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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WOULD YOU MARRY A MINDREADER?

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וישב יצחק בגרר.
 וישאלו אנשי המקום לאשתו. ויאמר: "אחותי
 היא",
 כי ירא לאמר "אשתי", 'פן יהרגני אנשי המקום
 על רבקה, כי טובת מראה היא'.
 ויהי כי ארכו לו שם הימים,
 וישקף אבימלך מלך פלשתים בעד החלון וירא,
 והנה – יצחק מצחק את רבקה אשתו!
 Yitzchak settled in Garar.
 The people of the place asked /'his wife, and
 he said: "She is my sister",
 because he was afraid to say "my wife",
 'lest the people of the place will kill me
 over Rivkah, because she is good-looking'.
 It happened when his days there were
 extended,
 that Avimelekh King of
 the Pelishtim overlooked at the window and
 saw,
 behold – Yitzchak *metzachek et* Rivkah his
 wife!

"Yitzchak *metzachek*". Puns are notoriously untranslatable. But are there ideas that can only be expressed via wordplay, so that one loses not only art but essence in translation? On the other hand, would we be comfortable saying that some literary devices in Chumash serve purely artistic purposes?

Wordplays on *tz'ch'k* have already been prominent in Yitzchak's story. Avraham (17:17) and Sarah (18:12) each *tz'ch'k* when told of his impending birth; G-d responds to Avraham by revealing Yitzchak's name, and to Sarah by asking Avraham why she had *tz'ch'ked*. Sarah demands Yishmael's expulsion after seeing him *metzachek* (21:9). But it's never clear why *tz'ch'k* is so important.

I don't have a satisfying explanation for why G-d reacts so differently to Avraham than to Sarah. But it seems likely to me that Yishmael is expelled for challenging the place of Yitzchak: *metzachek* = making himself like Yitzchak. (That leads us to consider whether Lot seeming like a *metzachek* in the eyes of his sons-in-law (19:14) explains why Lot failed to become Avraham's heir.) It follows plausibly that Yitzchak in

our episode is revealing his essence = his Yitzchakness = the reason that he rather than Yishmael is Avraham's true heir.

But what is that essence? Answering this question requires a narrative and lexicographic excursus.

Narratively, the most pressing questions in our episode may be why Avimelekh was at the window, and why Yitzchak was so careless as to be caught. My suggested answer to the first is that Avimelekh never believed Yitzchak – many years ago, I framed this in class at Maimonides as: Eyes were rolling all over Phillistia – "It's another of those Hebrews with their 'sisters'."

Note also that Yitzchak is not besieged by suitors for Rivkah.

Perhaps Rivkah was in fact not unusually attractive to anyone but Yitzchak, and Yitzchak realized over time that no one cared whether she was his wife rather than his sister. However, it seems to me more likely that Avimelekh never believed this "sister" story. Why, then, was Yitzchak careless? Well, it had been a long time, and people usually relax their vigilance over time.

Here the lexicographic excursus may be helpful. What does "*metzachek*" mean? As with many words, it can but does not necessarily have a sexual connotation. Thus Potiphar's wife complains that her husband has brought a Hebrew slave "*letzachek banu*", which likely means "to make us the object of his sexual play". It is plausible that the Jews who "arose *letzachek*" during the Golden Calf episode were erotically engaged. -

Yitzchak is *metzachek et*, and Yishmael is *metzachek*. Let's assume that these uses are at least erotically tinged. I suggest that *metzachek et* nonetheless does not mean, as most translations have it, "sporting with", or even as Everett Fox more comprehensively has, "laughing-and-loving with". Both these assume that "et" here means "with", rather than serving as a direct object marker. I would instead have "was causing Rivkah his wife flirtatious laughter", or as Deborah Klapper suggested, "was making Rivkah giggle". In other

words: What made Yitzchak who he was – in contrast to Yishmael, who was *tz'ch'ke* for himself, and in even starker contrast to the stereotype drawn by Mrs. Potiphar of one who is *tz'ch'ke* others-as-objects – was that his *tz'ch'ke* was for the sake of another. Yitzchak did not grow careless – rather he responded to Rivkah's need for affection.

Deborah suggested as an alternative that perhaps Yitzchak was not doing anything deliberately, and certainly not being consciously erotic. Rather, just as his birth caused *tz'ch'ke* for everyone who heard of it, being around him caused *tz'ch'ke* for Rivkah in a way which made it evident that he was her husband.

This reading of Yitzchak's character fits well with interpretations of Yitzchak praying *lenokbakh* his wife as meaning "for the sake of his wife", and not so well with those that take "opposite" more literally. Moreover, Yitzchak and Rivkah seem to have serious communication issues as their marriage develops. Rivkah, so far as we know, never discusses the behavior of her unborn children with Yitzchak, before or after she goes to to inquire of Hashem. Yitzchak, so far as we know, does not discuss his plans to bless his sons with Rivkah, although he informs Esav in her presence. Obviously Rivkah does not discuss her substitution of Yaakov for Esav with her husband.

It is tempting to connect *veRivkah shoma'at* (27:5) = Rivkah hearing Yitzchak instruct Esav, with *veSarah shoma'at*, (18:10) = Sarah hearing the angel tell Avraham that she will become pregnant and give birth. I assume that the angel **intended** Sarah to hear, knowing perfectly well that she was on the other side of the entrance. Perhaps Yitzchak intended Rivkah to overhear, and to overwrite him if she thought it necessary, and their communication was complex but clear.

Targum 'Yonatan' accepts the connection to Sarah but draws an opposite conclusion: Rivkah overheard Yitzchak via *ruach hakodesh*, presumably even though Yitzchak tried to keep her from knowing. However, Or HaChayyim, argues that *shoma'at* describes a continual state rather than a specific act:

מודיע הכתוב כי רבקה נביאה היתה
ושומעת תמיד בדברי יצחק וגו',
הגם שלא ידבר בפניה.
והבן.

Scripture conveys that Rivkah was a
prophetess
and continually heard Yitzchak's words etc.,

even those he did not speak in her
presence.
Understand this.

Or HaChayyim does not clarify whether Yitzchak was aware that he had no secrets from Rivkah, or (to my knowledge) whether he could hear her words as well. If the transparency was mutual, then of course he heard Rivkah's instructions to Yaakov as well.

The theoretical and practical challenges of telepathic relationships have to my knowledge been treated more extensively in secular than in Jewish literature, although there are interesting discussions around Amos 3:7: "*For Hashem Elokim will not do anything without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets*", sometimes in conjunction with or contradistinction from 18:17: "*Hashem said: Am I concealing from Avraham that which I am doing?*" And maybe neither Rivkah or Yitzchak had yet developed this ability as of their sojourn in Gerar. So we can wonder if their relationship remained one which brought *tz'ch'ke* to Rivkah simply from Yitzchak's presence, or in which Yitzchak's essence was best known via his relationship with Rivkah. It's also fair to note that the Torah never tells us anything regarding the meaning or significance of Rivkah's name. This makes it hard for us to get a full picture of her contribution.

My preference is for readings that present Yitzchak and Rivkah as true minds, and admit no impediments to the constancy of their love. It should be clear that to be taken seriously, any such reading requires accepting the equality of husband and wife, and that love does not require full agreement.

Shabbat shalom!

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