

Shabbat 14 November - Toldot

“And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham, Abraham begat Isaac”. With these words our Sedra this week begins, one doesn’t need to be a great Sage to be prompted with the seeming redundancy of this verse. We already know that Isaac is Abraham’s son from the previous Sidrot –why dazzle us with this news again? Most of our classical commentators deal with this question, so I’m not going to try to give their response here, just look into Rashi, Ramban etc. and see what they say.

However I would like to suggest a slightly different interpretation. We home in on the next part of the narrative. Isaac and Rebecca yearn desperately for a child. They have been married for twenty years yet there has been no positive result. The verse highlights how Isaac with his wife entreat G-d for a child. Now listen to the result; “G-d answered **his** prayers, and his wife Rebecca conceived.” Notice the emphasis; G-d responds to Isaac’s plea not to Rebecca’s. Rashi addresses this and comments; “one cannot compare the prayer of a righteous child the son of a righteous person to the prayer of a righteous person the child of a wicked person”. It was Isaac whose appeal was answered because his father Abraham was righteous and therefore his pleas carried more authority.

I am slightly perplexed by Rashi’s statement. Surely Rebecca’s prayer ought to have been the more acceptable to G-d for she was the daughter of a wicked person, Bethuel, yet she became righteous unaffected by her negative environment? Is it really fair that her prayer be bypassed because of her background? Indeed the Talmud seems to concur with this sentiment when it says “in the place that the truly penitent stand, even the completely righteous cannot reach there”. In other words there is something special about being a Baal Teshuvah- a truly repentant person that outweighs the level of even the truly righteous. Why was Rebecca’s prayer therefore not more readily accepted?

The answer is simple. When you are brought up in the shadow of a great man of the stature of Abraham it is easy to be caught up in the fact that you will also follow in his footsteps because that is what is expected of you. However the emphasis here is that Isaac strove to be a righteous person in his own right despite the fact that it was something inherent in the family.

Now we understand why the repetition of the first verse, in order to stress that Abraham was righteous on his own merit as was Isaac.

Shabbat Shalom