

It's A Matter of Perspective

Category: Bereishis, Toldos

Are you a "Joy Jew" or "Oy Jew"? The secret of Rebecca's behavior, uncovered.

Joy vs. Oy

There are two types of Jews in the world. There are people who are always telling you their problems, and they always have problems to share. The minute one issue is resolved they are lucky enough to find another one to complain about. These I call the "Oy Jews." Then there are the "Joy Jews." You know who I'm talking about, the people who always have a smile on their face and a good word to say.

This past weekend, I had the merit to attend the international conference of Shluchim. There I got to see many of my family members and friends who are Chabad Rabbis all over the world. One of the things that I noticed is that the Shluchim and Chabad as a whole can be put in the category of Joy Jews.

Let me explain it this way.

In this week's parsha we read that after twenty years of infertility, Rebecca's prayers are finally answered and she conceives. However her pregnancy is very painful, so painful in fact that she begins to think, "Why did I want this?" She starts to regret all of her praying and wishing for a child. In her distress and confusion she seeks the advice of the spiritual leader, the Rebbe of the generation. Rashi says this was Shem the son of Noah who was still alive at that time.

This poses a problem: According to the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 56), Shem (also called Malki Zedek) lived in Jerusalem. Rebecca lived with her pious husband and father-in-law in Beer-Sheba, very far from Jerusalem. The natural thing for her to do would be to discuss her pain with them. Why did Rebecca travel all the way to Jerusalem to see a prophet when she had two prophets living in her home?

In answering this question (Toldos 5748, Sefer Hasichos pg. 520) the Rebbe taught a tremendous insight which sheds light on Rebecca's entire life.

The Rebbe explained: Rebecca knew that by telling her husband or father-in-law that after all of their praying and waiting she was suffering so badly that she was beginning to regret the whole thing, they would have been pained greatly. Instead, she schlepped herself all the way to Jerusalem on a camel, not wanting to cause such great Tzaddikim any anguish.

Rebecca wasn't the kind of person to share her woes with others. On the contrary, she wanted only to spread good news and happiness. Therefore, she was willing to take on even greater discomfort so long as she wouldn't have to burden her family with her own pain.

Why She Stole the Blessings

As I said, this insight sheds light on Rebecca's whole life; so now we can also understand the main story of our parsha; the story of the stolen blessings.

Everyone who reads this story is shocked. How could it be that Rebecca should come up with such a 'devious' plan to deceive Isaac? And how could Jacob whom scripture designates "the Honest Man," agree to go along with such a plan? In the end, when they did succeed in procuring the blessings through trickery, Isaac himself told Esau, "Your brother came with cunning and took your blessings!"

The proper thing for Rebecca to do would be to sit down with Isaac in his office and discuss the issue with him. She should have told him that in her opinion Jacob was more deserving of the blessings than Esau. If you know anything about Jewish wives you'd agree with me that chances are very good that Rebecca would have changed Jacob's mind without a problem. But this trickery seems completely unbecoming!

However, now that we've learned the Rebbe's insight it all makes sense.

Just imagine, if Rebecca was to sit down with Isaac and discuss the issue with him, what could she have told him?

That even as a fetus whenever she'd pass by a house of idol-worship Esau was so drawn to it that he would fight to get out of the womb?

Could she tell him that for forty years Esau had been stalking other men's wives and abusing them?

Maybe she could tell him that Esau was married to non-Jewish women and they were lighting incenses to pagan gods in Isaac's own home?

Or maybe she could have told him that on the day of his Bar Mitzvah which was also the day of his grandfather Abraham's passing, Esau "celebrated" by doing all of the following: violated a girl who was engaged, killed a man, denied G-d's existence outright, rejected the fundamental concept of resurrection and threw away his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup! (Bava Basra 16b)

Certainly, if Isaac would have known all of this, he would never have wanted to bestow such blessings upon Esau. But Rebecca realized that Isaac didn't know what kind of man Esau really was. Rebecca also knew that Isaac had prophetic powers - but that G-d was hiding from him all of the wicked deeds Esau did every day to spare him from the pain this knowledge would bring.

If Rebecca would have told Isaac all of this, she would have won him over completely. Even after hearing a part of it, Isaac would have happily given the blessings to Jacob instead of Esau. But Isaac would also suffer great anguish from hearing such things about his own son.

Now, no parent is prepared to hear people criticize their children, even if they know the people are telling the truth. Especially in this case where we're not dealing with small misbehavior problems; Esau was a criminal! Any person, even someone without children, can imagine how great Isaac's pain would be to hear this about his son.

[Perhaps this is why G-d weakened Isaac's eyes - so he wouldn't have to watch as Esau sank to the depths.]

So would Rebecca, who would travel all the way from Beer-Sheba to Jerusalem to spare her husband any pain, ever agree to tell Isaac the truth about Esau and cause him immense pain and anguish?

No way! She felt it was better to resort to trickery than to break Isaac's heart so irreparably.

Seeing the Positive

What's the lesson for us?

There are people who love to share their troubles with others. No matter when, they will always be complaining that the business isn't so good and the health is always a little "shvach" and so on. And nobody really likes these people; we tolerate them but we don't enjoy being in their company. But people like Rebecca, who always have good things to say and never share their woes with others - they spread joy and happiness to everyone around them.

The great philosophers of our times are all predicting a dark future for the Jewish people. They have everyone talking about "the Vanishing American Jew." But anyone who was lucky enough to witness the Shluchim's Convention knows that Judaism is flourishing and every day Jews are returning to their faith. The Shluchim and Chabad as a whole have a positive outlook on the Jewish future. Shluchim don't know of any "vanishing American Jews" they only see "flourishing American Jews."