

POWERFUL PARSHA PERSPECTIVES
“DIGNITY LEADS TO DIVINITY”
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Parshas Toldos

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Parshas Toldos

OVERVIEW

We move on to learn more about the Patriarchs. Last week we read that Yitzchak married Rivkah. In this Parsha, we learn that Yitzchak and Rivkah have been married twenty years, but don't have any children. They pray to G-d and G-d gives them twins – Yaakov and Esav. The boys have different personalities: Esav is a man of the field, a man who's very into this world. Yaakov is a man of the tents, a man who studies Torah.

In this parsha, we read the story of Esav's selling his birthright. Then there is a hunger in the land, and Yitzchak travels to the land of the Philistines, where there is a whole issue surrounding his wife. Eventually Yitzchak becomes successful living in the land of the Philistines. But, eventually he is thrown out of the land of the Philistines and he digs all kinds of wells.

The parsha ends with Yitzchak's wanting to give the blessings of this world to Esav, but ends up giving them to Yaakov, who has taken the blessings by disguising himself (as per his mothers' instructions) as Esav. Yaakov is then sent out of the land to find a shidduch in the land of Charan.

This evening, we're going to focus on the story of the Selling of the Birthright.

ALL FOR OF A BOWL OF SOUP?

The Torah tells us in Chapter 25, verse 29: Yaakov was cooking a stew, a lentil soup. The reason he was cooking a lentil soup was that his grandfather Avraham, the founder of the Jewish People, had died, and it is customary to server mourners round foods, symbolic of the cycle of life, and beans are round. At this time, Yaakov was 15 years old.

Esav came home from a hard day in the field, and he was tired.

And Esav said to Yaakov: "Please, stuff me now with this red, red stuff, because I'm really tired. " He didn't even have the strength to pick up a fork. All he wanted was to open his mouth and for Yaakov to shove the soup down. The Torah interrupts this scene to say that the reason Esav is called Edom is that he went for the red (Hebrew, "adom") stuff.

Yaakov said, "[If you want it,] sell your birthright to me today." This is the price Yaakov demanded in return for the bowl of soup.

Esav said, "I'm going to die; what do I need this birthright for?"

Yaakov said, " Swear to me today."

And Esav sold him his birthright. And he sold his birthright to Yaakov.

*Yaakov gave Esav bread and the lentil soup. And he ate and he drank and he got up and he went. **And Esav spurned the birthright.***

The Talmud makes a sophisticated analysis of the text. They analyzed the text in depth in order to find out what was really going on.

The midrash says: *“On this day Avraham Avinu passed away. This wicked man transgressed five sins on this day: He raped a betrothed woman, he murdered someone, he denied G-d’s existence, he denied the resurrection, and he belittled the Birthright.”* It sure was a busy day for Esav! As evidence to prove the reason for his extreme tiredness, the midrash says that it came from cohabiting with that woman. There are different nuances in the text that led to these comments in the midrash.

The Rabbis ask two important questions about this story.

Question #1: Why is the Evidence Hidden?

Let’s say that the FBI is hunting for a wanted person, and is tracking someone who is very suspicious. As the evidence unfolds, it turns out that this fellow has already murdered 26 FBI agents; has stolen vital military secrets from the United States and has sold them to other countries. He had an affair with the wife of the President and the wife of the Vice-President. In private, he is setting up an Al Kaida network to overthrow the country. And, as well, he disowned his son.

Now, the FBI agent has to write a report of his findings. What does he write? He writes: “He disowned his son.” This is not an accurate report as it highlights the relatively insignificant event while ignoring the real criminal acts.

Let’s go back to the Torah story. From a simple reading of the text, what bad thing did Esav do? The only thing we actually see is that he belittled the birthright.

G-d knows what happened and G-d wrote the Torah. If the Talmud deduces from the text all the things that happened, the Talmud didn’t make it up. There is a tradition handed down regarding these details. The question is: When G-d wrote the Torah and listed all the felonies committed by Esav, why did He leave out the most important things? After all, giving up one’s birthright is a puny wrongdoing compared to rape, murder, etc.

If you didn’t know what the Talmud has to say, you wouldn’t think Esav was such a bad guy; after all, his father Yitzchak loves him, and he always brings his father food to eat. Judging by outward appearance, the story doesn’t look so bad. But, the rabbis asks, since there are enough hints in the text for us to deduce what Esav was really like, why didn’t the Torah tell it straight out? That’s a very strong question!

Question #2: Why does Yaakov Seem So Mean?

Another strong question is this. Yaakov seems to be a schemer. His brother comes in from the field, starving and tired, and all he wants is something to eat and eat fast. And the first thing Yaakov says is, How much are you going to pay for it? Yaakov looks like a terrible guy and Esav looks better than Yaakov. You may ask, What right does Yaakov have to take advantage of his brother like this, catching him in a moment of weakness?

The Rabbis answer both of these questions with the following answer: The Torah is not a history book. If you want facts, look them up in an almanac. The Torah was not meant to give us the course of events of history, because that is not what Torah is. Torah is Torat Chaim; that is, instructions for living. If the Torah describes anything Yaakov does, or anything Esav does, it wants us to glean lessons from their behaviour.

