

*Shiur L'Yom Sh'lishi*¹

[Tuesday's Study]

READINGS: **Torah Toldot:** **Genesis 26:1-14**
 Haftarah: **Malachi 1:6-8**
 B'rit Chadasha: **Romans 9:6-7**

I will perform the oath that I swore to Avraham your father.
[Genesis 26:3]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 107:8-14;

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is Petition No. 3, *S'lach* [the Prayer for Forgiveness]

Vayehi ra'av ba'aretz - Then there was a famine in the land Genesis 26:1a.

It is supposed to be springtime in the Negev - but something is very, very wrong. Yitzchak takes his sheep on his familiar shepherd's circuit each day – but he is finding less and less pasturage each time out. His herdsmen are reporting a shortage of fodder for the herds that is growing more critical every day. The ewes and nannies are getting thin; the rams and bucks are getting hungry and irritable. Why is nothing growing? It probably has something to do with the lack of rain. It is as if someone turned a switch, and the Heavens turned to brass. Not only are no spring showers falling – there are not even any recognizable drops of morning dew to be found. Fields have been prepared as usual. Furrows have been plowed. Seeds have been sown; but they are just not sprouting. Trees and vines have been pruned – but photosynthesis is just not happening. Bees are buzzing everywhere - but there is just nothing for them to pollinate. The ground around *Be'er LaChai Roi* is drying out and beginning to crack open. The vineyards are succumbing to blight; the orchards to mildew. The valleys are becoming as dust bowls; the hillsides as moonscapes. At this rate there is no way the Covenant Family is going to make it through a long hot Negev summer. What can they do? Is it time to move on?

Scores of Kena'ani and Cheti families who had sought to sojourn in the area have already given up. They have pulled up their tent pegs, piled their children and belongings on carts, and headed off in search of fairer climates, fertile fields, and food.

Need is the stimulus to concept, concept to action.

*A half-million people moving over the country; a million more restive, ready to move;
ten million more feeling the first nervousness.*

— John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Predators, running low on prey in the wild, inch closer to the Covenant Family's sheepfolds every day. Vultures are circling menacingly. There is no relief in sight. Day by day, hour-by-hour, the suffering – and the tension in Yitzchak and Rivkah's relationship – increases. How long will it be before Yitzchak, Rivkah, Ya'akov, and Esav have no choice but to join the migrant throng?

*...and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath.
In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy,
growing heavy for the vintage.
— Steinbeck, Id.*

What is going on here? Where are the 'blessings' to which Yitzchak and Rivkah were accustomed from their youth? Where is *the plenty*? Where is *the grain*? Where is *the flax*? Where is the *fig*, the *pomegranate*, the *date*, and the *olive*? What has happened to the years of abundance? Should we follow our Kena'ani and Cheti neighbors on their trail of tears?

***Pick Your Poison Carefully –
To Which of the Potentates of This World Will You Run for Shelter?***

Here is how Torah describes Yitzchak's actions upon leaving *Be'er L'Chai Roi*.

Vayelech Yitzchak el-Avimelech melech-Ph'lishtim Gerarah

And Yitzchak went to Avimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar.

[Genesis 26:1(b)]

Yitzchak set out tentatively, traveling first to the nearby land of the Ph'lishtim², in Gerar³, where his father had gone when the toxic fall-out from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah drove him Westward. As you will recall, Avraham had made a covenant of peace with Avimelech, the Ph'lishtim king⁴. Perhaps that covenant of peace would still be honored, Yitzchak may have mused. It seemed worth a shot. But alas, Yitzchak is about to find out that close association with pagan kings and their minions always comes with an exorbitant, outrageous price

² Genesis 10 identifies the Ph'lishtim [*i.e. Philistines*] as descendants of Cham [Ham]. Torah tells us first that ***The sons of Cham were Cush, Mitzrayim, Put, and Kena'an***, and then tells us that ***Mitzrayim begot ... Casluhim, from whom came the Philistines and Caftorim***. The Philistines occupied the area along the Mediterranean coastal strip of southwestern Kena'an, including five major cities - Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath.

³ It is unclear whether the Biblical reference to *Gerar* [*gimel, resh, resh*] is intended as a reference to a specific ancient *city* or is merely a general reference to the Western Negev region to the northwest of Beersheba – the area over which Avimelech presided as warlord. Despite being an area of very limited rainfall, this part of the Negev manages to produce significant quantities of citrus fruit, green onions, cabbage, lettuce, cotton and sunflowers because fifteen to twenty feet below the surface of the area a layer of clay forms an underground water reservoir which traps water which gravity draws from the hills around Hebron (thirty miles or so to the north). The wells which Avraham and Yitzchak dug while living in this area tapped this underground water resource, and allowed them to sustain life and crops even in dry seasons when surface water dried up.

⁴ See Genesis 21:22-33.

tag. In fact, close association with pagan kings and their minions always tends to cost a person the very thing he or she values most in the world.

In this case, what close association with the pagan king of Gerar will cost Yitzchak will be Rivkah, the wife whom Yitzchak loves. As it was with Avram in Egypt, who had his beloved Sarai taken into the harem of Pharaoh, so it will be with Yitzchak and his beloved wife Rivkah in Gerar. There is no free lunch in the heathen's world. The kings of this world - and the minions who serve them – are *takers* and *taskmasters*, *not givers*.

But ... What is a Covenant family to do – in times of FAMINE, PLAGUE, PERSECUTION, OR WAR?

