

# MESHECH CHOCHMAH

## Parshas Toldos

### Refining the Jewish People

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבְּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתִּלְדָּךְ לְדָרֵשׁ אֶת ה'.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גֵיִם [גוֹיִם] בְּבֶטְנֶךָ.

*The children agitated within her, and she said, "If so, why am I thus?" and she went to inquire of Hashem.*

*Hashem said to her: "Two nations are in your womb." (25:22-23)*

Chazal<sup>1</sup> explain Hashem's words to Rivkah as alluding to two great personalities who would be descended from her: Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi from Yaakov and Antoninus of Rome from Esav. We need to try and understand how telling Rivkah that these two great men would come from her served as the answer to her inquiry. In truth, if we wish to see how this was the answer to her question, we need to look more carefully at the question itself, as it is phrased somewhat cryptically. What exactly does Rivkah mean by asking "If so, why am I thus?"

#### The Venom that Came with the Fruit

To understand the background to all of this, the Meshech Chochmah refers us to a statement of the Gemara elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> that at the time of the sin with the *Etz Hada'as*, the snake injected a venom into Chava, and hence into mankind. This venom remained within the system of humankind; however, in Yaakov's days it departed from him and his family.<sup>3</sup> What is the nature of this venom, and how did it come to depart from Yaakov?

1 *Avodah Zarah* 11a, quoted in Rashi to our pasuk.

2 *Shabbos* 146a.

3 [The Meshech Chochmah quotes Chazal as saying that the venom departed in Yaakov's lifetime. The Gemara Shabbos, cited above, states that it departed from the Jewish people when they stood at Har Sinai. Either the Meshech Chochmah is basing himself on an alternative source on Chazal, or, alternatively, he is explaining that Yaakov achieved on an individual level what would later be attained by his descendants on a national level when they stood at Har Sinai.]

The Meshech Chochmah explains as follows. The pasuk<sup>4</sup> describes the original state in which man was created as “*yashar* – upright.” This refers to the fact that his essential inclination was toward good. As we know, evil did exist even at that early stage, however, it existed as something extrinsic to man. To be sure, it was possible for evil to tempt him from the outside (as it did), and moreover, it was possible for him to succumb to that temptation (as he did). Nevertheless, that was an external force, for all of man’s internal tendencies were toward good.

However, this situation itself changed with the sin of the *Etz Hada’as*. From this point onwards, the drive towards evil entered man and became part of his internal makeup, so that it was no longer true to say that his essential inclination would always tend toward good. This was the “venom” with which the snake injected Chava – the inner drive towards evil which became part of the mankind’s fundamental makeup.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Three-Stage Refining Process**

The situation as described above continued until one man came and began to reverse it – Avraham *Avinu*. Through his monumental spiritual and moral achievements, he was able to initiate the process of refining and separating once more the pure from the impure. This refinement found expression in the radically divergent makeup of his two sons, for Yishmael “drew out” the impurities, leaving Yitzchak to receive and embody that which was pure within Avraham. This process continued in the next generation as well, with Esav drawing out any remaining impurities from Yitzchak, leaving Yaakov as the pure finished product, finally rid of the snake’s venom.

The implications of Yaakov achieving this state – which he then bequeathed to his descendants – ultimately defines the way we view the nature of the Jewish people, as well as each individual Jew. For now we once again look upon the essential nature of the Jew as “*yashar*,” upright, the way Hashem originally created man. He may yet, sin, but that drive is looked upon as “outside interference” – even though it resides inside of him! – not an expression of his true will. As Rav Alexandri expressed this idea in his private prayer following the *Shemoneh Esrei*, “Our (essential) will is to do Your will. What gets in the way? Yeast in the dough (the evil inclination) and negative influences from the governing nations.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, this idea finds expression in the halachic realm as well. There are certain *mitzvos* which requires the consent of the person involved. In cases where it is judged that the person should do that mitzvah, yet he does not consent, the halachah states “we force him until he says ‘I consent’”. How does this represent genuine consent? Surely his words are nothing more than a response to our coercion! The Rambam<sup>7</sup> explains that, in reality, every Jew wishes to do the right thing. If he says he does not want to it is because an alien element within him, the *yetzer hara*, is preventing him from doing so. Therefore, when we apply coercion, we are in actuality subjugating his *yetzer hara*, so that when he then says “I consent” he is voicing his innermost will which can finally express itself. The basis upon which all of the above rests is the axiomatic assertion that the essential nature of the Jew is to do good. This is what was achieved by the refining process of the Avos, culminating in the final product of Yaakov Avinu.