If the Torah were to tell us that Esav is a murderer and a rapist, we wouldn't be gaining anything from that information: the world is full of terrible people and Esav is just another one of them. That fact doesn't teach me anything about the way I am supposed to live.

Rather, the Torah is teaching us **that the root of all the sins Esav did – the root of his personality – was that he belittled his birthright**; and by belittling his birthright, he showed that he was a person who didn't care about the birthright. Such a person could be murderer and a rapist, etc. **There's a certain quality a person who would sell his birthright has, that would also make him a person who would kill people.** Now, we understand why the Torah singled out this particular aspect: it wants to teach us a lesson based on it. Now we have to find out how selling one's birthright is the root of wickedness – what is the significance of the birthright?

We will discuss the answer in three levels, each deeper than the other.

WHAT'S RIGHT ABOUT THE BIRTHRIGHT?

Level One: Tell me what you value, and I'll tell you who you are

Rav Simcha Zisel Ziv says: How can you tell if a person has certain virtues you are looking for? Well, if other people praise him, you can learn something about this person: perhaps you can learn that he has a virtue others don't have; consequently, they praise him. For example, a person is walking down the street wearing expensive clothes. You figure he must be a rich guy, an honorable guy, etc. But then when you find out he borrowed the clothes from a rich guy, you realize there's nothing special about this person, because the clothes are not his. You praise a person only for the virtues he really has. But how do you know if these virtues are really authentic? The answer, says Rabbi Simcha, is to ask: **What is this person willing to forgo in order to maintain the virtue?**

Let's ask all the married women: Would you sell me your wedding ring? I'll give you \$100 dollars for it. What would you say? Certainly you'd say no. Even if I offer you \$1,000 you'd say no. What about if I offered you \$1 million? Would you still say no?

Now, what if I offered you a quarter for the ring? Or what if I offered you a bowl of lentil soup? Would you give me the ring? If, G-d forbid, you sold me your ring for a mere pittance, I wouldn't want to be there when your husband found out! **The point is, if this ring is valuable to you, you will forgo a lot in order not to give it away.** And if you give it away for a pittance, it shows that the ring is not of much value to you, or that you don't feel any connection to the ring even though you're wearing it.

For example, if a wife has an abusive husband, that ring has zero value for her. As far as she's concerned, it's a pain in the neck. Even if she owns the ring, she doesn't feel it's hers. You often see, in divorce cases, people chucking away great family heirlooms at a garage sale. It proves that those items really weren't theirs – there was no connection to them. The same disdain for one's possessions applies to people's virtues. If a person is willing to give up their virtue for peanuts, it means that there isn't a lot of virtue to begin with. I'll illustrate with the following anecdote:

A nobleman once went over to a beautiful heiress and asked, "Would you sleep with me for a million dollars?"

She said yes. He said, "How about for \$50?"

She said, "What! Do you think I'm a tramp?"

He said, "Madam, we've already proved you're a tramp. We're only negotiating the price now."

Let's say a person has the power of intelligence. Is the intelligence yours or not? Let's say you're an observant Jew, and your intelligence tells you: "I'm an intelligent person, and I have to realize that Torah is important: Torah is of value; mitzvot are of value; davening is of value. I really ascribe value to them and those are values that are precious and dear to me." Then one day, you go to Wonderland with your kids. The admission price for persons ages 12 and up is \$25. And for kids 11 and under the price is \$12.50. Now, you take your 12-year-old with you, and you say to him, "Tell them you're 11." Your child protests, "But, mommy, I'm 12." Think about it: You say you're an honest person. But, for \$12.50, you're willing to let your honesty go down the drain.

We can always tell to what degree a person appreciates a virtue by his readiness to stick up for it or disparage it.

Here's another example: Let's say you go to daven every day. Now, one day there's a sale going on at your favorite store. If you come in early, you get a 10% discount. The store opens at 7:30 am. And so you say, Well, I'll miss davening today. You go and buy something for \$30 and get \$3 off: for \$3, you missed davening. It shows how much davening means to you if you're willing to forgo it for \$3.

What if a person insults your honor, and because of that, you get them back "good" with a juicy piece of lashon hara. You have violated a commandment of the Torah! For what? For a little bit of honor. You're not even willing to forgo your own honor in order to uphold a commandment of G-d. What does that say about your values and what you hold in high esteem?

Let's look at Esav. He is the bechor – the firstborn. He's the scion of the family. He is destined to be the third of the Patriarchs. But when he comes home hungry from the field, and Yaakov says, Do you want the pot of beans? It's going to cost you your birthright. What do you say? – what does Esav say? He says, It's not a big deal. That fact that he says that and sells his birthright just like that, shows you it has no value to him. And if it has no value to him, then, **by definition, he's not the firstborn**. Even though he may have been born a firstborn, but that value is not his: he doesn't own it. Literally, he sold it for bopkes (in Yiddish, "bopkes" means "beans").

By asking Esav to sell his birthright, Yaakov was showing that he knew the birthright meant nothing to Esav and therefore wasn't really his. He didn't take away from Esav something that was his. By the fact that the price was so ridiculously low, we see that Yaakov knew that Esav never really had the birthright. The proof was that Esav was willing to give it away for nothing.