Vayelech Yitzchak el-Avimelech melech-P'lish'tim b'Gerar. Before the ecosystem spasmed and the crops failed, Yitzchak and Rivkah lived pretty much 'off-the-grid'. Prior to the famine Torah does not describe Yitzchak, Rivkah, and family as interacting with a single person outside their little oasis. What did they know of Avimelech, of the P'lish'tim culture, or even of the economy of Gerar? Their sphere of influence was limited to their own little watershed. As for the two boys that had been born into their household, Esav spent most of his time roaming the wilderness areas wreaking havoc on wild roe; Ya'akov, by contrast, spent most of his time tending the flocks, taking care of the mundane, day-by-day needs of his parents. The 2nd Generation Covenant family was – at least in those early days – pretty much the ultimate *'lamp hidden under a bushel*. The new head of the Covenant household, Yitzchak, clearly had no appetite for this world's drama – much less fortune or fame. He was content to live a simple, peaceful life. Being a close friend and beloved protégé of the Creator of the Universe was enough for him – at least for now. He has learned from a lifetime of walking with the Holy One to be slow to anger, slow to speak, and even slower to form an opinion. He refused to 'trouble his head' about the outside world. He sought neither trouble, attention, or gain from - nor political, ideological, philosophical, or theological discourse with - the peoples living around him. He did not wear his ethnicity like a chip on his shoulder; nor did he see anyone else as less valuable than himself. He was gracious, kind, and respectful to everyone he encountered; but he was closely associated with none. He belonged to no Kena'ani or Cheti cliques or clubs. He eschewed participation in Kena'ani or Cheti holidays, entertainment events, education systems, or socialization functions. He sought membership in no Kena'ani or Cheti organizations. He did not attend the meetings of any Kena'ani or Cheti institutions. Yitzchak, you see, loved the Holy One. He loved Creation – especially *Eretz Yisrael*. He loved Rivkah. He loved rascally Esav and cagy Ya'akov. And he loved life. As a result, he smiled a lot – and when he smiled, his face beamed. His eyes sparkled. His laughter filled his sphere of influence with

the pleasant frequencies of deep, inner joy. He danced even when there was no music – and he did it with passion, as if no human being was watching. He hummed while he walked. He whistled while he worked. He sang to his herds and flocks. And he left every place he visited a better place than he found it.

Up to this point Yitzchak walked with the Holy One in the way Avraham had taught him. He served His Creator-King joyfully, and stewarded his family and his little piece of Creation faithfully. He had *honored his father and his mother*, and in doing so had *honored the Holy One*. On Moriyah, he trusted the Holy One enough to willingly lay his body down on an altar and surrender his neck to a slaughter knife. His trust in the Holy One was rewarded; he walked away unharmed – and emboldened. We have since seen him walking in a field doing something our English Bibles translate as *meditating*⁵. We also saw him *take a woman he had never met before to wife – and love her, and become a faithful husband to her*. We even saw Yitzchak *put aside his past history with and serious offenses against his older half-brother Yish'mael at least long enough to honorably and respectfully escort the bodily remains of their mutual father Avraham to their final resting place*.

We know therefore that Yitzchak is a man of *peace*, a man of *virtue*, and a man of *honor*. But we still do not really know what makes him ‘tick’. We still do not know what motivates him. We still do not know what frightens him. We do not know what captivates his heart or drives his will. We don’t know how he will respond to the deeper levels of adversity that the world – and family life – have to offer. That, however, is about to change. Beginning with today’s aliyah we are going to see both Yitzchak’s world – and his family - turned upside down. Watch out, dear patriarch – there are *crucibles coming!*

What Makes Yitzchak – And the Yitzchak In Us - ‘Tick’?

It is not that Yitzchak has heretofore had a trouble-free life. He has had to deal with life’s challenges like everyone else. He has encountered dark energy from both without and within. He, like all men, has had to deal with all the *after-Garden manifestations of ra – i.e. ra itself* [self-will, manifesting in narcissistic self-obsession⁶], *charah* [fallen’ man’s inclination to respond to challenges of life or relationship with offense, anger, wrath, ranting, and/or outrage, rather than staying calm, and seeking

⁵ The Hebrew verb is שׁוּבָה – *shin, vav, chet*, pronounced *su’ach*. Some might call it ‘practicing the Presence’ of the Holy One – *i.e.* connecting with the Creator through focused thought; through rhythmic movement – especially walking and/or rocking; through the visual and auditory stimulation of Creation, and through alternating silence with periods of humming, whistling, singing, and/or voicing praises, thanks, and prayers.

⁶ *Ra* is not ‘moral evil’ as men tend to think of it; it is, instead, merely the opposite of self-denial. It gives rise to every form of *narcissistic selfishness and egocentric self-promotion*.

counsel from, and following the Way of, the Holy One], *naflu paneicha* [fallen soul/'downcast mood'; the phrase the Holy One uses to describe 'fallen' man's inclination to respond to challenges of life or relationship with disappointment, discontent, dissatisfaction, melancholy, sadness, depression, and/or despair], *mishchat* [corruption flowing from prolonged contact with unclean creatures, things, ideas, and behaviors⁷], and *chamas*⁸ [anti-social outgrowths of anger, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, offense, vengeance, elitism, prejudice, or arrogant pseudo-intellectualism]. In the opening aliyah of *Toldot* we saw real tears in Yitzchak's eyes and heard deep, guttural groans coming forth from his lips. We sympathized with the pain he and Rivkah's felt during her long season of barrenness. Based upon our recent study of the Avraham chronicles we expected the Holy One to respond to these gut-wrenching prayers with a God-encounter – or at least an angelic visitation. But it was not Yitzchak, but Rivkah, who got the first God-encounter of this 2nd generation of Covenant-keepers.

