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WAS THE AKEIDAH ON YITZCHAK'S SHIDDUKH RESUME?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Avraham was near despair. His son, his sort-of only son, whom he loved at least as much as he loved the others, was 37 years old and still “in the freezer” at Yeshivat Shemever. So far as Avraham knew his son had never talked to a girl, let alone gone on a date. Yitzchak simply wasn’t going to take care of marrying himself off. So Avraham did the only thing a parent could: he wrote a shiddukh resume and sent it off.

Yeshivat Shemever was a magical place. No one who went there ever wanted to leave. At some point the Rosh Yeshiva would tap a student on the shoulder and hand them a copy of Plato’s Republic with the Allegory of the Cave annotated. A week later the student would pack the copy with their other seforim and leave.

The Allegory of the Cave teaches that philosopher and nonphilosophers see the world entirely differently. Philosophers live in sunlight and see three-dimensionally in color, while nonphilosophers live as bound prisoners in caves squinting at shadows – they see two-dimensionally in black and white. Philosophers go down to the caves to persuade nonphilosophers out of the caves by explaining what they are missing; they are judged insane. The mystery is why the philosophers keep coming down to the caves to try to explain.

Rambam’s explanation is that genuine knowledge of truth generates an evangelical impulse. Anyone who knows Truth will feel an overpowering need to share it, as Avram and Sarai did when they “made souls” in Charan. Sharing it requires going down to the caves where the nonphilosophers live.

Modern yeshivot, and the Talmud, have a different explanation. They may share Rambam’s notion that Adam was a philosopher in Eden, and perhaps Eve as well. But what Rambam underplays is that sexual desire eventually distracts from philosophy, and if not properly managed, becomes the focus of mental life, with philosophy at best an occasional distraction. Yeshivot are Eden, and the time inevitably comes when you expel yourself. The Rosh Yeshiva’s tap on the shoulder with a shadkhan’s number is a diagnosis not a cause.

One positive aspect of this system is that, at least in a society that effectively stigmatizes nonmarital sex, dating is very *tachlis*-oriented. People capable of staying in yeshiva, that

is, people capable of simultaneous chastity and concentration, do so. No one leaves Eden unless they have no choice.

But this was not always true for the *bochurim* of Yeshivat Shemever. They would sometimes be thrust into the world unprepared to seek companionship, looking only for audiences. Worse, if a young woman nodded along cheerfully and at the end expressed complete allegiance to the particular style of Talmud Torah that the Yeshiva had most recently embraced as Truth, she would be dumped immediately, because preaching to the converted offers little relief from unbearable quasiprophetic urges.

Worse, some of these exiles were genuine solipsists with no need for an audience. From the Yeshiva’s perspective, there were two possibilities: Either the students genuinely knew Truth, in which case they would need to leave to satisfy the evangelical urge, or else they had no such urge, which proved they didn’t genuinely know Truth, in which case the yeshiva need them to leave lest they “cool the water” for everyone else in the pool. So the yeshiva pushed them all out the door. But they met a skeptical marriage market.

So Yitzchak was a definite oddity – 37 years old and still in yeshiva. This would need to be explained for him to even get a date, leaving aside the question of whether he would show up.

The portrait of Yitzchak that I’m drawing is grounded in a peculiar story told in the context of Ibn Caspi’s commentary on the Akeidah.

Avraham returned to his lads –

because he was the head, and there is no need to mention those who are subordinate to him, such as Yitzchak his son.

There are hundreds and thousands of this kind of thing in the Torah.

– *וישב אברהם אל נערו* –

כי הוא הראש, ואין צורך לזכור הנטפלים לו,

כמו יצחק בנו,

ומזה המין בתורה למאות ולאלפים.

Ibn Caspi here denies meaningfulness to a feature of the text that 20th century interpreters such as Nechama Leibowitz often saw as crucial, namely that while in the run-up we are told twice that “the two of them went together”, Avraham

returns to his lads without Yitzchak. Modern interpreters argue that the father-son relationship is broken by the Akeidah, generally because Yitzchak feels betrayed and/or is traumatized by what he perceives as his father's willingness to kill him, even if he intellectually agrees that obedience to G-d's command should trump all human relationships and values.

