



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת תולדות תשס"ט • 5769 Parshas Toldos

## THE GOOD OLD DAYS

### SHORTCHANGED? CHAS V'SHALOM!

Taking a quick overview of the three *Avos* (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov) in *sefer Bereishis*, we notice something interesting.

The Torah devotes significant space to discussing the life of Avraham Avinu. In parshas Lech Lecha, parshas Vayeira, and parshas Chayei Sarah, the narrative focuses primarily on Avraham. Ya'akov receives similar treatment. In a good portion of this week's *parshah* of Toldos, as well as Vayeitzei and Vayishlach, Ya'akov plays a major role; and Vayeishev, Miketz, Vayigash, and Vayechi deal extensively with the actions of Ya'akov's sons and the effect on their father.

What may initially seem strange is the extent – or lack thereof – to which Yitzchak appears. In comparison, he seems to get very little “coverage.” The only *parshah* in which he is extensively discussed is Toldos, and even here, he does not seem to take center stage (*l'havdil*) in the storyline. The beginning of the *parshah* outlines the struggle of Yitzchak and his wife Rivkah to have children, as well as their joint attempts to avoid Avimelech, the king of Gerar. The latter section of the *parshah* deals primarily with the competition between Ya'akov and Esav to secure Yitzchak's blessing. Just about the only, relatively brief section that highlights Yitzchak exclusively is the depiction of Yitzchak's well-digging activities, the significance of which appears elusive.

What exactly *is* going on here? Yitzchak receives comparatively little treatment, and when he does get some, it is for (seemingly) mere conventional activities such as digging wells!

As we shall see, however, this very arrangement is itself a testimony to Yitzchak's special greatness.

### UNEARTHING THE MYSTERY

Opening up this somewhat cryptic passage is the Rabbeinu Bechaye. He explains the issue of the wells on two levels, each centering on the same basic idea.

“And all of the wells that were dug in the days of Avraham were stopped up by the Plishtim, who filled them with earth... And Yitzchak went back, and re-dug the wells... which the Plishtim had sealed after Avraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them” (*Bereishis 26:15,18*).

Rabbeinu Bechaye points out that these verses highlight Yitzchak's purpose in this endeavor, as well as his life-mission. We see that Yitzchak was dedicated to the continuation of his father Avraham's legacy. He was so dedicated, in fact, that he made sure that the very wells his father had dug would continue to function and even be called the same names that his father had called them.

The Rabbeinu Bechaye understands this section of the wells on a deeper level as well. The Torah tells us (*Bereishis 12:5*) that when Avraham first entered Eretz Yisrael, he brought with him “the souls he had acquired in Charan.” Rashi (*ibid.*) explains the verse as referring to converts, whom Avraham had introduced to the belief in and service of the One true Hashem. The wells of our *parshah*, maintains the Rabbeinu Bechaye, are really a veiled reference to these souls. The “wells dug by Avraham” were actually the souls he had converted, having opened up their hearts to faith in Hashem. Unfortunately, after his death, the wicked Plishtim got their hands on these “wells,” and “stuffed them up”; i.e., they

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closed off their hearts to Hashem and enticed them away from the righteous path. This they achieved by “filling them with *shmutz*,” a reference to heretical ideas.

And so Yitzchak saw it as his duty to return these backsliding converts to the service of Hashem. And he succeeded in “re-digging” the “wells” Avraham had opened and rekindling within them the love of Hashem that his father had imparted.

Whether we interpret this passage according to its literal meaning – referring to actual wells -- or the hidden meaning of converts, we can now appreciate the significance of this particular section. The Torah was highlighting the aspect of Yitzchak Avinu at which he excelled and to which he devoted his life: the preservation, for posterity, of his father’s ways.

## **FAR FROM THE TREE**

R’ Yeruchem Olshin explains that it was this trait of Yitzchak’s that accounts for the seemingly minimal

amount of space devoted to him in the Torah. In other words, the very fact that there is so little to report about Yitzchak speaks volumes about the greatness of this patriarch. He was not concerned with making his own mark or with his own, personal achievements. He perceived his life mission as safeguarding the hallowed teachings of his father, in order to ensure their safe transmission to the future generations of *K’lal Yisrael*. He was extremely concerned that not a hair’s breadth of his father’s ways should be lost or changed even one iota; and to this end he was more than willing to sacrifice his own legacy. Yitzchak’s selfless devotion to his father’s *mesorah* (traditions) is reflected in the Torah. Yitzchak does not receive too much mention of his own accord; when the focus is on him, he is seen engaged in activities pertaining to the perpetuation of his father’s legacy.

The Mishnah in Sotah (9:15) describes the pathetic spiritual conditions that will exist in the immediate pre-Messianic era. The state of affairs described below stands in great contrast to the noble behavior of Yitzchak Avinu:

הַצָּפָא יִסְגָּא... נְעָרִים פְּנֵי זְקֵנִים וְלִבְנֵי זְקֵנִים  
יַעֲמְדוּ מִפְּנֵי קִטְנִים, בֶּן מִנְבֵּל אָב, בֵּת קָמָה בְּאֵמָה...  
אִיבֵי אִישׁ אֲנָשִׁי בֵּיתוֹ... הֵבֵן אִינוּ מִתְבַּיֵּשׁ מֵאָבִיו.

“*Chutzpah* will be practiced in abundance... youths will heap shame upon the elderly, and the elderly will have to stand in homage before the youth. Sons will degrade their fathers, daughters will rebel against their mothers... A person’s family will become his enemies... sons will feel no shame before their parents.”

Specifically in an era where morals have been turned upside down, where to a large, unfortunate extent, even well-meaning parents have lost sway over their children, it is worthwhile to go back to our roots. The Torah provides a model of the regard one should feel toward our forbears and the urgent need to safeguard their sacred, time-honored ways.



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