

## Parshat Toldot

### Founded Fears, Fulfilled Blessings

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Fear is not logical. It can be debilitating, confusing, and consuming and it can ultimately impact our ability to be fully present in this world. I remember when an important supporter of our school sat down with me and encouraged me to confront my fears and lower the barriers that I put up to protect myself. At the time, I didn't realize I was scared or unsure of myself. The supporter told me that I needed to realize that I was more than who I thought myself to be and that when I realized this, things would change for me. I thought he was crazy. I told him so, and he said that if I ever needed anything, he would have my back... he did then and he still does today.

Everyone has fears, whether they be conscious or unconscious; I am grateful to this day that this man pushed me to work through my fears, without judgement and with full courage and vulnerability. Since that conversation, I have grown tremendously both personally and professionally. He invested in me and in the fears I didn't even know I had, and worlds opened for me as a result. To this day, I reflect on the impact of this simple conversation. One person, reaching out to one other person... because sometimes it is *our responsibility* to help others rise up.

In the middle of our parsha, the Torah explicitly details Yitzchak's fears and the impact of his fear on both him and those around him.

וַיִּשְׁאַלּוּ אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָחֻתִי הוּא כִּי יִרָא לֵאמֹר אִשְׁתִּי פֶן־יִהְרֹגֵנִי אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם עַל־רֵבְקָה כִּי־טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִיא

When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," **for he was afraid to say "my wife," thinking, "The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful."**

When describing his fear, the Torah uses the root י.ר.א, the same root as the word we use to describe "יראת ה'" the fear or awe of God. Yitzchak's decision to lie to Avimelech is rooted in the fear that he could not control the way the inhabitants of Gerar would react to him and Rebecca and that he would be killed on account of his beautiful wife.

What did Yitzchak have to fear? Had he not been promised blessings and protection by Hashem?

Yitzchak's fear may be grounded in the fact that until now, there is no mention of his actual success. While he has been promised God's presence and blessing for progeny and land (Gen. 26:3-5), none of these promises were yet to materialize (according to the peshat of the text). Nonetheless, Yitzchak obeys God's request to stay in Gerar and not go down to Mitzraim. The Torah says simply:

יצחק בגרר וישב.

Yitzchak dwelled in Gerar.

Often, the word וישב indicates really settling down-physically and perhaps even mentally. Ibn Ezra has a fascinating interpretation of this statement. He states, עשה כאשר צוהו השם

This was a command that was given to Yitzchak and he did as he was commanded. HaEmek Davar takes this idea further. Yitzchak may have expected help from Avimelech because of Avraham's earlier treaty with the King of Gerar. He did not receive this help, but settled in Gerar and he sat securely there because of *God's promise*. ע"פ הבטחת ה' ישב לבטח שם. It doesn't seem like an accident that HaEmek Davar does not explain Yitzchak *feeling* safe; rather his commentary states ישב לבטח שם meaning, he sat securely there. I wonder if this commentary is asking us to think about the duality of existential safety vs. practical safety...this idea that even when we are promised something, there is always a doubt until this promise has been delivered. While Yitzchak may have intellectually understood that he was blessed by God with a

promise, human nature led him to feel intense fear...so much fear that he lied about who his wife was. While Yitzchak may have felt a sense of *existential security*, his actions denoted that practically, he did not feel safe.

Our parsha teaches us about the impact of fear and the consequences of addressing fear. The moment Avimelech confronts Yitzchak about *why* he lied to him is a moment of connection *and also* an opportunity for influence. When Avimelech understands *why* Yitzchak lied to him, he immediately tells his nation to leave both Rivkah and Yitzchak alone. Avimelech has the power to dissolve Yitzchak's fear and uses this power in a productive and positive way. Perhaps Avimelech knew that Yitzchak was touched by God even then (though he officially acknowledges it after this moment). Perhaps Avimelech did not want to get in the way of Divine promise.

In any event, Avimelech teaches us the lesson that when we are in positions of power and we realize that there is a fear differential, we have a great opportunity to influence someone's life for the better. We can do this by taking away some of their fear, by acknowledging our part in the conversation...by truly connecting and by doing everything in our power to help dissolve their fear.

And the moment that Yitzchak's deepest fear (the possibility that Rivkah and he could be hurt) is removed by Avimelech (the person with the power) - Yitzchak becomes successful.

. וַיִּזְרַע יִצְחָק בָּאָרֶץ הַהוּא וַיִּמְצָא בַּשָּׁנָה הַהוּא שְׁעָרִים וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ ה'

And Yitzchak sowed in that land and found in the same year a hundredfold. And the Lord blessed him.

Many of the commentaries (for example, Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra) emphasize the notion that this was NOT a year of success for most people and that this was difficult soil in which to plant. Despite all that, Yitzchak reaped great rewards. The order of the passage is quite interesting.

וַיִּזְרַע יִצְחָק בָּאָרֶץ הַהוּא | וַיִּמְצָא בַּשָּׁנָה הַהוּא שְׁעָרִים | וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ ה'

First, Yitzchak plants, then he finds success in his planting, and then, God blesses him.

The moment Yitzchak is no longer paralyzed by fear, he is able to more fully engage with the world. He becomes successful and upon *his* actions, God blesses him as promised or begins to fulfill the blessing that was promised.

Yitzchak becomes more present in the world when his fear is neutralized. Before we are reminded that God blesses him, Yitzchak plants and prepares the land that is to be fruitful.

Avimelech's actions teach us that when we have the power to help someone through their fear, we have a moral responsibility to do so - because the consequences for that person can be life changing. May we all merit to help others overcome their fears. And in turn, by overcoming our own fears may we merit to fully engage in this world and open ourselves to receive its blessings.



Daniella Pressner is the *Head of School of the Akiva School in Nashville, Tennessee*. Born in Jerusalem, Daniella grew up in Chicago and received her BA from Barnard College in Religion and Dance and her MA from Vanderbilt University in Jewish Studies. Her Masters thesis centered on an analysis of Bat Pharaoh's character and identity in ancient, medieval and modern times. She was a member of the Scholar's Circle and the Summer Talmud Intensives at the Drisha Institute in NYC and has studied at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Israel, as well as the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Daniella has served on the Board of HaYedion, is a past president of Jewish Family Service of Nashville and currently serves on the Board of the Jewish Middle School in Nashville. Daniella was awarded a DSLTI fellowship for future leaders of Jewish Day Schools and her writings have been published in the PEJE, Avi Chai, RAVSAK and JOFA journals. She is married to Rabbi Saul Strosberg of Congregation Sherith Israel in Nashville and the mother of four spunky children.