Often, we're no different from Esav. We may look more religious, but we're literally ready to give things away. When your child's day school sends you a bill this year for another \$1,000 per child, you pull your kid out of day school. Is this the value you place on your child's Jewish education?

Level Two: Tell me how you behave, and I'll tell you who you are

It says in Deuteronomy 14:1: "You are children to Hashem, your G-d: you shall not cut yourselves and you shall not make a bald spot between your eyes for a dead person. For you are a holy people to Hashem, your G-d, and Hashem has chosen you for Himself to be a treasured people, from among all the peoples on the face of the earth."

What does this mean?

If a close relative of yours dies, and you are overwhelmed by grief, you are not allowed to express that grief by inflicting wounds upon yourself. Why? Because we are G-d's chosen people, we are holy people.

The Seforno comments that we mustn't feel so bad, because knowing we are G-d's chosen people should be a comfort to us. But Rashi goes much more to the heart of the issue: He says, "As you are children of G-d, it is fitting for you to look nice and not cut up or made bald." In other words, someone who is a child of G-d has to do things that suit the personality that a child of G-d has. When the Torah says we are children of G-d, it is not hyperbole. This is the real thing! We are invested with a pure and holy soul. That holy soul is the closest thing to the Almighty that is possible for anyone to have. By definition, that means we are extremely special, valuable people. A tremendous amount of greatness lies within us, and that means we should have a tremendous amount of self-esteem.

Therefore, when a person is a child of G-d; i.e., a prince, a certain kind of behaviour is demanded of him. It doesn't suit a prince to rip his hair out in agony; that's something a common boor would do. In some Third World countries, you see people ripping out their hair in a sign of mourning. But this is something a person with a sense of self does not do. The behaviour expected of a prince applies to the spiritual behaviour as well as to the physical makeup. It is not only a question of not tearing one's garments or pulling one's hair out. In the spiritual realm, a prince doesn't allow certain influences to infect his being. There is boorish behaviour and there is regal behaviour. A person with regal behaviour acts in a refined way.

Rav Aron Kotler, of blessed memory, the first Lakewood Rosh Yeshiva, elaborates on this point: (Mishnas Rav Aharon, Vol. I, pg. 157) He says that generally, most people don't recognize their intrinsic value; but they do recognize their deficiencies. Why? When they were children, they were deficient – they did not know how to read or write. As they began to learn, people would criticize them: "Don't hold the pencil this way; hold it that way. Maybe your handwriting will improve as you get older." We start off as wild animals. Even as we grow up, we remember ourselves as people who make mistakes. Our nature is more prone to recognizing the things we do wrong than to acknowledging the wonderful qualities we have. When a person focuses on his negative rather than his positive qualities, he sets up a vicious cycle and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the keeps going lower and lower.

It's like a person who won the lottery and is a millionaire ... but he never bothered to check his ticket! He really is a millionaire, but, because he didn't check the ticket, he doesn't make use of the money, and, for all intents and purposes he is a poor man.

Therefore, says Rav Aron Kotler, "A person is obliged to reflect and recognize the tremendous value and significance and royalty that each person has. The more one recognizes it, the greater the person is going to be." He says that people who became great rabbis and great people were the people who understood they had dignity. They understood they had potential. And, because they "held of themselves" (a yeshivish expression) they lived up to the

importance they had and were able to realize greater potential as they forged ahead. He said that once a person recognizes his self-worth and feels dignified, he has found the greatest method for growth. The real power of the person depends on recognizing his worth. And the actions he does must reflect his regal and dignified character.

If a person has failed in one area, it is a lot easier for him to say, "Well, I'm really nothing, anyway." If a person wants to feel good, there are two ways of going about it: the easy way and the hard way. The easy way is to say, "I'm really a nothing, and therefore the little that I do compared to the nothing that I am is pretty good, so I'm okay!" This is a perverse way of looking at things, but many people do this. It's a terribly damaging perspective to live with. Once a person feels he's a nothing, there is no end to how much of a nothing a person can be. Once a person considers himself a nothing, he can do the most disastrous things.

On the other hand, a person can say: "I'm a significant, dignified person. I really have tremendous talent! How could I have done that bone-headed thing? I have to take responsibility and I have to change. I can be better! It doesn't suit me to live in this low-life reality. I come from good stock and I am going to make something of my life."

The critical question is: In this scheme of things, where is the person rooted?

There is a law in the Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) that states: A person who eats in the street is disqualified from testifying in court. Now, there are many other things that can disqualify you from being a witness; for example, lying, cheating, stealing.

But if you walk out of a pizza store with a hot slice of pizza in your hand and, as you walk, you chomp on the pizza – what does this say about the refinement of your character? How dignified do you feel? Unfortunately, in the low-standard society in which we live, we don't even think about the matter. We don't even think about etiquette and comportment – we have lost that sensitivity. I may be wrong, but I don't think I've ever seen a picture of a President or a Prime Minister eating on the run. Think about it: Who eats in the street besides a cow? A cow grazes – he walks and chomps – just like us, except we do it on two legs. We're human beings. When a human being eats, he should sit down like a dignified mensch and eat.

