

Parashat Vayatzte 5770, 2009:

*True Jewish Heroes*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *alehah hashalom*, and to the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel and Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Toward the end of the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of *Sefer Bereishit*, we encounter the construction of a “pile and monument” whose purpose was to serve as a testimony to agreements and covenants enacted between *Yaakov Avinu* (our forefather Jacob) and his nefarious father-in-law, Lavan:

And Lavan said to Jacob, “Behold this pile and behold this monument, which I have cast between me and you. This pile is a witness, and this monument is a witness, that I will not pass this pile [to go] to you and that you shall not pass this pile and this monument to [come to] me to [do] harm. May the G-d of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us, the god of their father.” And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac. (51-53, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The original Hebrew for the expression “Fear of his father Isaac” is “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*.” The word “*pachad*” (“fear”) appears 25 times in *Tanach* (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture). The sole instance, however, of the expression “*b’Pachad*” appears in the above-found passage. As such, it virtually cries out: “*darshani*” (“interpret me”). Stated somewhat differently, what exactly is meant by the expression “Fear of his father Isaac?” As in most areas of Torah exegesis, the answer is a resounding: “It depends who you ask.”

The *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Sefer Bereishit*, *Parashat Vayatzte* 13 interprets “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*” in the following manner:

G-d forbid that anyone might even suggest that the righteous individual [Yaakov] might swear directly in the name of the king [Yitzhak]. Rather, he [Yaakov] actually swore by the life of his father like an individual who wants to emphasize the truth of his utterance by stating: “By the life of my father I shall refrain from doing such and such!” So, too, this oath was not actually sworn on behalf of “Fear of his father Isaac” per se. We know this, since it states [in *Sefer Malachi* 1:6] “A son honors his father...” (Translation my own)

This *Midrash* is capable of divergent interpretations. In my view, one of the most cogent readings is offered by the *Kli Yakar* (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntchitz, 1550-1619), as presented by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator Rabbi Chanoch Zundel ben Yosef, known as the *Eitz Yosef* after the name of one of his most popular works. Basing himself upon the final words of the *Midrash*: “A son honors his father...” the *Kli Yakar* suggests that “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*” does not refer to the person of Yitzhak at all. Instead, it refers to the imminent act that Yaakov was about to perform for Yitzhak, namely, the fulfillment of the commandment of honoring one’s father (*kibud av v’ame*). This explanation fits contextually since, as the *Kli Yakar* reminds us, he was “hastening to go to his father’s house to fulfill this mitzvah.” Thus, for Rav Luntchitz, the phrase “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*” refers to the fear and awe Yaakov felt in once again being able to fulfill the commandment of *kibud av v’ame*.

An entirely different approach to understanding the phrase “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*” is offered by *Rabbeinu Ibn Ezra* (1089-1164). At first, he translates our phrase as referring directly to Hashem. That is to say, that Yaakov took an oath “in the Name of the One whom his father held in awe.” In his second explanation, however, he notes the opinion of others who maintained that the *pachad* (fear) that is mentioned here “refers to fear and awe associated with the day of the Binding [of Yitzhak upon the altar]” – in my view, a seminal event that formed the foundation of Yitzhak and Yaakov’s relationship to one

another, and to the Almighty. In either case, our phrase ought not to be taken literally. Instead, it may be understood as a slightly oblique reference to Hashem, or as a metaphor for the *Akeidat Yitzhak* (the Binding of Yitzhak).

A unique understanding of our term, “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*,” is offered by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Provencal exegete, Rabbi Chizkiah ben Manoach, known as the Chizkuni, in the second of his two explanations:

Yaakov made Lavan aware of the violent shaking and trembling that overtook his father Yitzhak at the moment when he sought to [but did not] curse him [Yaakov] for taking the blessings [originally intended for Eisav] via trickery. As the Torah states: “And Yitzhak trembled.” This tells us that even his father [Yitzhak], who was a completely righteous individual (*tzaddik gamur*), had strong personal feelings as a result of [Yaakov] having come to do him wrong. (Translation my own)

Rav Chizkiah clearly emphasizes the normal human feelings that overtook Yitzhak when he realized his own son, Yaakov, had duped him. This, then, is the referent to the phrase “*b’Pachad aviv Yitzhak*.” We may well assume that Yitzhak’s trembling was a physical manifestation of the powerful emotions that nearly overcame him upon realizing that he had given the *berachot* (blessings) to the “wrong son.” Beyond question, he felt betrayed and furious. As the Chizkuni suggests, he even wanted to curse Yaakov for his duplicity and deceit. Yet, as powerful as these emotions were, he conquered them, and recognized that against his own personal desires, another step in G-d’s divine plan had been revealed. This act of self-transcendence represented *gevurah* – heroic self-mastery and overcoming. In reality, it was precisely the same kind of response that Yitzhak had previously manifested when he joyfully submitted to his binding at the moment of the *Akeida*. As such, he was a hero in the most authentic sense of the term, precisely because he was a real person, replete with all of the complexities of the human heart and mind.

I believe that the Chizkuni's approach to Yitzhak derives from Judaism's essentially naturalistic approach to the men and women who grace the pages of *Tanach*. This is particularly the case when it comes to the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and the *Emahot* (Matriarchs). Over and over again, Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah are portrayed as real people, confronting the same trials and tribulations that you and I encounter. Since they faced our real-life challenges, and in the process actualized their potential, they have become beacons of light to us as we traverse the tempestuous seas that are our lives. They are, in short, true Jewish heroes.

May Hashem give us the strength and insight to emulate the lives of our *Avot* and *Emahot*. May we, too, grow in our ability to rise above the temptations and dark challenges that so often befall us. May we be *zocheh* (merit) to do this with dignity, respect, honor, and in accordance with the intent and content of the deepest understanding of our holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

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