As the twins he had fathered began to grow in very different directions the Holy One pulled back the curtains on Yitzchak's identity for us even more. We were given a *delightful – if not somewhat surprising - glimpse into Yitzchak's personal tastes and personality*. We learned that this man of honor, virtue, and peace had a *passion for outdoor things, and cherished the taste of wild game*. And quite to our disappointment we learned that, while he loved both of his sons, Yitzchak seemed to have far more interests in common with the ebullient, extroverted, flesh-driven hunter and outdoorsman Esav than he did with the contemplative, studious, introverted and sometimes downright reclusive Ya'akov.

Through experiencing these things with Yitzchak we have come to realize that he was not just some surreal character in a dusty old book, but was a *real person*. The Holy One wants us to see that Yitzchak had just as serious a set of mind-numbing, bone crunching *personal dramas* to deal with as we do. He did not live in an ivory tower or float through life on a cloud. He worked hard for his money. His blood ran red when he cut himself. His kids were far from perfect little angels. His marriage had its ups and downs. And yet, through it all, despite it all, in the heat of it all, he has remained a man of honor, a man of virtue, and a man of peace.

⁷ *Mish'chat* is the heart-hardening, mind-preoccupying, joy-stealing, *shalom*-killing kind of corruption that comes from overexposure to and/or ingestion of creatures, things, thoughts, emotions, and attitudes that belong in the biodegrading realms of the unclean [Hebrew *tamei*], and/or the common/profane [Hebrew *chol*].

⁸ *Chamas* includes every anti-social idea, ideology, indoctrination, and attitude that lead human beings to vain imaginations, to knee-jerk reactions, to the taking of offense, to the making of accusations and the insistence upon placing of blame, to hyper-emotionalism, to taking sides in other people's drama, to the embracing of 'moral' outrage, to arrogant, divisive rhetoric, to manipulative behaviors, to alignment with mob mentality, to associations with vigilantism, to acts of vengeance, and to patterns of violent oppression.

And as a result I suspect most of us have come to ... well, to kind of *like the old fellow* whose name means ‘Laughter’.

Everything that we have experienced with and learned of Yitzchak so far however has been mere preparation for what we will experience in today’s aliyah. For in today’s aliyah we are finally going to get to see Yitzchak *al p’nei* [face to face] *with the Holy One*. Yitzchak, the 2nd generation Covenant Friend of the Holy One, is now primed and ready for a *lech lecha* kind of moment of his own.

Transitioning from Following in the Footsteps of Avraham to Sh’ma-ing the Voice of the Unseen Shepherd Himself

Vayeira elav Adonai. In order for Yitzchak’s role in the Covenant tapestry to move into the next phase, the revelation that Avraham received is *going to have to become more to him than just words and rituals learned at his father’s knee*. He is going to have to have a much more personal and intimate relationship with the Holy One if he is going to fulfill his God-ordained destiny. Yitzchak must learn, as Avraham did, not just what it is like to *worship at an altar* and to *pour out his heart in prayer in a special time of need*, but also what it is like to live *al p’nei* [face to Face] with the Creator of the Universe in times of trouble and tribulation. He must learn, as Avraham did, to walk in fellowship with the Master of the World moment by moment, day by day, season after season, decade by decade – through both times of joy and times of sorrow, through thrills and through trauma, in the midst of overwhelming stress as well as tedious boredom. The covenant lifestyle of walking in the way of the Holy One, and doing/building *tzedakah* and *mishpat* into everything one touches, must become Yitzchak’s *go-to* coping mechanism.

The Holy One has *a plan* to make that happen. But you may not particularly *like* the plan. It is all a matter of *times* and *seasons*, you see – and the season that Yitzchak and his progeny are about to enter is the kind that most human beings are never really excited about having to navigate.

The Eagle Begins to Stir the Nest

Avraham and Sarah had been very ‘public’ people – a people who left a lot of impressive ‘footprints’ on the world as they danced their lover’s dance with the Holy One across Torah’s stage. Highly visible emissaries of the Holy One, they had exerted amazing amounts of influence upon the world around them. Indeed, they left a large and very noticeable Kingdom-of-Heaven ‘footprint’ wherever their travels led them. The most powerful people in the world knew Avraham and Sarah well – and recognized that as a result of Avraham and Sarah’s presence in their world neither they nor their kingdoms would ever be the same.

That has not happened yet for Yitzchak and Rivkah. Heretofore Yitzchak and Rivkah's lives had been on the exact opposite end of the social impact continuum from Avraham and Sarah. But it is tough to be a '*light to the nations*', *much less* a fountain of blessing unto all peoples, when you live secret, secluded lives. Hence the Holy One is about to bring the 'hidden-ness' season of life to an abrupt end for Yitzchak and Rivkah. The famine will serve as the catalyst for this transition. The onset of famine will make the peaceful land around *Be'er LaChai Roi*, where Yitzchak had been living with his family, uninhabitable - at least for a man with flocks and herds, a wife, and two strapping young boys to support. The supernatural well the angel of the Holy One dug for Yish'mael a generation ago has seemingly run dry. And so, no longer can the covenant family stay cloistered in their comfortable little oasis. Their bellies are going to demand that they get out of the nest and scrounge for food. And that means the couple that has been hidden away in the wilderness for decades has to go out where there are *people*.

Where would Yitzchak go? And what would he do to make sure bread was put on the table for his wife and little ones? Avraham was no longer there to make Yitzchak's decisions for him. Now the decision of what to do and where to go was Yitzchak's and his alone.

As the curtain of Torah opens today it looks like the second-generation Covenant-Partner-in-training is reacting to the famine much like his father did. He is running to the courts of a pagan king, hoping that king will provide shelter and fodder for the herds and flocks he inherited from Avraham and provision for him, his wife, and his children until the famine lifts. Famine has a way of tempting good people to do desperate things like that. But for a son or daughter of the Covenant, such desperate actions never work out the way one thinks. Close association with the pagan world and its ways never does.