It is easy to understand why the Beit Din would not allow a person who eats in the street to testify in court. The Rabbis are telling us: If you are not meticulous (in Hebrew, "makpid") about your self-respect and dignity, and the yetzer hara comes along and whispers in your ear, "C'mon, if you bend the truth a little bit, it might be good for you" – what's going to stop you? If you're a refined, dignified person, and the temptation to lie comes along, you would say to yourself, "*How could I lie? How could I do something that's not suitable for me?*" But if you lack a sense of dignity, and if you are the kind of person who thinks nothing of eating in the street, why shouldn't you lie as well?

The idea of sitting on the floor and not on a chair is another example of undignified behaviour. A person sits on a chair. Sitting on the floor when there are other options available shows a lack of sophistication. The President wouldn't sit on the floor at a news conference! (We're not talking about going camping, where it is appropriate to sit on the floor around the campfire.)

For non-Jews, who are constituents in G-d's world, but not children of G-d, such common behaviour is acceptable. But the Jewish People, who have brought morality and conscience into the world and have been willing to give up their lives for the principles of morality and good conscience into this world, have an important mission. We, the Jewish People, have to change

the world, and, to do this we must have the highest standards. We are the children of G-d. We must comport ourselves with a sense of dignity. A child of G-d doesn't sit on the floor. A child of G-d doesn't eat pizza in the street. A child of G-d behaves regally. The real self-esteem lies in the fact that we are children of G-d. That fact alone is the source of our dignity.

The non-Jewish world has to grope and find other areas of self-esteem, which may not be honest and accurate visions of self-esteem. But for a Jew, the knowledge that "you are children to Hashem, your G-d" gives us our self-esteem. We have that powerhouse inside us. If you do eat pizza in the street, you are negating what the Torah tells you, and if you don't have that self-esteem, who knows what's going to happen?

The principle is: The more one can feel and sense within himself that he is a child of G-d and is destined for greatness, the more he will take care of himself and the more he will watch his behaviour to make certain he doesn't overstep the boundaries of refined behaviour. He will do this with total awareness that it is not suitable for him to lower the standards expected of him by G-d.

For example, you have a teenage son. He has chosen friends who lead a different lifestyle. Their fathers beat their mothers, they drink and they do drugs. One day your son says to you, "My friends have invited me to a drug party. Can I go?" Sometimes parents face these difficult situations and have to know how to handle them with sensitivity.

You tell your son that he can't go: "You don't come from that kind of family, dear. You come from a hard-working family, a family that appreciates values. In our family, we don't sell ourselves for cheap thrills. "

Your son protests, "But everybody else is doing it!"

And you say, "But they're a bunch of beheimos! They don't live for anything. You're going to become a fine, upstanding person. You're on a different wavelength. You are a dignified person. Don't waste your life by destroying your mind." Your son will understand what you're teaching him if you explain things in this fashion.

Once you lose the Jewish hallmark of self-esteem, how far can you go? It's no longer a question of not eating in the street; it's no longer a question of carving incisions in your flesh – that's just the tip of the iceberg! **Once you don't think your special at all, you can do anything!**

Now we can come back and take another look at Esav.

By selling his birthright for a bowl of beans Esav showed that the birthright had no value for him. Moreover, by saying, "I'm going to die – of what value is the birthright to me?" he showed that he had no sense of eternality. At that point the Rabbis deduced: "And he denied resurrection." *If Abraham died, thought Esav, then we're all going to die. And what worth is my life – I'm not worth that much if I'm going to die anyway. And so there's nothing to strive for!*

Our Rabbis understood that with Esav's kind of mentality a person can rape someone and kill someone and do anything. Once you lose your sense of value and dignity and you compromise on a principle by doing undignified things, even if it seems trivial, you'd better be careful, because, from that point on, things are just going to go down the line.

The Torah, however, did not go into all the details. It mentioned only one episode – the selling of the birthright – and this act was the breaking point! This one act brought Esav down. In this one act, he compromised on a value and declared that it was a non-value. Once he denied the value of his birthright, he also repudiated the greatness and dignity within him. Once he manifested his lack of self-worth in this one area, he set himself up for failure in any other area. Like the millionaire in the anecdote, Esav really had the birthright, but he chose to say, *that's not me!* And he showed his lack of appreciation for what he had by selling the birthright for a mere pot of beans! Therefore the Torah identified this one source, even though it seemed to be a minor point, as the beginning of Esav's downfall. It led to the total corruption of Esav's spirit. His attitude led him to commit all the crimes the Talmud detailed. The Torah had no need to elaborate.

It is precisely those minor things that we have to worry about! When we don't make our children sensitive to the little things, who knows what's going to happen in the end?

You'll find people doing such stupid things when they get carried away with their sense of insignificance. It reaches the point where, even when faced with things you would think would be important to them, they prefer to say, "That's not for me." And they don't even look at those things that can help them realize that they are persons of worth.

