

TOLDOS

Struggle, Inferiority, and Morality

In the *Torah* portion *Toldos* we learn how Jacob tricks his father and receives the blessing that his father meant to give to Esau. He does this on the instructions of his mother, Rivka. It seems hard to understand why it is that Rivka did not just talk to Yitzchak and tell him that she felt that Yaacov should get the blessing and not Esau. After all, as any other Jewish woman will do, she should have gone up to her husband and said, "Issie, you are not doing the right thing." Jewish women are not known to be reticent, to be deferential to their husbands in matters such as these, so why is it that Rivka did not just talk to her husband and tell him that, although she loved Esau and although he was her firstborn, she felt that Yaacov should get the blessing and not Esau, but she did not do it. Instead, she manipulated and maneuvered to get Yaacov the blessing. She ended up by having to send Yaacov away and by having one brother hate another. Yaacov got the blessing but at a great cost. It would have been better had she been straightforward, just like it is much better in any type of politics, whether it is American politics or Israeli politics or even shul politics, to go on the straight and narrow because, otherwise, even if you win through your manipulation, you engender such hatred that it is impossible for the institution or the country to remain united and whole. Why was it that Rivka did not just communicate to Yitzchak and tell him that she felt that Yaacov was a more fitting candidate to receive the blessing than Esau?

If we look at the beginning of this *Torah* portion, perhaps we can understand the reason. It says, "And these are the generations of Yitzchak, the son of Abraham, and Abraham began Yitzchak, and Yitzchak was 40 years old when he took Rivka, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramite from Podon Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramite, for him as a wife." Why do we have to repeat all this genealogy over again? We just learned about it in the last week's *Torah* portion. The answer is that what is being stressed here is that Yitzchak was the son of Abraham. Abraham began Yitzchak. And what about Rivka? Rivka was the daughter of an idol worshipper and the sister of a crook, a Mafia don, who swindled everyone and who never treated anybody compassionately or kindly. In other words, because she came from such stock, she, herself, felt inferior to Yitzchak. How could

she speak to spiritual matters to Yitzchak when she, herself, came from such a background?

This was apparent even in the first meeting between Yitzchak and Rivka. Rivka spied out Yitzchak as she was coming by caravan from Mesopotamia as Yitzchak was walking in the field. She immediately put a veil on herself. The rabbis say this was not just because of modesty but because she felt inferior to Yitzchak. She felt there was a veil between them. Why is it that G-d should have chosen her to be a matriarch when she came from such a family of idol worshippers, a family which had crooks in it, like her own brother Laban? Laban reminds me of the story of a boy in class whose teacher asked him, "Tell me, Johnny, is the world round or flat?" Johnny said, "Neither, my dad says it is crooked." This is the way Laban lived. Rivka never had the self-confidence to speak to her husband directly on spiritual matters. She should have had the confidence because we learn later on in the Torah portion that when she finally became pregnant (she had a hard time getting pregnant; it took 20 years of marriage before she became pregnant) "And the children were struggling in her womb and she said, 'If so, why do I need this?'" The rabbis explain this means, why did G-d choose me? Why did G-d choose me to be a matriarch, to be the carrier of Yitzchak's children? Rivka was so disturbed that she went to inquire of G-d and G-d said to her, "Two nations are in your womb and two nations from your womb will separate. One nation will be greater than the other and the older will serve the younger." This was the prophecy that was given to her. From this prophecy she could have inferred that she would have twins and that these twins would conflict and that this conflict would be almost an eternal conflict which the Jewish people would endure until the time of the *Mashiach*. However, in the next sentence it says, "And they fulfilled her days to give birth and, behold, there were twins in her womb." What does it mean, and behold? Wasn't she given a prophecy that there would be twins in her womb? Why was she surprised?

Many rabbis explain that what happened is that when she went to inquire of G-d, Rivka interpreted this prophecy in a different way. Not only did she interpret the prophecy differently, but also the person who gave her this prophecy interpreted it to mean that inside each of us, inside every human being there is a struggle. There is a struggle within each of us

to recognize that there is a G-d in the world and, therefore, that there is a right and a wrong in the world, that there is such a thing as morality. We all have to struggle to realize that we must do *Chesed*, that we must treat each other with kindness if we are to be truly human.