A Life-Changing God-Encounter Coming Right Up!

When the famine persisted Yitzchak apparently saw himself as having only two choices - settling in Gerar among the rather unpleasant Ph'lishtim, or doing as his father Avraham did and ride out the famine in Egypt, where the waters of the Nile provided good pasture even in the toughest of times.

It is in the hard decisions and tough choices of life that *mature relationships with the Almighty* are forged. So as our aliyah of Torah opens today Yitzchak and his family are trudging through the hot, dusty desert toward Gerar. Mercifully, into that potentially dire situation is about to step none other than the Holy One Himself - the God who keeps His covenant even with those who sleep in the dust.

Torah tells us that the Holy One ‘appeared’ [vayera] to Yitzchak – and that Yitzchak’s life was changed forever. In the course of this God-encounter the Holy One said to Yitzchak:

Al-tered Mitzraymah

'Do not go down to Egypt.

sheichon b'aretz asher omar eleicha

Remain undisturbed in the land that I shall designate to you.

Gur b'aretz hazot

Remain an immigrant in this land

v'eheyeh imeicha v'avaracheika

I will be with you and bless you,

ki-lecha ul'zar'acha eiten et-kol-ha-aratzot ha'El

since it will be to you and your offspring that I will give all these lands.

v-ha-kimoti et-ha-sh'vuah asher nishbati l'Avraham avicha

I will thus keep the oath that I made to your Avraham your father.

V'hirbeyti et-zar'acha kechocheivei ha-shamayim

I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky,

v'natati l'zar'acha et kol-ha-aratzot ha-El

and I will grant them all these lands.

v'hitbarachu v'zar'acha kol goyei ha-aretz

All the nations on earth shall be blessed through your descendants.

Ekev asher-shama Avraham b'koli

All this is because Avraham sh'ma-ed My voice,

Vayish'mor mish'marti mitzvotai chukotai v'torotai

and kept My charge, My commandments, My decrees, and My laws.'

[Genesis 26:2-5]

Receive these Words into your own spirit, Dear Reader. Study them. Meditate on them. Wrestle with them. These words define your destiny and your purpose in life just as much as they defined the destiny and purpose in life of our ancestor Yitzchak.

In the first recorded “God encounter” of Yitzchak’s life the Holy One gives to Yitzchak personally - not vicariously through his father or his wife - instructions on *what to do*, on *where to go*, and, even more importantly, *of what his destiny consists*. Here are the main points of what the Holy One said to Yitzchak:

1.

Do not go down into Egypt;

2.

Sojourn for a while in the land I will teach you about.

3.
I will be with you,
4.
and [I] will bless you;
5.
Unto you and unto your seed I will give all these lands,
6.
and I will perform all the covenant promises that I made unto your father;
7.
I will make your seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and
8.
[I] will give unto your seed all these lands;
9.
And in your seed shall all the peoples of the earth be blessed;
10.
I will do this BECAUSE *Avraham sh'ma'd my voice, and sh'mar-ed my mismeret⁹*
my mitzvot¹⁰, my chukim¹¹, and my torot¹².

These Divine Words will become the *aseret ha-dibrot* [Ten Words/Commandments] of Yitzchak's life. They will – over a lifetime – transform him.

The “Time-Release’ Factor

The aforementioned 10 words the Holy One spoke over Yitzchak are full of the exact same creative and prophetic power possessed by the 10 Divine proclamations of Creation Week, from the *Yehi ohr* [Light BE!]’ proclamation of Genesis 1:3 to the *V'yevareich Elohim et-yom ha-shvi'i v'yekadesh oto* [and God blessed the seventh day and He made it holy]’ proclamation of Genesis 2:3. They will therefore not by any means return to the Holy One ‘void’. They will *accomplish their Divine purpose*. And they will most assuredly *have their Divinely intended effect*.

It is important to understand however, that the creative and prophetic effects of these Divine proclamations, unlike those of Creation week, will appear gradually instead of immediately. The Holy One's words are like ‘time release’ capsules – their power is released, and they accomplish the purposes for which they are sent into the world – over time, according to a pre-ordained Divine timetable.

⁹ *I.e.* the things the Holy One entrusted to Avraham as a trustee or steward.

¹⁰ *I.e.* the specific instructions the Holy One had given to Avraham concerning what conduct is and is not covenant-consistent.

¹¹ *I.e.* the unexplained directions/commands the Holy One had given to Avraham.

¹² *I.e.* the instructions the Holy One had given Avraham for all aspects of living to help him “hit the target” of fulfillment of Divine purpose and will for his life.

Yitzchak does not therefore immediately become a spiritual superman just because he has had a God-encounter. On the surface of things he probably did not appear to have changed much at all. As we are about to find out, he will still make many wrong choices along the way. He will not by any means walk in sinless perfection. Neither did the Holy One require sinless perfection of his father or mother, of course. And neither does the Holy One require sinless perfection from you or I do. Sinless perfection has never been a requirement of any covenant the Holy One has ever made with man. Sin always has consequences, of course – but every Covenant the Holy One makes always provides a way for sin to be atoned for and for ‘in-flight corrections’ to be made. What is required of Yitzchak as he walks in Covenant with the Holy One is not absolute, unmarred perfection, but simply that in the midst of human weakness and failings Yitzchak will let the Voice and the Words of the Holy One pierce his soul and his spirit, and be permanently engraved upon his heart. In so doing Yitzchak will demonstrate that he has both his *father’s ears to sh’ma* and his *father’s heart to sh’mar*. And thus he will receive and pass on to the next generation both his father’s intimacy with the Creator of Heaven and earth and the most blessed of all inheritances.

