרַח וְגו'. וְהֵלֵא אֵין רִיחַ רַע יוֹתֵר מִשְׁטָף? - And he smelled the fragrance of his garments: Is it not true that there is no smell worse than hair of goats? But this teaches us that the fragrance of Gan Eden came in with Yaakov.

What was it about this narrative that imbued Yitzchak's being (and garments) with the smell of Gan Eden?

R' Shimon Finkelman and R' Zechariah Wallerstein offer a compelling and novel answer. They write, "Rav Shimon Schwab explains that the mitzvah of kibbud av (honoring one's father) that Yaakov was fulfilling at that time is what imbued his garments with the scent of Gan Eden. (For) there is a specific connection between this mitzvah and Gan Eden.

"Adam and Chava were placed in Gan Eden לְעֹבְדָהּ וְלִשְׁמָרָהּ, to work it and guard it (2:17), which Chazal interpret to mean to perform positive commandments (I'ovdah) and refrain from transgressing negative commandments (I'shomrah). When they partook of the Eitz Ha'Daas (the fruit of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad), writes the Zohar, they impaired for all time the spiritual effect in Heaven of the mitzvot that mankind would perform.

"However, their sin affected only those mitzvot which

they potentially could fulfill. Since Adam and Chava did not have parents, kibbud av va'eim (honoring one's father and mother) was not part of their avodas Hashem. Therefore, their sin did not affect the spiritual impact of this mitzvah.

"That is why Yaakov's fulfillment of this mitzvah caused the scent of Gan Eden to accompany him (as he listened to his mother and served his father)" (Honor Them, Revere Them, Artsroll, p.86-87).

What an incredible explanation as to why it was specifically the scent of Gan Eden that Yitzchak smelled as Yaakov entered! This mitzvah remains forever untainted by the first sin.

Perhaps it would be fair to propose that each time this mitzvah is fulfilled, some metaphysical scent, the koach of the purity of Gan Eden, accompanies the ba'al mitzvah, as we amass zechusim for ourselves.

The gadlus of R' Moshe Twersky zt'l HY"D (killed in the Har Nof Massacre on 25 Cheshvan 5775) is well known. He was a giant in Torah, middos tovos and maasim tovim. In regard to his fulfillment of kibbud av va'eim, we can only imagine that the scent of Gan Eden was present as he served his parents.

"While R' Moshe Twersky was reluctant to allow his own children to do things for him, he was eager to help his parents in any way, large or small."

A talmid who witnessed the following scene relates: One Friday night, while Rebbi (R' Twersky) was already sitting at his place at the head of the table, after ha'motzi, he noticed that his mother had gotten up to make her way to the kitchen to help serve the meal. Rebbi literally jumped out of his chair and ran to the kitchen. He wanted to serve his mother - and not the other way around.

"Rebbetzin Twersky shared a humorous example of her husband's exceptional kibbud eim. Just a few weeks before R' Twersky's petirah, his mother, Rebbetzin Atarah Twersky, came for a visit. R' Twersky was learning in the dining room, and his mother came in to get something. R' Twersky immediately stood up to his full height and remained standing until his mother left the room. Rebbetzin Atarah didn't notice that her son had stood for her. A few minutes later, she again needed something from the dining room. When she reentered the room, R' Twersky stood up again and remained standing until his mother left the room. This then happened a third time, at which point Rebbetzin Atarah noticed what was going on. She subsequently told her daughter-in-law, 'I stopped going

in there, because otherwise he would have kept that up the whole day!” (A Malach in Our Midst, p.255-256).

May we be so fortunate to merit to serve our parents

Rivkah's Eternal Question

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

As twins “race about” in her womb, Rivkah asks ambiguously, “*Im ken, lamah zeh anochi?*” (Bereishit 25:22) Literally translated, Rivkah inquires, “If this is so, why am I?” But what was “this”, and “why am I” what?

Traditional commentators have offered various explanations, including:

- Rashi (ad loc.) suggests that Rivkah regretted praying for pregnancy: “If this is the pain of pregnancy, why did I ask for this?”
- In another approach, Ramban (ad loc.) contends that Rivkah was on the brink of rejecting her very life: “If this is the pain of pregnancy, why should I live?”
- Alternatively, Ibn Ezra and Radak (ad loc.) explain that Rivkah questioned her unusual situation. She spoke with other women and discovered that her pain was unique, leading her to ask, “If pregnancy is normally not this hard, why am I experiencing this extraordinary pain?”

However, Dr. Yael Tzohar of Bar Ilan University notes that these and other traditional answers share certain weaknesses:

1. Read literally, Rivkah’s question ends, “Why me?” That may fit with Ibn Ezra and Radak, but not with the others.
2. Would a woman who prayed for children for two decades respond to pain with this level of rejection? Again, Ibn Ezra and Radak escape this problem, but the others do not.
3. And finally, for all of our explanations: where is the comfort in the Divine response, “You are carrying twins who will be bitter, lifelong rivals”?

