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PEACE WITH SECURITY: A PSYCHOPOLITICAL MEDITATION ON YITZCHAK'S MEDITATIONS

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There are moments in life that initiate longitudinal bonds, the things that successful marriage and true friendship and discipleship and avodat Hashem are made of. These bonds, like all dynamic things, require maintenance but have the capacity for growth, and there is nothing more important in life than maintaining, growing, and deepening them.

But there are also moments of surpassing beauty that initiate permanent and unchanging but tangential bonds, between lives that meet only at the one point. The relationships they initiate may be of little intrinsic significance, but the memory of incandescence or transcendence is part of what sustains our belief in the possibility of shared experience, and thereby enables the relationships that matter.

I had a rather unusual such experience this week, and I'd like to share it with you, and think together about what it might mean.

My divrei Torah generally emerge from an encounter with a text rather than a pretextual agenda. So I often prepare by scanning the parshah and hoping to be surprised. This week the first thing that caught my eye was a phrase in 26:24:

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא
וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲנִי אֱ-לֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֲבִיךָ
אֶל-תִּירָא כִּי-אֵתְךָ אֲנִי
וּבְרַכְתִּיךָ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת-זַרְעֶךָ
בְּעָבוֹר אַבְרָהָם עֶבְדִּי:

Hashem appeared to him during that night.

He said:

I am the G-d of Avraham your father.

Don't be afraid, because I am with you,

and I will bless you and make your descendants numerous

for the sake of Avraham My servant.

It seems as if G-d is emphasizing Yitzchak's unworthiness even as He reassures him that it will all be good. What would that feel like? As some acharonim note, it strengthens the reassurance – unlike Avraham and Yaakov, Yitzchak doesn't have to worry **שמא יגרום החטא**,

lest his sins prevent him from receiving an already-promised reward. But what does it do to his self-image?

I started my research by using the phrase as my search term on the Bar Ilan Responsa Project's Literature of Chazal database. There were only ten hits, and fittingly, nine of them focused on Avraham's status as G-d's servant. Only the very first result, found oddly in Tosefta Berakhot 6:8, related to Yitzchak.

ר' דוסטאי ב"ר ינאי אמר משם ר' מאיר
הרי הוא או' ביצחק
"וברכתך והרבתי את זרעך בעבור אברהם עבדי"
דרש יצחק ואמ':
הואיל ואין הברכה שורה אלא על מעשה ידי ...
עימר זרע,
שנ'

"ויזרע יצחק בארץ ההיא וימצא בשנה ההיא מאה שערים"

*Rabbi Dostai son of Rabbi Yannai said in the name of Rabbi Meir:
Behold it says about Yitzchak:*

"and I will bless you and make your descendants numerous for the sake of Avraham My servant"

Yitzchak interpreted this and said:

Since blessing rests only on my handiwork ...

so he harvested and planted,

as Scripture says:

"Yitzchak planted in that land, and he found in that year a hundred gates?"

I simply couldn't make head or tails of what was being said here. What in G-d's words teaches Yitzchak that his blessing is limited to "his handiwork"? Why does Yitzchak harvest before he plants?

Very likely the answer to these questions is that the text is hopelessly corrupt. But before giving up, I found one more problem. The text as we have it says that Yitzchak harvested and planted *in reaction* to G-d's words in 26:24. But we are told about the planting in 26:12!?

So R. Dostai must have read the text as out of chronological order. What motivated him to do this?

The answer seemed clear. 26:24 tells us that Hashem appeared to Yitzchak **בלילה הוא**, "during that night".

Which night? The previous verse tells us only that “Yitzchak went up from there to Be’er Sheva”, without mention of night.

But the truth is that there is no mention of night anywhere earlier in the story of Yitzchak. So which night?

