בס"ד

**Yitzchak the “Blind Swan”**

Tzvi Aryeh Benoff

About 175 years ago, the Danish fairy tale author Hans Christen Anderson published The Ugly Ducking, a story about an ostensibly freakish duckling struggling in vain to fit in with the other ducks until he realized that he was actually a graceful swan and joined his kind to live happily ever after.

Ever since its publication in 1843, the Ugly Duckling has served as the paradigm of the universal desire for self-discovery. And like many *gedolim* and *tzaddikim*, Yitzchak Avinu had a unique journey of self-discovery that is often overlooked.

In Parshas Toldos, the Torah recounts how there was famine in the Land of Israel, more dire than the one in Avraham’s lifetime. Ever striving to follow in the footsteps of his father, Yitzchak prepared to leave Eretz Yisrael and journey to Mitzrayim in search of sustenance.

Hashem, however, told him otherwise.

He charged Yitzchak to remain in the land of Israel, because, the midrash says, Yitzchak was sanctified on the altar of the *akeida* as a *korban olah*, a sacrificial offering totally dedicated to God. “*chutz la’aretz eno kedai lecha*” Hashem said. Living outside the land of Israel did not befit someone so singularly dedicated to the Divine. In the inimitable, colloquial parlance of the mussar sages – the Diaspora was *pas nisht* for someone with the spiritual standing and sensitivity of Yitzchak.

Now at first glance, one would say that Yitzchak was the quintessential ugly duckling undergoing a journey of self-discovery; he thought that he was just like his father Avraham, and thus sought to leave Eretz Yisrael during the years of famine, but Hashem informed Yitzchak that he was actually someone quite different than his father – he was a *korban* which must stay in the Holy Land.

The only problem with that is that Yitzchak already knew that.

He already knew that he was an offering that was subject to a different set of standards and conventions than those of his father. Years before the famine, Yitzchak and Rivka were childless for decades, and the midrash comments that Yitzchak did not want to marry a concubine like his father did because he was a *korban*. So Yitzchak wasn’t an ugly duckling. He clearly knew that he was different! He already knew that the indelible impact the *akeida* made would forever transform his identity and destiny! So why then did Yitzchak plan to leave the holy land of Israel?! Why was Hashem’s revelation of Yitzchak’s true identity necessary?

The answer is that Hashem wasn’t revealing Yitzchak’s true identity. He was revealing what’s Yitzchak’s identity meant. Yitzchak knew who he was. He knew from the onset that he was an *olah temimah*, an offering totally dedicated to God. But with all of that self-awareness, he still didn’t fully appreciate what being a *korban* meant. Hashem needed to reveal to Yitzchak, that his spiritual sensitivity was so heightened that it would be impacted not only by one’s intimate familial home, but the broader national atmosphere as well.

All too often we tend to romanticize the journey of self-discovery to be like that of the Ugly Duckling. The path to reaching the happily-ever-after and self-actualization must lie in the revelation that we are not who we think we are. And while there are certainly real stories like that, they are not the norm. Ugly Ducklings are far and few between. What is far more common, and I think often woefully underappreciated, are the “Blind Swans” – people know who they are, but don’t fully appreciate or understand what that means. Each one of us is a member of the Jewish Nation. But just like Yitzchak, we aren’t born with the knowledge of what our identity means. It takes years of learning from friends and family, schools and synagogues, and our own investigations. And in a certain sense, that quest of self-discovery never truly ends. Every day we experience the world, ourselves, and Hashem anew, granting us a unique perspective on the privilege and responsibility of being dedicated to God.

Although we may not merit to have Hashem appear to us in a dream (at the very least I haven’t merited such an experience yet), we have two resources that Yitzchak didn’t have to help us: The first is the memory and messages of Jewish history. We have the benefit of generations of people, writings, and experiences which can inform us about what it means to be a Jew. The tears, melodies, prayers, kindness, Torah, and simple faith of our ancestors flow through the veins of the Klal Yisroel, informing our convictions and shaping the decisions and choices we make.

But there is a more personal resource that we also have. Although we may not hear Hashem’s voice speaking to us as clearly as Yitzchak did, Hashem still speaks to each one of us every day. The Gemara says that when a person sits and learns Torah, Hashem sits down and joins them. The word for Torah “*mikra*” means to call out. The Torah is Hashem’s voice calling out to each one of us. So when we sit down and open a book of Torah or say the Shema prayer in the morning and evening (which is also a fulfillment of the commandment to study Torah), Hashem calls out to us. And just as the Torah is given each day anew, Hashem’s conversation with us is never the same. While the words might seem similar to the ones we read the day before, they are laden with new meaning; they carry a response to the highs and lows of our day. Hashem’s divine presence suffers when we suffer and rejoices when we rejoice. He is our *chavrusa*, our lifelong study partner to give the strength and direction to try to make sense of our lives and the mission with which we are entrusted.

In these unprecedented times, may we merit just like our father Yitzchak to hear Hashem’s instructive and reassuring calling in the words of the Torah to give us the courage, hope, and help to navigate the maze of life and learn about ourselves and our mission to sanctify the Name of God in all that we do.