To keep your self-esteem and dignity, **you have to hold on to what you have**. Why would a person want to look at himself in a negative light rather than focus on the positive qualities he has? If a person really has self-esteem and dignity, why would he fritter it away for a pot of beans? Why would you sell your birthright for a pot of beans? The bechorah is real and a Jew is a child of G-d – why would he deny it? Why does the person blatantly ignore his innate importance and trade it in for something insignificant as a bowl of soup? How does a person lose what he has?

Level Three: Tell me if it's logical, and I'll tell you if it's true

But let's look at the story another way. Doesn't it seem illogical that Esav, the scion of the family, the bechor, the son in whom Yitzchak invested so much time, would sell his birthright? So what if he had a bad day – he's still the bechor!

Let's examine the mechanism at work: In level #1, we said that Esav was not ready to forgo anything for his birthright and this means that he did not value it. And in level #2, we said that if the person doesn't acknowledge that, as a child of G-d, there is fundamental good and self-esteem that lies within his neshama, then that person can sink to the lowest abyss. We understand the mechanism at work in Esav's psyche based on those two levels. But there is still another question to answer: How could Esav do something so illogical? How could he ignore the obvious greatness that lay in front of him and instead go for the pot of beans?

To understand this mechanism, we go the Chovot Halevavot (Duties of the Heart) Gate #5: The Gate of Dedicating Our Actions for G-d [with no ulterior motives]. There, the author says: "You should know that your greatest enemy in the world is your Evil Inclination."

What's the yetzer hara's greatest weapon? He tries to create doubts in your mind. He confuses your mind with all kinds of false ideologies and questions based on nothingness, to get you involved in these kinds of things, and it will cause you to doubt your religion, which heretofore was so clear to you.

For example, you become a ba'al teshuva, and, the next thing you know, you're fired from your job. After six months, you come across a job opportunity. There is only one little problem: you will have to work on Saturdays. All of a sudden, the yetzer hara jumps into action. He says, "Do you think G-d wants you to lose this job opportunity? Do you think the Rabbis had all the answers to all the questions? Is this how G-d treats you? Why don't you try the job for a few weeks? After all, you have a wife and kids and you're behind in your mortgage payments. Does the Torah want your wife and kids to starve? If you get thrown out of the house, they'll get sick, and the Torah says you have to care for your wife and family." All of a sudden, everything that was clear to you isn't so clear any more. The yetzer hara always attacks you in an area he knows is going to hurt you most. (Maybe Shabbos is not a big test for you, but if it is, the challenge looms large.)

Another example: Your wife has not been giving you enough attention lately. She used to be so supportive. Well, maybe the fact that she now has a job and has personal satisfaction from her job and isn't waiting for you to come home because she has a bit of her own life now that the kids have grown up and moved away. Until now, it was so clear in your mind that your wife loved you so much – there was no doubt in your mind that she loved you. One day she makes a comment you didn't like hearing, and then the yetzer hara jumps in: "You know, she's been using you all these years. She said your mother was *%#\$."

And today, a rainy, miserable day, you call your wife to ask her to pick you up from the subway and you're sure she'll be waiting for your call, but you can't get through, because she's talking to that same person she talks to all the time – her new boss at work. Humph!

And then, while you're standing there in the rain, that attractive secretary of yours, who's been trying to make passes at you for the last while, drives up and asks, "Would you like a ride?"

How clear are things now? That's the yetzer hara at work.

Says the Chovot Halevavot: In order to fight the yetzer hara, you have to fight it with your ammunition. And what is that ammunition? Your brains! Your intellect! He goes on to say, "Don't be confounded and confused by the mass armies of the yetzer hara. Don't be afraid, because all he wants to do is show that the lies and the deceit of life are truths." **The yetzer hara has only one weapon: to make what is true false and what's false true.**

The scenarios may change, but the base is always the same. The yetzer hara's goal is to make you see those things you thought were true as things that are false, and vice versa. If you think about all the aveirot you do, the bottom line is that you acted based on the "encouragement" of the yetzer hara.

Your only defence is to use your brain. Your brain will always tell you what is true and what is false. When you use your intellect, says the Chovot Halevavot, you will see "how easily you will capture him." No matter how strong the yetzer hara is, he's easy to capture. The defence system of the mind can defeat the yetzer hara quickly and utterly.

The following episode shows how we can defeat the yetzer hara: The Chofetz Chaim lived in Radin. The mornings in Radin were extremely cold. There was no heat in the houses. The Chofetz Chaim had to get up early to daven. One morning, the yetzer hara said to him: "Yisrael Meir, it's so cold. Sleep a little longer. You're such a tzaddik, you can sleep a little longer."

Yisrael Meir said to him, “If it’s so cold, how come you’re up working!” The Chofetz Chaim’s intellect pierced right through that argument!

The Chovot Halevavot concludes: **“Even a weak intellect can make the yetzer hara accept your mastery over it. And you can very easily overcome his weapons. Why? Because a little bit of truth can defeat a lot of lies, just as a little bit of light and dispel a lot of darkness.”**

That’s the power of truth. Even a little bit of truth can help you pass every test. If you know the truth of Shabbos, no power can ever overcome that knowledge. If you know your wife loves you and has been loyal to you for 30 years, now power can persuade you that she will ever be unfaithful to you, even though for some reason she has been ignoring you a bit.