Now that R. Dostai had alerted me, the problem seemed so blatant that I was sure all the standard commentaries would address it. So I looked at Rashi, Rashbam Ibn Ezra, and so on – no luck. Many of these commentaries noted other temporal anomalies in the narrative – obviously that Be’er Sheva is named three separate times, and it’s very hard to figure out which wells were dug when. But no one at all seemed bothered by “on that night”.

At this point I began doubting myself. Maybe the problem wasn’t real, and I was missing an obvious solution. Maybe I had misread R. Dostai, or this difficulty was also the phantom offspring of a corrupted text. What did that say about my ability to read Rabbinic commentaries generally? How many of my previous Torah essays were based on invented textual issues or unnecessarily complex answers?

And then the moment happened. Approaching desperation as I scanned through everything remotely relevant on Bar Ilan, I found someone who had shared my dark night of the soul.

- "וירא אליו ה' בלילה ההוא"

כל ימי צעקתי על פסוק זה: מה ר"ל "בלילה ההוא"?
ולא ידעין באיזה הלילה כלל, כי לא נזכר שום לילה.

"Hashem appeared to him during that night" –

*All my days I screamed about this verse: What is the intent of
"during that night"?!*

*We don't know at all which night, because no night has been
mentioned.*

These were the words of Rabbi Yochanan son of Aharon Luria in his commentary Meshivat Nefesh. Bar Ilan tells me that Rabbi Luria was lived circa 1440-1514 in Alsace, but that his commentary was first published from manuscript in 1998. Had I tried to write this dvar Torah twenty years ago, I would have been completely alone.

Rabbi Luria’s solution is that night here is symbolic, and refers to Yitzchak’s dark night of the soul while being chased from well to well by the Philistines. The Torah finishes its physical narrative, which ends when Yitzchak digs the well at Rechovot (verse 22), and then fills in the psychological narrative. There was a time when Yitzchak was too discouraged to try digging yet another well, so G-d appeared and encouraged him. What else are your father’s friends for?

I don’t find this solution at all satisfying. There is no hint here that night is metaphorical rather than actual, and no hint in the text that Yitzchak considered giving up. But it really doesn’t matter – Rabbi Luria and I, though separated by five centuries, will always share that moment of being the only ones in the world obsessed with this question.

But there is of course the possibility that one of you had noticed the problem, perhaps years ago, and now reading this dvar Torah adds you to our bond. So for you – and for everyone who understands our experience even if they don’t share it - I’ll provide my own very tentative solution.

I suggest that “during that night” means “during the same night that G-d previously appeared to Yitzchak”. In other words, this revelation is a continuation of the revelation recorded in 26:2.

If we put those revelations side-by side, they seem almost identical. What changes is that in the first G-d favors Yitzchak because of Avraham’s **actions**, while in the second He favors Yitzchak because of Avraham’s **character**.

Here I turn to my favorite insight from the great medieval commentator R. Yosef Ibn Caspi: When a prophecy appears to be repeated, it doesn’t mean that there was a new experience of revelation, but rather that the prophet gains a new understanding of the previous experience. I want to take that one step further and say that the Torah here is telling us that Yitzchak had one experience of revelation, “during that night”, but that he understood it differently before and after the episodes of the wells.

When Yitzchak first arrived in Gerar, he thought G-d’s message was that he should imitate Avraham’s actions, and so he redug his father’s wells. (Davida Kollmar suggests that this may help explain R. Dostai’s enigmatic notion that "blessing rests only on his handiwork".) After that failed repeatedly, he realized that he needed to be like Avraham, not to imitate his actions. One cannot be like an enormously creative person by imitating them.

When that happened, Avimelekh ceased quarreling with him and, recognizing that G-d was with Yitzchak, he reinstated the Philistine-Jewish accord first made with Avraham at Be’erSheva. Perhaps the underlying message gives a new meaning to the slogan “Peace with security”: Those with insecure identities cannot make lasting peace, nor can lasting peace be made with them. Yet even where longitudinal relationships cannot be formed, we should never surrender our faith in the possibility of shared human experience.

Shabbat shalom!