Beloved, in each of your lives may you personally hear the voice of the Holy One - and *sh’ma*! And may what you *sh’mar* [*i.e.* treasure, guard, highly esteem, and carefully keep watch over and observe] be that which the Holy One has spoken - and not mere philosophy, tradition, or religion learned from someone a substantial portion of whose diet comes from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

***The Kinds of Lives We are to Called to Live When Surrounded
by a Secular Society With A Violently Different Worldview
Than Our Covenant-Centered Way of Life***

The remainder of today’s aliyah deals with two God-ordained life experiences of Yitzchak’s life which immediately follow and which were ordained by the Holy One to drive home to Yitzchak [and to us all] the point made by the Holy One in the God-encounter just described. The Holy One has just told Yitzchak to sojourn in the land in which he found himself [that part of Kena’an known as Gerar, then occupied by the Ph’lishtim], *and* that if he does so the Holy One will ‘*be with*’ him and will ‘*bless*’ him. The Holy One is about to *prove the point* – despite no great degree of faith or righteousness on Yitzchak’s part.

From Which Tree Have the People Around You Been Eating?

The first lesson Yitzchak and all of us seeking to live a *sh’ma* lifestyle have to learn is that the secular society around us - the society to which we are called to be

a ‘blessing’ - lives by totally *different rules* and looks at life from a totally *different perspective* than do people who have a covenant with the Holy One. The secular society around us, be it Ph’lishtim or American or Canadian or African or Asian or European in culture, you see, seeks its sustenance not from the fruit of *the tree of life*, but from the fruit of *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*.

In any contact with secular society therefore we like Yitzchak must learn that we will encounter both the *evil* and the *good* – the perverse and the moral. Sometimes we will find that these opposite ends of the spectrum exist *in the same person(s)*. Paranoia, schizophrenia, and double standards [or, more precisely, *multiple constantly shifting standards of moral relativity*] are diseases that afflict every person – or society - who makes the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil a regular part of his or her diet. That is just the way the world is. Adam and Chava ate the fruit. And intimate knowledge of and interaction with good and evil – in varying degrees we cannot always control – is the result. What are the characteristics of people – or a society – which lives by the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? What are the symptoms of such slow spiritual ‘food poisoning’?

The First Fruits of that ‘Other Tree’

First of all, people who eat of that tree’s fruit regularly are *always skeptical of or hostile toward the Holy One*. Like Adam and Chava after they ingested the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden the first thing people who ingest this tree’s fruit today tend to do is *hide from the Holy One* – or even deny that He exists. Why do they do this? Because they are addicted to the ‘high’ they get from both that which they see as ‘good’ [usually in the form of *social activism, political reform, philanthropy, random deeds of kindness, and/or public ‘ministry’*] and from that which are ‘evil’ [*i.e.* any perversion of the Divine purpose for any person, for any thing, or for any aspect of Creation]. They know, you see, that if they submit their lives to the Holy One – or even *acknowledge* Him – they will have to accept the idea that they are *accountable to Him* for their actions. They choose instead, even in the midst of trying to appear ‘good’ in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world, to *stand in the way of sinners*.

The Second Harvest from the Fruit of the ‘Other Tree’

Secondly, people who regularly eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil are easily recognizable when they open their mouths because *they are always critical of other people*. Just like Adam and Chava blamed everyone but themselves for what had happened after they ingested the fruit, so all who follow their diet follow their self-righteous system of denial of any responsibility, adopting an attitude of victimization, and insisting on external blame-

redistribution. Considering themselves ‘good’ they look for and convince themselves they find ‘evil’ *outside of themselves*. They are therefore never content to look at anyone else and see good. To the contrary, they stare intently at everyone else until they see [or at least *imagine they see*] some flaw or blemish or spot - anything they can characterize as ‘evil’. They then choose to sit – alas to get comfortable and bask - in *the seat of the scornful*.

The Third Harvest from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Thirdly, people who regularly ingest the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil are under – and tend to spread like a contagious disease to everyone and everything around them – a ‘curse’. Just as Adam and Chava received a curse [*i.e. a restriction on their enjoyment of their lives and the purpose of their Creation*] after eating of the fruit, so it is with all who follow their example. This does not mean that all who do so are all poor, or sick, or short-lived – it just means that they can never really *enjoy*, or *be satisfied with*, or *bless the Holy One for* anything – whether it be *provision* [or even wealth], or *health* [or even superior strength, beauty or athleticism], or, for that matter, *the breath of life*. They choose to walk in *the counsel of the unGodly*.

These are the characteristics of people who we will encounter in secular society. Most of them do not – and do not have any *desire to - know* the Holy One. There is some ‘good’ in the worst of them and there is some ‘evil’ in the best of them. Our purpose is not to judge – or condemn – the ‘evil’ in secular people. We want to – are Divinely called to - ‘be a blessing’ to the people of the secular world. But we most definitely need to make sure we *understand what we are dealing with*. We need to have no illusions that the secular world is a ‘nice’ place, waiting with bated breath to receive the blessing we have been called to give.

It is *a jungle out there* in Gerar - and in every other secular village in which we who are in covenant with the Holy One may ever find ourselves. The sooner we acknowledge that fact, and get over it, the better off we will be. It was *true for Yitzchak*, and it is *true for us*.

An Instructive Example

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about. Imagine a man has a beautiful wife or an attractive teen-age daughter, and takes her to a restaurant or shopping mall - or for that matter a function sponsored by a respected school, social organization, charitable group, church or synagogue. No matter how modestly and tastefully the lovely wife or daughter is dressed and how innocently she behaves herself, the reality is that some of the men/boys she will encounter there will look upon her the way – well, let’s just say the way Chava looked upon the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil just before she picked it and

took the first bite. And if no one is looking, and they get half a chance – well, let’s just remember what happened to Ya’akov’s daughter Dinah and Lot’s daughters on the last night before S’dom was destroyed, and leave it at that. That does not mean these men or boys live lives of perversion or are motivated solely – or even primarily - by perverse desires. Some in each context mentioned probably *do* and probably *are*; others – hopefully the majority - definitely *do not* and definitely *are not*. Men are by the Holy One’s design *attracted to that which is lovely to look upon*. If any of these men let their baser instincts govern them, there is no telling what evil thing they will do – to the wife and daughter – and to you.

