

Parashat Toldot 5776, 2015

“Fear Not For I Am With You”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And the L-rd appeared to him (Yitzhak) on that night and said, “I am the G-d of Abraham, your father. Fear not (*al tira*), for I am with you, and I will bless you and multiply your seed for the sake of Abraham, My servant.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 26:24, Parashat Toldot, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Fear is not an emotion that we commonly associate with the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and *Emahot* (Matriarchs). Yet, just as Hashem declared to Yitzhak “*al tira*” (“do not be afraid”) in our *pasuk* (verse), so did He with Avraham and Yaakov. (See *Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, and 46:3-4 respectively) Based upon the *peshat* (direct reading) of our *pasuk*, it appears that Yitzhak was existentially agitated on two accounts: the fear that G-d might abandon him, and the fear that the Almighty might not bless him with many children. Thus, the Holy One Blessed be He reassured him regarding both of these fears: “Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and multiply your seed...” Our verse, therefore, clearly provides us with insight into the content of Yitzhak’s consternation. What we do not know, however, is exactly why he was afraid.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) provided a very practical rationale as to why Yitzhak had such depth-level trepidation at this juncture in his life. He noted that the

narrative preceding Hashem's assurances to Yitzhak focuses upon Yitzhak's time in Gerar, and the disputes over water rights that transpired between his shepherds and those of Gerar. Moreover, and quite ominously, the overall encounter with Abimelech, King of the Philistines, did not end well: "And Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us, for you have become much stronger than we.'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 26:16) Therefore, the Ramban stated:

As a result of Abimelech forcing him [Yitzhak] to flee, people were [free to be actively] jealous of him [on account of his manifest wealth], and the shepherds of Gerar argued with him. As a result, Yitzhak was afraid that all of the parties involved in these activities would gather together against him and strike both he and his family. Thus, the Holy One Blessed be He promised him that he should not be afraid of them, [for He would protect him], and blessed him. (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, the Ramban maintained that Yitzhak's fears stemmed from his strategic military disadvantage and the likelihood of an impending attack by the Philistines. Thus, when Abimelech had declared Yitzhak to be "much stronger than we," this was an assessment of his wealth, rather than Yitzhak's ability to protect himself and his family. Consequently, "the Holy One Blessed be He promised him that he should not be afraid of them," even though he felt singularly vulnerable at this time.

Further support for the Ramban's position may be derived from the wording of the *pasukim* (verses) that were addressed to each of the *Avot*. Each of these prophetic encounters present Hashem speaking to the *Avot* as "*Anochi*" rather than the usual term, "*Ani*." While both are translated in English as, "I," they have two very different connotations. The great Torah scholar Rav Meir Lob ben Yechiel Michel Weiser (1809-1879), known to the world as "the Malbim," persuasively presented the distinction between these two terms in a gloss on our *parasha*:

There is a difference between “*Ani*” and “*Anochi*.” In every instance wherein [the Torah] states “*Anochi*,” this connotes [the concept of] I in my very being and focuses upon the essence of the speaker. [In contrast,] when [the Torah] says, “*Ani*,” this is not a statement [regarding the fundamental identity of the speaker,] rather, it refers to descriptions of, or actions regarding, the speaker. (*Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Toldot, 27:18-19, see as well, *Sefer Shemot*, Parashat Yitro, 20:2-3, translation and brackets my own)

The Malbim’s analysis provides us with a cogent rationale as to why the collective fears of Yitzhak and the other *Avot* were so quickly laid to rest. When the Almighty spoke to them in the persona of “*Anochi*,” He, so to speak, firmly placed Himself “on the line” and declared, with His essence and being, that each of the Patriarchs had nothing to fear. Clearly, no more reassuring words could ever be spoken.

Since we are mystically connected to the *Avot*, by virtue of being their descendants, we can legitimately look to Hashem’s inspiring and comforting words to each of them as being addressed to us as well. The Holy One Blessed be He is with us, and has always been with us, even when we have felt His presence eclipsed by the darkness of man’s relentless inhumanity. We longingly await the ultimate *geulah shlaimah* (complete Redemption), the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the righteous Messiah), when the entire world will stand shoulder to shoulder in recognizing Hashem. May this time come soon and in our days, bringing peace for the Jewish people and the entire world. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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