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4 *Koheles* 7:29: “אשר עשה האלקים את האדם ישר”

5 See Ramban to *Bereishis* 2:9 and *Nefesh HaChaim shaar* 1 Chap. 6.

6 *Berachos* 17a.

7 *Hilchos Geirushin* 2:20.

### **From Camels to Oxen and Donkeys**

With this idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah provides a stunning interpretation of Yaakov's words to Esav upon returning to the land of Canaan, "וַיֹּהֲבֵי לִי שׁוֹר וַחֲמֹר" – *I have acquired oxen and donkeys.*<sup>8</sup> On the face of it, Yaakov appears simply to be giving Esav an inventory of the livestock he had acquired. However, we know from the gift he subsequently sends Esav that he had many camels as well, also a noteworthy asset. Why would he omit them from his opening list?

Most interestingly, parallel to Yaakov's non-mention of camels while talking to Esav, they feature prominently in the Torah's description of events involving his mother, Rivkah. Commenting on the pasuk which states that Rivkah rode on a camel as she accompanied Eliezer to Canaan, the Midrash<sup>9</sup> explains that Rivkah's own states paralleled that of a camel. For an animal to be considered kosher, it needs two characteristics, to have split hooves and to chew the cud. Most animals have either both or neither characteristics, but the camel has one of each, in that it chews the cud but does not have split hooves. Halachically, as we know, such an animal is completely non-kosher. However, thematically, the Midrash states that Rivkah's own state was similar to that of a camel in that, of her two children, Yaakov and Esav, one was pure and one was impure. With the process of refinement not yet complete, good and evil had not yet been fully separated from each other.

Part of Yaakov's opening message to Esav is understood by Chazal as a description of his spiritual state. For example, when he says "עַם לָבָן גֵּרְתִּי" – *I sojourned with Lavan,*<sup>10</sup> this is understood as a reference to the fact that he kept the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos while with Lavan (גרת = תרי"ג).<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, this is the deeper meaning of what Yaakov means by telling Esav that he had acquired "an ox and a donkey." He is not describing his livestock inventory, but rather, his spiritual state. An ox possesses both characteristics required for an animal to be kosher, it is "completely" kosher. In contrast, a donkey possesses neither, and hence it is "completely" not kosher. Thus Yaakov's words represent the fact that he had achieved the state where the pure and the impure had once again become completely distinct. Evil still existed, however, it was not integrated together with the good, rather, it was a separate, extrinsic entity. This is why Yaakov mentioned oxen and donkeys – but not camels. The process of refinement had been completed!

### **Understanding Rivkah's Question**

All of this brings us back to Rivkah's question in the beginning of our parsha. The children are agitating within her and this leads her to ask, "Why am I thus?" What does she mean by this question?

The Meshech Chochmah explains: As we mentioned, the process of refinement of the future Jewish people began with Avraham's children and continued with those of Yitzchak.

With one difference

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8 *Bereishis* 32:6. The words for oxen and donkeys are written in the singular, but are taken as a generic reference to the species as a whole.

9 *Bereishis Rabbah* 60:14.

10 *Bereishis* 32:5.

11 Rashi *ibid.*

The two children of Avraham, representing contrary elements, were each born of a different mother, for the pure within Avraham – Yitzchak – was carried by Sarah and the impure – Yishmael – was carried by Hagar. Apparently, this itself was part of the process of separation. This was the question plaguing Rivkah, for as we know, the agitation of her children within her was a product of Yaakov trying to escape when she passed by a *Beis Hamidrash*, and Esav doing likewise when she passed by a house of idolatry. Recognizing the conflicting nature of her two children, she then asks “Why is it thus with me?” What she means to ask is, why is she carrying both the pure and the impure child, unlike the first generation where the two were carried by different mothers?

Having understood the question, what is the answer?

Hashem informs her that “there are two nations in your womb,” which the Gemara interprets as a reference to the two great personalities of Rebbi Yehuda Hanassi and Antoninus, the former being descended from Yaakov and the latter from Esav. What Hashem is doing is explaining why she is carrying Esav as well, for although he himself is impure, he nonetheless carries within him certain pure personalities who will be his descendants – represented here by Antoninus, who, as the Gemara describes,<sup>12</sup> was an extremely moral person who held Rebbi Yehudah Hanassi in the highest esteem.<sup>13</sup> It is in consideration of future pure descendants such as these that Rivkah carries not only Yaakov, but also Esav!<sup>14</sup>

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12 See e.g. Avodah Zarah ibid.

13 Another example of a pure quality descendant from Esav is the Tanna R’ Meir.

14 The implication here is that there were to be no such high caliber descendants of Yishmael who would warrant him being carried by Sarah.