That's why it says that there were two nations in her womb. Each of us many times has to fight with ourself in order to do the right thing. We know that many times we are drawn to take shortcuts, that many times we want to obtain success no matter what, even if it causes us to cheat our customers, even if it causes us to do terrible things. For example, we all know that many times People feel in order to save their business, they have to fill out false reports and attain money illicitly but, the truth of the matter is, it would be better if their business just went bankrupt. Other times, because we are unhappy, instead of trying to solve our problems, we take drugs and alcohol, etc. in order to ease the pain. Many times, too, instead of being compassionate and kind and concerned about the poor, we become selfish and hard-hearted and do not want to share. We develop all sorts of philosophies, such as it helps the poor if we do not help them; it teaches them independence. Other times we want to sweep the bums off our street but we have no place to put them. Instead, we just dump them in another neighborhood and say that we should not help them at all because helping them just makes them more dependent on us and does not allow them to grow. This may be true in certain instances, but in most instances where you have people who are sick or mentally ill or you have mothers with small children, it does not apply at all. What we try to do is cover up our selfishness with all sorts of intellectual theories. We have lost our struggle with ourselves.

This is what was being told here. Rivka was being told that you, Rivka, are a person who had understood well the lessons that Abraham taught when he wed in Mesopotamia. His family did not adopt them but you had. Abraham had a strong belief in G-d and you by your going to inquire of G-d showed that you had a strong belief in G-d. You know what is right and wrong, and you also know that we must serve G-d by doing kindness, by helping others, and Rivka was certainly a kind person. When Eliezer, Abraham's servant, came to Mesopotamia and asked for a drink of water, not only did she give him a drink of water, but she gave water for all

his camels, a tremendous task. In every human being, Rivka, not just in you but in every human being there is this struggle to believe in G-d, to believe that there is a morality, to believe that there is a right and wrong. Each of us many times wants to take shortcuts. Each of us many times succumbs to peer pressure. Each of us many times wants to do those things which are not proper and right in order just to slide by. Each of us has this problem, and each of us has to fight to do kindness.

That is why it says the mighty will serve the younger. The word *yakef* can also mean the one who bears pain. What does this mean? It means that the mighty will serve the one who understands pain, the one who can feel the pain of other people. A society can only exist if it takes care of all its members; otherwise, it will deteriorate into civil war and revolution: that is why it is so important that we help each other. In a family we know that a family cannot stay together unless all the members of the family help each other; otherwise, it will end up in hatred and division and war. G-d was telling Rebecca, "Don't feel inferior. You should have no reason to feel inferior because all of us have that struggle. There are two nations within all of us." When all of us realize this then we should know that we can always overcome everything, just as Rivka overcame a bad environment. She overcame a milieu in which her own father and mother were idol worshippers and in which her own brother was a crook and, yet, she became a wonderful human being. She should not have felt inferior at all. The problem was that she understood this lesson intellectually but she did not understand it psychologically, so at the moment when Yitzchak was going to give the blessing to Esau, she decided that she had to intervene, not by communicating with Yitzchak but by manipulating her son Yaacov, and this led to a great deal of problems, as we know later on.

All of us should learn this lesson. None of us should ever feel inferior and none of us should ever alibi. We should never say, well, because I have this impediment, I have this trouble in my life, this type of parents, this type of an environment; therefore, I cannot succeed. You can succeed. You can overcome everything because G-d is telling us that everybody has to struggle, but everybody can rise above the struggle and become real decent human beings. This is very important for us to know. We can all act morally and decently, and we can all act kindly to our fellow human be-

ings. This is what Judaism demands and this is what we can do. Judaism demands that we act morally and that we practice *Chesed*, kindness, and we all can.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a person who was sprawling over two seats in a theater. An usher came over and said, "Fellow, you have to get up. The theater is filling up. We need that extra seat." The man said, "Uhhhhhh." The usher told him again he had to get up, and the man just said, "Uhhhhhh." Finally, the usher called the manager, and the manager told him to get up because he needed the extra seat. The man said, "Uhhhhhh." The manager said he was going to call the police. The manager asked where the man came from and the man said, "From the balcony." None of us comes from the balcony. We all come from Adam and Eve. G-d created us all. We all can implement the teachings of Abraham as Rivka did. We all have that potentiality which allows us to do the right thing and to practice kindness. Yes, there are two beings that are struggling within us. Each of us has to struggle. Each of us, though, can win in this struggle. None of us should ever say because I come from this background or I have these problems, I cannot be a good person. Each of us can. We all, no matter what background we come from, have problems. We are all struggling to do the right thing. We all, G-d tells us, can win this struggle if we will but try. Let us all hope and pray that all of us will try so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.