On the other hand, more than likely most if not all of the men you encounter there will *harness their baser instincts and behave more or less as gentlemen*. They may hold the door for you and the wife/daughter. They may engage them – or even you - in casual discussion. They may even impress you with talk of spiritual things and/or ‘family values’. That does not mean they can be trusted. That does not mean you can let your guard down. That does not by any stretch of the imagination mean that you – or your wife and daughter – are safe. No, *not by any means*.

If this is the reality in modern-day America – a more or less civilized society - consider what it was like in ancient times. Consider what Yitzchak had to contend with. As long as he and Rivkah stayed in their own little world at *L’Chai Roi* he was more or less insulated from the evil that lies in the heart of his fellow man. But as we have discussed, that period of isolation is now officially over – at least for now. The Holy One has plunged Yitzchak and family into *reality 101*. Here is how Torah describes what happened the first day of Yitzchak’s enrollment in that course:

Yitzchak settled in Gerar. The men of the place asked him about his wife. He said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say, "My wife," lest, he thought, the men of the place might kill me for Rivkah, because she was beautiful to look on.

[Genesis 26:6-8]

We, like Yitzchak, must sooner or later deal with the stark realities of *life among the Ph’lishtim*. While we must always look for the ‘good’ in the people and societies we come into contact with, we must continually be as *wise as serpents*, and *harmless as doves* in our interactions. *Idealism* can prove harmful to our health. *Naiveté* can prove lethal to our wives’ and children’s’ virtue. And *assimilation* can prove fatal to our opportunity to participate in the mission to which we are called.

Toto ... I Don’t Think We’re in Kansas Anymore!

Ph'lishtia, you see, was *a very, very sick society*. Unfortunately, so is *your town*, Dear Reader. So is your *local shopping mall*. So is your *local public school system*. So is your *local grocery store*. So is the *local gymnasium*. So is the *local theater*. So is the *local bistro or coffee shop*. So is the *local college or university*. So is the *athletic field*, the *theatre*, and the *workplace*. And for that matter so is every *local religious institution*, whatever its name or affiliation, and whatever may be written on either the marquee out front or on the doctrinal statement posted in its pastor's study or on its website. You have every reason to fear for your wife's/daughter's/son's virtue, and for your life, each time you enter – nay, each time you so much as drive by - such places. I do not say that to frighten you, or to insult any organization or person out there. I say this simply to wake you up to the reality of the world in which we live. I say this because I believe that every time you emerge from your *oasis of hidden-ness*, as you eventually must, you need to be aware that in the flash of an eye any of the rather ordinary-looking people around you can *turn on you*, can *cave in to their baser instincts*, and both *say about you and do to you and to your loved ones unthinkably horrible and perverse things*. And I believe you need to be fully cognizant and accepting of the fact that there is very little – if anything - you can do to stop them.

Okay. Point driven home. So *what do we do about it?* While we can – and should – exercise wisdom in how we interact with this perverse world, we cannot – must not if we are to fulfill the Divine Calling – avoid contact with it entirely. That is why we have been told in no uncertain terms by Messiah that we are to '*wise as serpents, harmless as doves*'. When and to the extent possible [which it wasn't for Yitzchak and may not be for us], contacts with non-family members – and even non-Torah submissive family members - should be approached carefully, and then monitored very, very closely. This is not paranoia, and it is not a game. Lives and destinies are at stake. We are not at *Beer L'Chai Roi* – or on the family farm in Kansas with good old Auntie Em - any more.

Yitzchak Resorts to a Familiar Nuance of Narrative-Framing

Understanding the gravity of the situation he and his family faced, Yitzchak resorted to nuance. Rivkah was the daughter of Betuel, who had been borne to Nachor (serving as a Levirite marriage partner for Charan) by Milcah. Milcah's sister, Ischah, also known as Sarah, had borne Yitzchak to Avraham, Charan's brother. By the nuance of Levirite marriage tradition, that made Yitzchak and Rivkah brother and sister - if their relationship was viewed through the Levirite marriage lens. When asked by the Ph'lishtim men about that gorgeous young thing he had with him he realized that his beloved wife Rivkah was, partially because of her beauty but mostly because of the depravity of the culture, going to be the object of other men's lust as long as they remained in this society. He knew

he couldn't stop it. He knew he couldn't run away. He just hoped to survive. So, pressed for an answer that could mean life or death to him, Yitzchak decided to resort to a nuance that he knew no one in Gerar would understand. He decided to make up a story about the beautiful Rivkah being his sister. He decided not to mention the fact that she was his wife. Why did Yitzchak do this? It seems obvious that *fear is what motivated him*. Please don't judge Yitzchak too harshly for that. Avraham did the same thing. I dare say that each of us has at one time or another done far worse.

Yitzchak will soon learn, of course, that fear is not the kind of motivator that accomplishes a lasting peace. Only love can do that. But *love is an art* - an art that *must be learned from a Master*. Yitzchak is still in *art school*. And so, Dear Reader, are we all.

Oh What A Tangled Web ...

