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Givers and Takers

"He who dies with the most toys wins"... or does he?

The famous scene where Yitzchak gives the blessings over to Yaakov, thinking that he was Eisav, begs a question: How is it that Yitzchak didn't know that Eisav was a wicked person? Couldn't he see past his tricks?

Although Yitzchak didn't realize quite how bad Eisav was, he most certainly saw that Eisav was very much immersed in physicality. It was *because* of this that Yitzchak decided to give him the blessings.

Yitzchak thought that if Eisav would have everything that he wants physically, this would help him to fight his desire for it, and he would then be free to focus on spiritual pursuits.

It was his wife Rivka however, who had a wicked Father and brother, who realized that someone who lives with the attitude of "taking", trying to draw towards himself as much as possible, will never be satisfied with what he has. Giving him more would make no difference. "He who has one hundred wants two hundred; he who has two hundred wants four hundred" (Kohelet Raba 1:34).

Here lies an important message.

The difference between living life with an attitude of "What can I acquire?" versus a life of "What can I give?"

If one's primary focus is on possessions, money or physicality one will go through life never feeling fully satisfied.

On the other hand, living life with an attitude of "what can I give and do for others?" leads to fulfilment and happiness in this world, and eternal reward in the next.

He who dies having made the most impact wins!



The Space to Grow

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

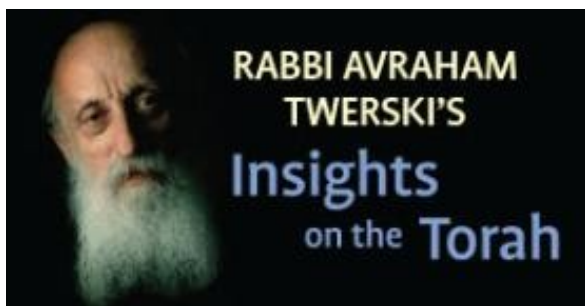
dug, and even gives them the same exact names that his father gave them! There seems to be a lack of differentiation of self on Yitzchak's part.

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*" (dispute) 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*" (hatred) 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 "*Rechovot*, (expanse)" 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 verses highlight that it was Yitzchak's servants who dug the wells. Yet, for the third well it says that 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 "*Rechovot*" – the space to flourish and grow on his own.



Different Blessings for Jacob and Esau

When Isaac blesses Jacob, the verse states: "And may God give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth" (Genesis, 27:28).

When he blesses Esau, the verse says, "Behold, of the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling and of the dew of the heavens from above" (Genesis, 27:39).

Although the blessings to Jacob and Esau appear similar, there are two striking differences between them. To Jacob, Isaac said, "May God give you," whereas in Esau's blessing he does not invoke the Name of God. Secondly, in Jacob's blessing, the blessing of "the dew of the heavens" precedes the blessing of "the fatness of the earth," whereas in Esau's blessing the order is reversed.

Although Isaac thought he was blessing Esau, the Divine Spirit motivated him to give Jacob the blessing appropriate for him. Jacob was to know that everything he possesses, even if it appears to be the result of his own efforts, is a gift from God. Moses warned the Israelites that when they inherit the Promised Land and become affluent, they should not think that it was their skill, prowess and work that produced their affluence, but that it was God Who gave them the ability to acquire wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). Jacob's descendants can have this faith, but to Esau's descendants it is an alien concept. Living by the sword, Esau's descendants gained their wealth by plunder and robbery.

The Divine Spirit also bestowed upon Jacob the awareness that the goal and purpose of life is spiritual, "the dew of the heavens." This is achieved via the fulfillment of the Divine will. Inasmuch as one cannot fulfill the mitzvot without the physical means to do so, earthly belongings, "the fatness of the earth,"

are a necessity, but they should be seen only as a means, not as an ultimate goal.

Esau, on the other hand, lives for earthly pleasures. "The fatness of the land" is primary, and any spirituality is but an afterthought.

The two nuances are related. We can live spiritual lives only if we are aware that all mundane possessions are Divine gifts. If we lose sight of our utter dependence on God, we can degenerate into creatures that seek only physical pleasures, and we thereby lose the dignity of spirituality that elevates us above all other living things.



Big Person, Big Mistakes

It's interesting to note that every one of the great founders and leaders of Judaism made mistakes. Not just minor mistakes, they made big mistakes. In this week's Torah portion, for example, Isaac believes that Esav -- a murderer, adulterer and thief -- should become the leader of the fledgling Jewish people in place of Jacob, his righteous brother.

My father-in-law likes to remind his children constantly that "only God is perfect." Making mistakes is part of being human. And we see

very clearly that small men make small mistakes, but great men make great mistakes.

The reason is obvious. A person can lock himself away in his own little ivory tower. By avoiding the challenges inherent within changing his world, he will also avoid the risks associated with doing so. He might not make too many mistakes, but he will not achieve all that much, either. Mediocrity is readily available to all of us.

Great people, however, stick their necks out. They take personal risks in order to make a difference. They are not afraid of challenging situations and not afraid to engage the world. But the bigger the stakes you play with, the more significant the mistakes when you make them. One of the signs of a great man is that his mistakes are big mistakes. But his accomplishments are equally impressive.

The path of least resistance might lead to fewer mistakes, but it will also mean missing the opportunity to leave a lasting impression on the world. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may have made great mistakes, but their accomplishments changed the world forever.

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