

Parshat Toldot: The Blessing of Insufficiency

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Last week's *parsha*, Chayei Sarah, ended with the lineage of Yishmael.

12 These are the generations of Yishmael, son of Avraham . . . יב וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִשְׁמָעֵאל, בֶּן-אַבְרָהָם... ..

13 And these are the names of the sons of Yishmael, by their names, according to their births . . . (Bereishit 25: 12–13) יג וְאֵלֶּה, שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׁמָעֵאל, בְּשִׁמְתָם, לְתוֹלְדֹתָם... (בראשית כה: יב-יג)

This week's *parsha*, Toldot, begins with the sharply contrasting lineage of Yitzchak:

19 These are the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham . . . יט וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק, בֶּן-אַבְרָהָם... ..

21 And Isaac entreated the Lord opposite his wife because she was barren . . . (Bereishit 25: 19, 21) כא וַיַּעֲתָר יִצְחָק לִיקְוֹק לְנִכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ, כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא... (בראשית כה: יט, כא)

Yishmael is blessed with children, but Yitzchak is not. His wife, Rivka, is barren. And so she, and they, are immediately drawn into the orbit of the patriarchs and matriarchs who both precede and follow them. Like Sarah and Avraham, and like Rachel and Yaacov, Rivka and Yitzchak begin their covenantal journey together without child. It seems that a struggle with infertility is a *sine qua non* for covenantal partnership. It is puzzling to imagine why.

The Babylonian Talmud in Yevamot 64a weighs in on this matter:

R. Yitzchak stated: Why were our ancestors barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, craves the prayers of the righteous. א"ר יצחק: מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים? מפני שהקב"ה מתאוה של צדיקים

Why did our revered ancestors suffer in this way? Or, more pointedly, why must they have undergone *this* trial? Why must the pain of childlessness ground the covenantal blessing that "you will multiply like the stars of the sky" (Gen. 22:17)? The answer given is mysterious. God afflicts just to arouse the cries of those whose voices He yearns to hear. God breaks hearts so that people will give their hearts back to Him. How can we make sense of such cruel cravings?

This concept - - של צדיקים - - מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים - - can be found in just one other place in the Talmud and it is instructive to look there to help make sense of it. BT Chullin 60b states:

R. Assi pointed out a contradiction [between verses]. One verse says: "And the earth brought forth grass" (Bereishit 1:12), referring to the third day, whereas another verse when speaking of the sixth day says: "No shrub of the field was yet in the earth" (Gen. 2:5). This teaches us that the plants commenced to grow but stopped just as they were about to break through the soil, רבי רמי, כתיב: (בראשית א') וְתוצא הארץ דשא בתלת בשבתא, וכתיב, (בראשית ב') וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִהְיֶה בָאָרֶץ בַּמַּעֲלֵי שֶׁבֶתַּא! מִלְּמַד שִׁיִּצְאוּ דְשָׁאִים וְעַמְדוּ עַל פֶּתַח קִרְקַע, עַד שֶׁבֶּא אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן וּבִקֵּשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם רַחֲמִים, וַיִּרְדּוּ

until Adam came and prayed for rain for them; and when rain fell they sprouted forth. This teaches you that the Holy One, blessed be He, craves the prayers of the righteous.

גשמים וצמחו ללמדך: שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים.

Just as God withheld productivity from our matriarchs and patriarchs, so God withheld productivity from the ground itself during the early stages of creation, all in order to elicit human prayer. There must be something unique to these particular prayers, these desperate groans for something to grow, that make them worthy of setting both the creation of the world and the creation of the Jewish people in motion.

The key, I believe, is to be found in the experience of "ayin," of lack. Of Sarah, our very first matriarch to experience infertility, we are told:

And Sarai was barren; she had no child.
(Bereishit 11:30)

וְתֵהִי שָׂרַי, עֲקָרָה: אֵין לָהּ, וְלֹד. (בראשית י"א:ל)

Of Adam, on the precipice of agricultural creation, we are told:

Now no tree of the field was yet on the earth, neither did any herb of the field yet grow, because the Lord God had not brought rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil. (Bereishit 2:5)

וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה, טָרָם יְהִי בְּאֶרֶץ, וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה, טָרָם יִצְמָח: כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר יְקוּק אֶל-הָאָדָם, עַל-הָאֶרֶץ, וְאָדָם אֵין, לְעַבֵּד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה. (בראשית ב':ה)

The root of these foundational, liminal moments is "ayin," awareness of what is not there - a child to fill a womb, a person to till the ground. Against the backdrop of unfolding generations and unfolding creation, they represent a pause in the natural order. In the narratives that precede each of these verses, we are swept up in stories of easy growth. A world is born. Babies are born. We are lulled into forgetting what exquisitely miraculous processes are underway. We forget the divine energy that powers creation, both human and cosmic. We forget how very reliant we are on blessings from above. So God, at these crucial junctures of creation, slows down the story, halts the momentum of productivity to highlight its preciousness, and in these gaps, where need-awareness grows, suggests the Talmud, prayer is born. The palpable, painful experience of 'ayin,' of not having, may turn one inward and upward toward God - not necessarily in praise, but in deep awareness of one's vulnerability and profound dependency.

That God craves the prayers of the righteous, שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים, might thus be softened from its initial cruelty (though still not redeemed) by rethinking what *tefillah* itself might be. God does not withhold (re)productivity to prompt desperate human request, but to occasion awareness of human impotence. The prayers of the righteous, those that ground the covenant and birth the world, are not wild pleas for things (children or rain), but quiet, sustained meditations on their own ultimate powerlessness. By making the first person and the first Jews wrestle with fertility, our tradition has placed such *tefillot* at the very cornerstones of our covenant. The Torah thereby offers a subtle spiritual message: The recognition that we are not God, painful as it is, just might be what we need to generate a God-filled world.

The latter part of *parshat Toldot* casts this need-awareness not only as a truth of human existence, but also as a blessing. On the *bracha* given by Yitzchak to Yaacov —

And may the Lord give you of the dew of the heavens and [of] the fatness of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine. (Bereishit 27:28)

וַיִּתֵּן-לָךְ, הָאֱ-לֹהִים, מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ--וְרֹב דָּגָן, וְתִירֹשׁ. (בראשית כז:כח)

The Sfat Emet writes:

Regarding the verses "And may the Lord give you," [the midrash states,] "May He give and then repeatedly give." This is the way of the righteous, who does not seek to fill his house with silver and gold. Rather, God blesses him with all that he needs at any given time. For this reason, masters of faith pray for their food every day, as it says in the Zohar. In the blessing of Esav [by contrast], it is written, "Behold, your dwelling place shall be the fat places of the earth..." (Bereishit 27:39). But for Yaacov it is written, "And [may the Lord] give" -- for God's flow will be renewed daily . . . (Sfat Emet on Toldot 1881)

בפסוק ויתן לך ויחזור ויתן. פ'י שכן דרך הצדיק שאינו חפץ למלאות ביתו כסף וזהב. רק זאת הברכה שהשי"ת יתן לו בכל עת הצריך לו. לכן מארי דמהימנותא מתפללין בכל יומא על מזונא כמ"ש בזה"ק. ובברכת עשו כתיב משמני הארץ יהי' מושבך כו'. אבל ביעקב כתיב ויתן שיש לו התחדשות השפעה בכל יום כמ"ש מחדש בטובו בכל יום מעשה בראשית. ומזה ההתחדשות נוטל הבוטח בה'. וכ"כ עיני כל אליך כו' נותן להם את אכלם בעתו. (תולדות תרמ"ב)

In the eyes of the Gerrer Rebbe, there is a blessing in insufficiency, for it breeds dependency, which then yields renewed experience of divine benevolence. The blessing to Yaacov, in contrast to Esav, was specifically not for plenty, not for abundance, but for just the right amount to repeatedly necessitate awareness of need met again and again and again by God's grace.

What are the blessings in that vulnerability? The centering gift of humility, the joyful gift of gratitude, and, most importantly, the soul-enlivening gift of constant contact with the divine. Herein lies the mystery of God's difficult cravings. God is *mitaveh le'tefillatan shel tzaddikim* because it is relationship, above all, that God seeks, one in which He might "give and then repeatedly give" again. No gift, of course, aside from the growth of life itself, could quell the pain of infertility and insufficiently, but may it be a whisper of comfort to all those who struggle to know that there might be some blessing yet in the experience of *Ayin*.



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