Dr. Tzohar offers a different approach, by pointing to how Rivkah came to this point. Rivkah lived with her pagan family until Avraham’s servant arrived. That servant declared that Rivkah was special, by dint of her generous conduct at the well. (ibid. 24:14-20) The servant announced that a Divine miracle had identified her as special. (24:40-48) When the family hesitated, the servant

(both in this world and the Next) with arichus yamim v’shanim, as we bring nachas to them, as well as to our Father in heaven, the RS”O.

reiterated that Hashem had selected her. (24:56) Her family then blessed her, “You shall produce myriads.” (ibid. 24:60) Rivkah was anointed to mother the next generation of the family promised to Avraham and Sarah.

Against this backdrop, Rivkah interpreted the pains of pregnancy as a message that something was indeed wrong, and she was actually ineligible. She then asked, “If so, then why choose me?” Why that miraculous selection? If there is something wrong with my lineage, if I am personally unworthy, then why did You set me up for this? This explains the Divine response, as well. Hashem responds, “There are two nations in your uterus. Two nations will separate from your womb.” (25:23) Yes, Rivkah - you are the one I have selected, you are the one who is suited for this task. There is pain now, and there will be pain in the future from your twin sons, and I need you to fill this role. The comfort wasn’t in telling Rivkah about the two fighters in her womb. Rather, it was in explaining that Rivkah owned a special identity and mission related to those two fighters. You are the one who is suited to handling your twin sons.

Note that Hashem has not told Rivkah anything specific – that she will win Esav’s trust, that Yitzchak will be blind, that she will swap the blessings, or that she will enable Yaakov to escape from Esav. But Hashem gives Rivkah clarity of purpose, and this sense of purpose is what comforts, and empowers, Rivkah. Many years later, when the birthright and the family’s future was at stake, and Yaakov warned that his mother’s shockingly brazen plan might cause him to be cursed, Rivkah told him as Hashem’s official delegate, “Any curse of yours is on me.” I was destined for this position, because Hashem wanted me to make this decision. (27:13)

Hashem’s answer to Rivkah’s question echoes in our own day. The Divine plan requires that a nation accept Hashem’s Torah, live in Israel and stand apart from the world, and that has involved pain for thousands of years. We don’t know why we must be the ones on the spot. But we have stood up to this challenge for thousands of

years with remarkable success, producing a rich culture and a sustained tradition of intellectual depth and moral heights. We are here because Hashem knows that Rivkah's

descendants are uniquely suited to succeed at the task. Hashem's bet on Rivkah was a good one; may the same be true for Hashem's bet on her descendants.

The Space to Grow

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Murray Bowen was one of the pioneers of the field of family therapy. He noted that families have a system of psychological interconnectedness. For instance, when one member of a family becomes anxious, this tends to have an emotional snowball effect on the other members of the family. For psychological health and wellness, it is important for individuals within families not to become too fused with the thoughts, emotions, and actions of other members of their family. Rather, the ideal is differentiation of the self, where each individual is able to experience and balance both intimacy with, and independence from, others in the family.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks highlighted in his essay, "On Clones and Identity," Yitzchak was the least individuated of the patriarchs. There isn't much we know about his life, but what we do know seems to parallel and repeat many of the events and actions of Avraham. They both have to leave their land and enter the land of the Plishtim because of a famine. They both tell Avimelech that their wives are their sisters. To accentuate the parallel, the Torah tells us that Yitzchak even re-digs the same exact wells that Avraham dug, and even gives them the same exact names that his father gave them! There seems to be a lack of differentiation of self on Yitzchak's part.

Apparently, there was insufficient water from Avraham's wells that Yitzchak re-dug, so Yitzchak moved towards individuation and initiative by digging a new well. Yet, the Torah tells us that his first attempt was fraught with difficulty. The people of Gerar claimed that the water from the well belonged to them, which led to an argument. Consequently, Yitzchak named that well "Esek" because of the fight that transpired. Yitzchak's second attempt to dig

a well was just as unsuccessful. It also led to controversy with the people of Gerar, so he called it "Sitnah" because of the hatred and enmity it engendered. Finally, Yitzchak's third attempt to dig was successful as it was devoid of dispute. Yitzchak calls this well "Rehovot," which connotes peace, freedom, and space. Yitzchak is able to create a location for himself by differentiating from the Plishtim as well as carving out his own personal place in his family narrative.

What is unclear, however, is why the third attempt was successful, while the first two were not. The Chafetz Chaim suggests that the Torah is teaching us a lesson in grit and perseverance: if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Rabbi Norman Lamm suggests another approach in the name of his uncle, Rabbi Joseph Baumol. If we pay careful attention, there is a fundamental textual difference between the first two diggings and the third. For the first two, the pesukim highlight that it was Yitzchak's servants who dug the wells – "Vayachperu avdei Yitzchak." Yet, for the third well it says "vayachpor be'er acheret." Yitzchak—not his servants—dug the third well.