THE YETZER HARA VERSUS THE INTELLECT – A MATTER OF TIME

On the one hand, we have the yetzer hara, who is working through your emotions. And on the other hand we have the intellect. Which of these components works more quickly – emotions and intellect? Emotions – they engage you immediately, every time.

For example, if you’re angry with someone, what happens first? Do you think about why you shouldn’t get angry? No, because you’re already angry. You don’t need to think in order to get angry.

Or, for example, you’re trying to diet. An incredibly luscious cake is on the table in front of you. You down three pieces before you even think about the caloric content.

The yetzer hara has this advantage over the intellect: it is superior in that it works more quickly. It works faster than your mind can work. It confounds you, and before you know it, something has happened, and you don’t even know how it happened.

[The following is an excerpt from Gerald Schroeder’s latest book, “The Hidden Face of God”. (Page 117)]

“It is the amygdale, one of a group of organs, at times collectively referred to as the limbic system that evokes emotional memory even when at times that memory evades our logic...”

*“...The wisdom of the cortex notwithstanding, the amygdale, because of its proximity to the thalamus, induces its response before the cortex can get into the act. The limbic system is the fast route. The cortex is still working on the data when the amygdale is screaming for action. >From here arise the responses of fight and flight, and, interestingly, a third emotional choice not usually mentioned submission. Depending upon one’s past experiences, the amygdale quickly chooses a response to incoming sensory information and prompts a response. **The first part of us that acts, our first decision maker, is also our least logical self.** (Emphasis is mine)*

Even with the “slow” processing of the cortex, we’re talking about milliseconds. Slow is still quite fast. But the difference in timing is unfortunately sufficient to, at times, let us blurt out a response that moments later has us groaning “How could I have said that?”]

We spoke about self-esteem; we spoke about being the child of G-d. We spoke about the bechor. What made Esav give it all up in the blink of an eye? **His emotions. Emotions run**

more quickly than our intellect in telling us what the truth is. The intellect needs time to catch up.

Esav was coming in from the field, ravenous and “dying” for food. His stomach was growling; his emotions were running at full speed. The voice of reason said, *Wait a minute! It is worth it to lose your bechora? Remember, generations and generations of spirituality are invested in you. You will be the kingpin, you will rule. Can't you wait for a couple of minutes?*

If Esav had thought for a minute about all the ramifications of selling his birthright, he would not have fallen into the trap the yetzer hara set for him by latching on to his emotions.

When Esav came in from the field and saw the bowl of soup and asked, what's the soup for? – Yaakov told him that his grandfather Avraham had died. If Esav had stopped for a moment to think about what his grandfather's death meant. If only he had thought for a moment about the value of life, about the accounting one has to make before the Almighty, about family, about heritage. If only he had let his intellect catch up with his emotions, how easily he would have defeated the temptation of the bowl of soup!

Esav represents the person who doesn't have the time to think about things. He judges by first impression, **so much so that when he sees the soup, he says, “Give me this red, red...” He doesn't even have enough time to say the word “beans”!** That's how fast he wants it! He even eats it raw, before it is fully cooked. [Lentils are only red in a raw state. Once cooked, they turn brown.] That is the root of all Esav's problems.

The whole story revolves around the theme of time. In one small action, Esav lost it all. He sold the birthright in no time flat. No one sells his life for a pot of beans, and especially if you're a Jew and have a holy neshama.

Let's review level one: Didn't the birthright have value? Of course it had value. Had Esav thought about it – had he used his intellect – he would not have been defeated by the swift machinations of the yetzer hara, which manifests itself through the emotions.

Often we spend years not think about life's values, and the yetzer hara drags us down from one level to the next. When we are in crises of self-identity and dignity, we have to grab on to that which we know is true, and we mustn't give it up. Esav could have done just one thing and that would have saved him. Had he only said to himself: “I may be hungry, I may feel I'm dead, but one thing I know: that bechora must be worth something: I won't give it up for a trifle. I am too dignified to do this!” – how different things would have been! Had he given it a moment of thought, he would have seen how illogical it was to sell such a lofty inheritance as the bechora for a mere bowl of soup. If only he had said, “Let me think about it; I'll give you an answer in an hour” he would have thought about what he was about to do and would not have given up his birthright. All he had to do, no matter how he felt at that moment, was to hold on to his bechora. But he didn't hold on to even this one thing. And from that point on, he spiralled all the way down and became the terrible Esav that he was.

We have many issues to resolve. Things don't always work out the way we want them to.

Let's say a person is 50 years old and he is laid off from his job. How does he feel? He feels he's a nothing – his self-esteem goes down the drain. But, hold on! Isn't he a wonderful husband, a great father, a great grandfather? Doesn't he daven three times a day – doesn't he have a holy soul? Isn't he a royal, dignified child of G-d? If the person wants to find an easy

excuse for his getting fired, he can say he's a failure. And then he can come up with the reason for being a failure; namely, that he's a nothing. *What can you expect from a nothing?* he says to himself. And then he feels a little bit better, because, after all, even though he's a nothing, he has lasted this long at this job. And then, because he's a nothing, he gets involved in abusing his wife and doing all sorts of things to reinforce his belief that he is a nothing. But, if he would just turn around and look at all the good things about himself and hold on to the fact that he is a good husband, a good father, and learns Torah three hours a day, he'd realize that he's really something and he would hold on to his virtues. But our emotions run so quickly that they grab us before we even know what's happening. We have to tell ourselves to wait, and give our brains a chance to catch up.