Yitzchak's fear-motivated approach did not, of course, solve his problem for very long. All it really did was to occupy his energies with defensive, cover-up strategies. And that, it turns out, just compounded the problem. He didn't deal with the reality – he tried to manufacture his own. It is a temptation for all of us. But how, you may ask, could anyone have been expected to *deal with* such a horrible reality as Yitzchak faced? That, Dear Reader, is *a very good question*. If I have engendered in you that question by that fact alone this study has accomplished its purpose. I hope you will find the answer. It will not come from a book - or, for that matter, from a Rabbi's son Torah study. Answers to questions like that, you see, have to come from the Almighty. But here are some thoughts you might keep in mind as you petition Heaven for the answer you seek.

First of all, do you remember the first promise the Holy One's made to Yitzchak in the God-encounter we studied earlier in today's aliyah? The first promise the Holy One made was that He would be '*with*' Yitzchak wherever he went. What did this 'with-ness' promise mean? It did not mean that Yitzchak could be assured Rivkah would not be raped. It did not mean that Yitzchak and/or his young sons would not be brutally murdered. There are never any such assurances. Ask Ya'akov [remember what happened to his daughter Dinah at Shechem?]. Ask the survivors of the Holocaust, or the relatives of those who died in the terrorism tsunami that began with 9/11. But what the Holy One's promise did mean was that whatever happened the Holy One would be there to *turn it into good*. And that is all the assurance we can hope for – and all we really need.

Secondly, keep in mind that the 'little lie' Yitzchak told took away from Yitzchak, temporarily at least, the ability to 'be a blessing' – a light to the nations. After all,

who in their right mind would want the kind of ‘light’ he had to offer? His ‘yes’ was less than ‘yes’. His ‘no’ was less than ‘no’. And he thereby became engulfed in murky shadows. No one in Gerar ‘punched his lights out’ as Yitzchak feared would happen. What happened instead was much, much worse - *he punched his lights out himself.*

Caught Red-Handed!

And so to reactivate his light Yitzchak’s soul needed some rough polishing. The Holy One always disciplines those in covenant with Him. This time He decided to use the most unlikely of sources to do the ‘buffing’ on Yitzchak’s spots and wrinkles. Enter a very angry, offended, and self-righteous Avimelech.

*It happened when he had been there a long time,
that Avimelech king of the Ph’lishtim looked out at a window, and saw,
and, behold, Yitzchak was caressing Rivkah, his wife.
Avimelech called Yitzchak, and said, "Behold, surely she is your wife.
Why did you say, 'She is my sister?'"
Yitzchak said to him, "Because I said, 'Lest I die because of her.'"
Avimelech said, "What is this you have done to us?
One of the people might easily have lain with your wife,
and you would have brought guilt on us!"*

*Did you catch the last sentence of Avimelech’s self-righteous rebuke? “One of the people might easily have lain with your wife”, he said. He acknowledged that his society placed no value whatever on sexual purity. He knew full well and admitted that his people would rape a pretty woman like Rivkah in a heartbeat. Exactly what Yitzchak feared most could indeed *easily* have happened. Interestingly, however, even among a society of admitted rapists there was a moral standard that condemned *adultery* – by *others*, of course. It should not surprise us. Our society, as well, winks at some sexual sins but vehemently condemns others. Welcome to the world of double standards.*

When the rebuke was completed, Avimelech decided to do a strange thing – he decided to ‘protect’ Yitzchak and Rivkah. He wrapped his powerful tentacles around Yitzchak and Rivkah and made them virtual ‘wards of the State’:

*Avimelech charged all the people, saying,
"He who touches this man or his wife will surely be put to death."*

The Suffocating Embrace of Heathen Culture – and the Secular State

What meaneth *this*? Is this ‘order of protection’ a good thing – or something that will come back to bite the Covenant Family? Never get too excited about any politician’s decree or pledge of ‘protection’ Beloved. It never means what you think it does. Keep in mind the famous blessing of the Czar recommended by the rabbi of Anatevka in the play ‘*Fiddler on the Roof*’. When asked if there was a

proper blessing for the Tzar the rabbi nodded affirmatively, winked, and replied: “*May the Lord bless and keep the Tzar ... far, far away from us!*”

By reason of Avimelech’s ‘protection’ decree Yitzchak would soon have to learn to deal with something that should have scared the liver out of him - *the embrace of the secular government*. The embrace of government is a *tantalizing* embrace – but one that comes at a great price, one to which are tied many strings, and one which, unlike the covenant of the Holy One, tends to *evaporate into thin air* at the drop of a hat. That kind of ‘protection’ we neither need nor should desire. We will see soon enough – in tomorrow’s aliyah as a matter of fact - just how deceiving a decree/pledge it is.

Yitzchak *sowed a lie* into Gerar – and he is about to reap a harvest of the same from it. But before we get to that we will see the Holy One making good on his promise to ‘bless’ Yitzchak. The Holy One blessed Yitzchak in abundance that made everyone in the region of Gerar sit up and take notice. The Holy One blessed Yitzchak so much and so profusely that he *became an object of awe and envy*. He blessed Yitzchak not on account of Yitzchak’s righteousness but *despite his unrighteousness*. He blessed Yitzchak simply because of the covenant the Holy One made with Avraham, and because blessing Yitzchak despite his obvious unrighteousness furthered the Holy One’s eternal plan for the redemption of mankind.

You see, Dear Reader, the Holy One has it all *under control*. He does not wring His hands over either the mistakes of His people, or the evil of those who refuse to acknowledge Him.

***May You Prosper in All Things and Be In Health
Just as Your Soul Prospers***

Today’s aliyah ends with the Holy One absolutely blessing Yitzchak’s sandals off. In the midst of famine, this shepherder from the desert tries his hand at, of all things, *row cropping!* Everyone must have laughed at the greenhorn. But look what happened!