While there is a place for delegation, there are actions in life that must be performed by the individual if they are to be successful. While Avraham served as an important role-model for Yitzchak, it was time for Yitzchak to begin to differentiate and forge his own path. This journey could not be proxied out to others. It was something Yitzchak needed to experience himself. He needed to dig the new well, not his servants. Once he took responsibility and acted on his own accord, he was able to merit the "Rehovot" – the space to flourish and grow on his own.

Did Isaac Suffer from an Ocular Disease?

Ayelet Klahr

It is fascinating to speculate that medical issues played a key role in biblical studies. In particular, it may be that ophthalmologic issues greatly affected the story of

Isaac. It says about Isaac in Genesis, 27:1, "When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, 'My son.' He answered, 'Here I am.'"

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, presents different explanations as to why Isaac's eyes were dim. The first explanation is that his eyes were dimmed from the incense which Esau's wives offered to idolatry. There is much research and discussion of how smoke can increase the likelihood of one developing cataracts and macular degeneration, thus making it possible to suspect that Isaac was afflicted with cataracts or macular degeneration, both of which would dim his eyes. A study conducted at the Chinese University of Hong Kong revealed that there is a causal relationship between those who smoke and develop these eye diseases. The New York State Department of Health has published that those who smoke are three times as likely to form cataracts and macular degeneration than those who don't smoke. Dr. William Barry Lee, an ophthalmologist, explains that exposure to smoke reduces blood supply to the eye, enlarges the blind spot and reduces one's threshold of different lights. Additionally, elevated levels of carboxyhemoglobin found in the blood of those exposed to secondhand smoke, depresses one's visual perception.

Another possibility that Rashi quotes from the Midrash is that Isaac's eyes were dimmed from the tears of the angels at the Akeda, when his father, Abraham, almost sacrificed him to God. The final explanation that Rashi quotes from the Midrash is that God caused him to lose his eyesight in order to ensure that the blessing would be given to Jacob instead of Esau. The Midrash does not say which condition he had, but it makes it clear that his eye condition was so severe that Isaac was unable to distinguish between his two sons. Thus, it is possible to assume that Isaac's eye condition prevented him from distinguishing between objects and people. Both cataracts and macular degeneration can impair one's vision to the point where they are no longer able to distinguish between detail in objects and recognize people. The condition of cataracts occurs when the lens of the eye is clouded, causing images to be foggy because the light is either scattered or blocked, instead of being sharply focused on the retina to create a clear image. Additionally, cataracts change one's perception of color, which could be the reason why Isaac did not notice that Jacob's hair color was different from Esau's red hair. Macular degeneration is a condition where one loses their central vision, and only their peripheral vision is preserved. One can form dry macular degeneration, in

which retinal cells die, or wet macular degeneration, in which blood vessels leak into and beneath the retina. Isaac, being unable to recognize who was directly in front of him, portrays the symptoms of one with macular degeneration who has lost his central vision.

The Ramban in Genesis 25:34 points out the juxtaposition of mentioning Isaac's dim eyes with Isaac's old age. The Ramban understands this connection to be the explanation of the reason for his poor eyesight, being that Isaac was elderly. Macular degeneration and cataracts are both a very common development as one ages. Another theory to explain Isaac's poor eyesight is diabetes. Dr. Reisenberger, a biblical scholar, writes, "Diabetes mellitus and its complications encompass a multiplicity of signs, symptoms and secondary conditions which include a constant need for water, increased appetite, lethargy and chronic fatigue, visual deficit and sexual dysfunction, including impotence". She notes that Isaac was always sure to stay near a water source and that is why his servants were always digging wells for him. Reisenberger also points out that Isaac had no big physical achievements that are recorded in the Tanach. She speculates that Isaac and Rebecca also had trouble conceiving due to diabetes, as trouble bearing children is a common symptom of the disease. Diabetes can affect eyesight, causing Diabetic Retinopathy, leading to blurry vision, glaucoma, cataracts, and even blindness. Having high blood sugar damages the blood vessels of the retina, the light-sensitive part of the eye, that sends signals to the brain through the optic nerve. Diabetes and high blood sugar will damage the blood vessels in the eye, causing blockages within them, leading them to bleed. The eye tries to grow new blood vessels to compensate for the blocked, damaged ones, but they do not function well and leak. Subsequent bleeding and scarring of the retina impair eye function and vision. Thus, it is common for people with diabetes and fluctuating blood sugar levels to have defective vision. This could be part of the reason why Isaac had so much difficulty seeing and why it says that his eyes were too dim to see. It may be that Isaac suffered from one of several ophthalmologic conditions- cataracts, macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy, which caused his poor vision that is mentioned in Genesis.