But there is another way to explain the separation. On the third day, when he saw the place from afar, Avraham told his two lads: "Set yourselves down here, with the donkey". Rashi famously channels the midrash that the lads are "similar to donkeys". The word for donkey is *chamor*, which sounds related to *chomer*, which at least in post-Talmudic thought refers to materiality. If we put all that together, we discover that Avraham returned to the realm of materiality after the Akeidah – he went back down to the caves – but Yitzchak never left. With that in mind, we return to Ibn Caspi:

However, when I was in the city of Valencia some years ago, it was among the *chasdei/graces* of Hashem upon me that I was met by a *chasid zaken vegadol* = a pious man old and great

with a *zakan gadol* (=large beard) fully white who said to me that Yitzchak never returned, because as reward for his tolerance of being slaughtered – Hashem sent him to Gan Eden,

Therefore his name is not mentioned in the Scriptural telling of the death of Sarah, and he remained there until he married Rivkah the pleasant, Therefore his name is not mentioned in Scripture either regarding the death of Sarah or regarding the agency of Eliezer until he returned with Rivkah, and Scripture there says

and Yitzchak came from coming (from) B'er Lachai Ro'i.

I said to him: May your mind be at ease just as you have eased my mind.

האמנם, בהיותי בעיר ולנציאה זה שנים,
היה מחסדי השם עלי כי פגע בי חסיד אחד וזקן וגדול עם זקן גדול
כולו לבן,

ואמר אלי כי לא שב יצחק,
כי בשכר מה שסבל להשחט –

שלחו השם בגן עדן ועמד שם עד שנשא הנעימה רבקה.
ולכן לא נזכר שמו בכתוב במיתת שרה ולא בשליחות אליעזר עד
ששב עם רבקה,

וכתו' שם "ויצחק בא מבא באר לחי רואי" (בראשית כד:סב).
אמרתיו לו: תנוח דעתך כמו שהנחת דעתי.

Ibn Caspi's mysterious interlocutor¹ describes Yitzchak's extended stay in Gan Eden as a reward, but I think we moderns are more likely to see it as a consequence of trauma. The question is how he finally manages to leave. And that

brings us back to where we started, with Avraham writing his son's shiddukh resume.

We tend to tell the story of Yitzchak and Rivkah as love at first sight, as indeed it is. But it is not accidental but rather arranged love. The question is whether Rivkah agrees to marry Yitzchak knowing only about his family and his father's wealth, or whether she asked Eliezer to tell her about Yitzchak as well.

I have only one hint to the answer at this stage; I hope to learn more from the participants in YI Sharon's post-hashkomoh shiur. But here is the hint:

Rivkah's family gives her an odd blessing when she decides to go with Eliezer:

אחותינו
את היי לאלפי רבבה
ויירש זרעך את שער שנאוי
Our sister

May you become thousands and myriads
and may your seed take possession of the gates of those who
hate him

I often wonder about a blessing that assumes the existence of haters. But Rashbam notes that the blessing appears to echo the angel's blessing to Avraham after he sacrifices the ram (22:16-18):

וַיֹּאמֶר
כִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם־יְהוָה
כִּי יֵעַן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חָשַׁקְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ:
כִּי־רָבָה אֲבָרְכֶךָ
וְהָרְבָה אֲרַבֶּה אֶת־זַרְעֶךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַדּוּל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שַׁפְתַּי הֵימָּן:
וַיִּרְשׁ זַרְעֶךָ אֶת שַׁעַר אֹיְבָיו:
וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזַרְעֶךָ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ
עָלֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי:

He said:
By Myself! says Hashem
Because you have done this thing and not withdrawn your
son, your unique son,
that I will surely bless you

I will surely multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens
and like the sand on the seashore
and your seed will take possession of the gates of its foes.
All the nations of the land will be blessed through you
in consequence of your heeding My voice.

I propose that Eliezer told the whole story to Rivkah and her family, and that the echo was conscious. The marriage might not have been binding if such an overwhelming source of trauma had not been disclosed. The question then becomes how Rivkah succeeds in drawing Yitzchak back into the world.

Shabbat shalom!

¹ Suggestions/evidence regarding his identity are very welcome.