*Yitzchak sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year
one hundred times what he planted. The Holy One blessed him.
The man grew great, and grew more and more until he became very great.
He had possessions of flocks, possessions of herds, and a great household.*

Ah, and then came the next Divinely orchestrated life experience the Holy One had in store for Yitzchak and family. We will study it in more detail in tomorrow’s aliyah. For now let’s just recognize that it is inevitable and must be dealt with. Here is Reality-check #2: *And the Ph’lishtim envied him*. If it hasn’t

happened to you yet, Dear Reader, it will. Better ask the Holy One now how you are supposed to deal with it.

Questions for Today's Study

1. Today's passage begins with a *famine* [In Hebrew, the word is *ra'av*] in the area around *L'Chai Roi*, where Yitzchak [Isaac] was living. The Holy One often begins his intimate dealings with His people in one form of *hunger* or another. When famine struck the Negev during Avraham's life, Avraham's response had been to go down to Egypt [Genesis 12:10]. This however is something the Holy One instructs Yitzchak not to do.

[A] Where did Yitzchak go instead of Egypt?

[B] Yitzchak encounters the Holy One and learns what the "birthright" of his father Avraham consists of. List the aspects of that birthright that are mentioned in verses 2-4;

[C] In verse 5, the Holy One tells Yitzchak why He is going to bestow upon Yitzchak and his descendants the things that make up the birthright - it is because of Avraham's walk with Him! What things does the Holy One say Avraham did?

[D] In Strong's and Gesenius, look up the words translated "voice", "commandments", "statutes" and "laws" in verse 5. Write each Hebrew word and describe the Hebraic word picture each presents.

2. The King of the people in whose land Yitzchak and Rivkah dwelt during the famine was named (or titled) *Avimelech* (meaning 'the fatherly king').

[A] Over what ethnic group was Avimelech king?

[B] Did Avimelech and his people have a history of dealing with the family of Avraham? Explain. [Hint: See Genesis 20:1-18]

[C] What can you gather from today's verses was the spiritual condition of Avimelech's people? Was Yitzchak's perspective of their spiritual condition correct? Explain.

[D] What command did Avimelech give his people concerning Yitzchak and Rivkah once he found out who they were? Do you think his people's previous experience with Avram and Sarai had any effect on this? Explain.

[E] How does Torah say Yitzchak fared during his stay in the land of Avimelech's people? Why do you think this occurred?

3. In today's Haftarah reading from Malachi the Holy One speaks to the anointed *kohanim* [priests] of Israel. The *kohanim* - *spiritual leaders* - living at the time Malachi prophesied were unfaithful shepherds. They claimed special privileges and status as "sons" of God, and as "servants" of God you see. But *their hearts*, it seems, were far from the Holy One. So the Holy One exercises some "tough love", upbraiding the spiritual leaders of the day. The Holy One speaks to them

about true sons and servants, and what the *proper attitude* of true *sons* is to their fathers, and what the *proper attitude* of true *servants* is to their master. Heed His words!

A son honors his father, and a servant his master.

If I am a father, then where is my honor?

And if I am a master, where is the respect due me?

Says the Holy One of Hosts to you, Kohanim, who despise my name.

You say, 'How have we despised your name?' You offer polluted bread on my altar.

You say, 'How have we polluted you?' In that you say, 'The Holy One's table contemptible.'

When you offer the blind for sacrifice, isn't that evil?

And when you offer the lame and sick, isn't that evil?

Present it now to your governor!

Will he be pleased with you? Or will he accept your person?"

says the Holy One of Hosts.

[Malachi 1:6-8]

[A] Were the priests of Malachi's time behaving like "sons" of the Holy One?

[B] What does a son do for his father that the priests of the time did not do for the Holy One?

[C] Were the priests of the time even behaving like servants of the Holy One?

[D] What does a servant do for his master that the priests of Malachi's time were not doing for the Holy One?

[E] How had the priests of the time "*despised the Holy One's name*"?

[F] Which of the Holy One's Torah teachings/instructions had the priests violated?

4. In today's reading from the apostolic Scriptures Shaul of Tarsus continues speaking about *his people* - the natural descendants of Avraham. He indicates that out of the whole of Avraham's physical lineage [which includes the descendants of Yishmael and Midyan as well as the descendants of Yitzchak] only a remnant – those born through Yitzchak - resemble Avraham sufficiently to carry even recognize, much less appreciate and walk according to, his covenant with the Holy One.

But it is not as though the word of God has come to nothing.

*For they are not **all Yisra'el** that are **of Yisra'el**.*

Neither, because they are Avraham's seed, are they all children.

*But, "**In Yitzchak will your seed be called.**"*

[A] Shaul says that not all of the children sired by Avraham were ever heirs to the birthright. What is he talking about in verses 6-7?

[B] Using the language of Malachi, how are true "sons" and "servants" determined?

*May you find the stores of supernatural manna
that the Holy One has hidden in the world and in your heart –
to sustain you and allow you to sustain others
during the season of famine coming upon the earth.
May your eyes be open to what the Holy One is doing - and not doing - in this season,
to how the principalities of the second heaven are attempting
to distract, divide, and frighten us,
and to how our appetites and attitudes as well as speech and behavior patterns
need to be transformed to access and release the Hidden Manna.*

The Rabbi's son

Meditation for Today's Study

Psalm 107:8-14

*Let them praise the Holy One for his lovingkindness,
For his wonderful works to the children of men!
For he satisfies the longing soul. He fills the hungry soul with good.*

*Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,
being bound in affliction and iron,
Because they rebelled against the words of God,
and condemned the counsel of Ha-Elyon.
Therefore he brought down their heart with labor.
They fell down, and there was none to help.*

*Then they cried to the Holy One in their trouble,
and he saved them out of their distresses.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and broke their bonds in sunder.*