We've seen the negative process playing itself out in the battle between the yetzer hara and the intellect. Now, let's reverse the process.

YAAKOV GETS THE BLESSING

We'll take a look now at Yaakov, who for 63 years has been studying Torah day and night. He finds out that his father, who does not know that Esav sold his birthright to Yaakov, is about to give the blessings of heaven and earth, future prosperity and rule over the Jewish People to... Esav. After all of his hard work, Yaakov is about to walk away with nothing. What do you think this does to Yaakov's self-esteem? For 63 years, his father had ignored his righteousness. From Yaakov's perspective, can you imagine a greater abuse?

What was Yaakov supposed to cling to? Why, the birthright that he bought. Of course! The same birthright Esav had sold for a pot of beans! He had the document!

His mother Rivkah said, *Yaakov you can't let Esav take that birthright from you! You go and get that birthright yourself.*

Did Yaakov say, "Who, me? If I do that, Daddy will catch me out and I'll be eternally cursed. I'm not willing to give up being in his good graces just so I can get the birthright"? In spite of those feelings, he wasn't going to give up that birthright so easily. It was worth something to him.

He could have said, "Well, if Daddy doesn't think I'm worth anything and doesn't want to give me the blessing, I guess that means the birthright is not worth that much to me, either. Why should I make any effort to get the birthright? Do you think it's worth taking the risk of getting cursed?" He could have rolled over and said, "I'm a nothing."

He didn't want to masquerade. But he did it. He took the risk for the sake of the birthright. He went against his nature to be able to do it. Because he knew how important that birthright was, he was able to risk everything for it. And he was able to take the risk because he knew he was someone special and no one was going to be able to tell him he was not. A dignified person does not let an impostor wear the crown of royalty. Yaakov rose to the occasion, and that's why Yaakov is the one who succeeded.

Talking about self-esteem: I read this item in the newspaper recently: "As part of the gala opening of a branch of the Ken'v'lo clothing chain on Tel Aviv's Rechov Shenkin, the store

offered a free garment for each item that women in the store took off. Soon, traffic on Rechov Shenkin was stopped by men gawking in front of the store, as patrons as young as 13 rushed to disrobe in front of complete strangers. Store employees tried to convince the girls not to strip entirely, but to no avail. The lure of a free new bra was too strong.”

These are real people, real Jews, in the real “holy land” of Tel Aviv. That’s the pot of beans!!

Think about Jewish girls in the Middle Ages, whose only crime was that they did not want to become Christians. How did the non-Jews punish them? They would tie a Jewish girl to a horse, and she would be dragged through the streets to her death. There are stories recorded of Jewish women who would ask for a few pins before they were dragged to the streets, so that they could pin their dresses to their legs, so that their legs would not be exposed as they were being dragged through the streets.

Jewish women understood what self-respect and dignity was. Unfortunately, because of society’s impact, many people don’t understand how dignified they really are. Today, the yetzer hara is victorious over the intellect, because women don’t stop to think. Did those girls in the store think for a moment about what they were going to do?

The newspaper article continues: “A 17-year-old Jewish girl tells Ma’ariv, ‘The girls who took off their clothes are a symbol of the new feminism, according to which a naked body is the symbol of freedom. And if the adults don’t like it, they can stuff it!’ In her eyes, streetwalkers strutting down the avenue in hot pants are feminist icons.” This is the society in which we live.

CONCLUDING STORY

Let’s end on a positive note. Just as you can tell what a person is worth by what he is *not willing* to forgo, sometimes you can also tell his worth by what he *is willing* to forgo:

This story took place on Yom Kippur in the city of Berdichev, where the holy Reb Levi Yitzchak would daven on Kol Nidrei night.

It was time for Kol Nidrei. The Berdichever Rebbe motioned to the Chazzan and asked him to delay for a while – he was not prepared to start the davening. The people were waiting and waiting and the Rebbe still did not give the signal.

Reb Levi turned to the Shamash and said, “Is Mottel from the neighboring town of Zhitomer here?” The Shamash looked around and checked and said, “Yes, he’s here.”

The Rebbe said, “Tell him to come here. I want to talk to him.” Everyone was wondering, Why would the Rebbe want to talk to this simple Jew when everyone was waiting to start Kol Nidrei?

“Tell me,” said the Rebbe to Mottel, “Don’t you live in a land owned by the Poretz Zlotik?”

“Yes,” answered Mottel.

“Doesn’t your Poretz own a dog?”

“Yes,” Mottel answered.

“Do you, by any chance, know how much he paid for that dog?” asked the Rebbe.

"I most certainly do," said Mottel. "The Poretz paid 400 rubles for that dog. He said it was a pedigree – a rare-breed dog!"

Said the Rebbe, "400 rubles! That's wonderful! Thanks a lot!"

Mottel went back to his seat, and Reb Levi motioned to the chazzan to start Kol Nidrei.

When the davening was over, everyone rushed over to the Rebbe to find out what that interchange with Mottel had been all about.

The Rebbe explained:

"An incident that took place this past year that really bothered me a lot. A melamed (tutor) came to our town from a distant city. He had a lot of debts and he stayed in town for a long time tutoring and tutoring and making money. He earned the money he needed and began making his way back home. He was very careful with his money, but, unfortunately, he stopped at an inn, and some unscrupulous person stole all the money he had earned during the whole year. He cried and cried, but to no avail.

"Now, guess who was staying overnight in that same inn? None other than the Poretz of Mottel's. The landowner heard the melamed crying and asked him what had happened. In a moment of mercy, he asked him how much had been stolen, and he gave him the 400 rubles that had been taken from him, and the melamed continued to his home.

"As we were about to start Kol Nidrei, I thought about that incident and it worried me. I said to myself, 'We're standing before the Almighty, hoping that he will judge us favourably for the coming year. But how could the Judge, Hakadosh Boruch Hu, look at us favourably? Who among us did any one act comparable to that of the Poretz? If a gentile can do such a wonderful act, what does it say about Hashem's people who are expected to do wonderful act? Nobody did an act as wonderful as that! How can we start Kol Nidrei?'

"And then I remembered the dog! I remember that the Poretz spent some money on that dog, but I didn't know how much. When I found out from Mottel that he spent 400 rubles on something as trivial as a pet – that showed me that the 400 rubles had no value for him. While it's true that the act of giving money to the melamed was an act of kindness, it obviously was not one of great sacrifice. If a man can spend that much money on a dog, money doesn't mean that much to him!" That is the story. What is the point?

You often see people spending \$100 on an etrog, but also spend \$100 on the biggest nahrishkeit (foolish bauble). Does it mean we really care about the mitzvah of etrog? You may have spent \$1,000 on a pair of tefillin; but you spent ten times more on a stereo system. Do you really value the tefillin?

If the things we spend on are things we shouldn't be spending on, it reflects to a certain degree on the spending we do even for good things.

It is not only what we are willing to give up to do a mitzvah that counts. It is also what we are willing to spend on that shows where our priorities lie.

May the Almighty give us the wisdom and the ability to have the patience to act according to our wisdom rather than our emotions. May we merit to make the decisions of a Yaakov Avinu, to realize the birthright that is ours. And may we merit bringing the Mashiach bimheira b'yameinu amen.



Parshas Toldos

1. **Bereishis 25:29-34:** And Yaakov boiled a stew, and Eisav came in from the field, and He was exhausted. Eisav said to Yaakov, "Pour into me, now, some of that very red stuff for I am exhausted. (He therefore called his name Edom) Jacob said, "Sell, as this day, your birthright to me." And Eisav said, "Look I am going to die, so of what use to me is a birthright?" Jacob said, "Swear to me as this day"; he swore to him and sold his Birthright to Yaakov. Yaakov gave Eisav bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, got up and left; and Eisav belittled the Birthright.
2. **Talmud Baba Basra 16b:** On this day, Avram Avinu passed away ...this wicked man transgressed five sins on this day: He raped a betrothed woman, He murdered someone, he denied G-d's existence, he denied the resurrection, and he belittled the Birthright.
3. **Dvarim 14:1:** You are children to Hashem, your G-d – you shall not cut yourselves and you shall not make a bald spot between your eyes for a dead person. For you are a holy people to Hashem, your G-d, and Hashem has chosen you for Himself to be a treasured people, from among all the peoples on the face of the earth.
4. **Rashi:** because you are children of the Omnipresent, and you are fit to be handsome – and not cut or made bald.
5. **Mishnas Rabbi Aharon (Kotler) Vol. I, pg. 157:** In general, a person does not recognize this awesome importance, and only recognizes the deficiencies within himself... consequently, he belittles himself, thereby descending further down. Just like a rich man who is unaware of his wealth; and therefore doesn't make use of his wealth – is truly poor. A person is obligated to reflect and recognize the great self-worth that a person essentially has. ...the more he recognizes it, so he will become greater. This is the greatest, major, primary cause for improvement. Once a person recognizes his greatness, he will always consider if his actions are appropriate for the kind of person that he is.
6. **Talmud Kiddushin 40b:** A person who eats in the street is invalid from testifying in court.
7. **Duties of the Heart; Ch. 5 – The Gate of Dedicating Our Actions:** You should know that your greatest enemy in the world is your Evil inclination...whose efforts are to cast doubts upon things which you previously thought to be true. To bring uncertainty to what was clear to you.... Go to war against him with the weapon of your intellect.... Do not be confused from him, in spite of his awesome armies...for all his intentions are to show that what is false is true...and when you will understand his weakness, you will see how easy it is to get rid of him. Even though the intellect is weaker than the Inclination, the Inclination can swiftly accept the authority of the Intellect that fights against it. For a little truth can defeat a lot of Falsehood, just like a little light can push away much darkness.... Even the smallest victory over it, should be viewed as a major thing in your eyes...so that this victory will serve as a level from where you can ascend to greater victories.