

Dvar Torah Guide

Parshat Toldot & the Climate Challenge

1. *Balancing innovation with preservation*

What is the original quote?

וַיָּשָׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחְפֹּר אֶת-בְּאֵרֵת הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ בְיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיִּסְתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים
אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶן שֵׁמוֹת כַּשֵּׁמֹת אֲשֶׁר-קָרָא לָהֶן אָבִיו: (בראשית כו:יח)

Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them. (Bereshit 26:18)

What is the interpretation?

- What did Yitzchak achieve in his lifetime? While the Torah tells us that Avraham Avinu went on a great journey, brought people closer to Hashem and underwent 10 monumental tests, all Yitzchak seems to do (after the Akeida) is dig wells and plant crops. In fact, some of the wells he didn't initiate, he just re-dug his father's old wells!
- However, while Avraham's greatness was in his spiritual innovation, Yitzchak's greatness was in his preservation of Avraham's legacy. Although innovation is very important, preservation is absolutely essential for a long-term view, otherwise you will ultimately end up with nothing. It's therefore necessary to balance the two.
- When Hashem created Adam HaRishon, He placed him in Gan Eden "לעבדה ולשמרה" (Bereshit 2:15). The term לעבדה means to develop and innovate, whereas לשמרה means to protect and preserve.
- The Midrash (קהלת רבה ז:יג) explains that Hashem gave Adam a tour of Gan Eden and warned him that He made it beautiful for humans to enjoy, but that he must take care not to ruin it, because none will come after him to fix it.

How does this link to the challenge of climate change?

- Mankind has been blessed with a brilliant capacity for innovation and technology and this has advanced civilization incredibly.
- But we now see that excessive development and [fossil-fuel combustion](#) cause extreme damage to the balance of nature and will wreak havoc on mankind and the natural world.
- Hashem put us on earth with a dual responsibility - to innovate and develop, on the one hand, but to do so in a balanced way which will also preserve and protect.

2. *A long-term vs a short-term view - Esav selling the birthright*

What is the original quote?

וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לֶחֶם וְנִזְיָד עֲדָשִׁים וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה וַיִּקָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֹז עֵשָׂו אֶת־הַבְּכֹרָה:
(בראשית כה:לד)

Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright. (Bereshit 25:34)

What is the interpretation?

- Esav sells his birthright for immediate gratification. He could have played a central role in his family's long-term future and in the spiritual destiny of the world¹. Hungry and tired, he fails to recognise what he is giving up for a bowl of lentil soup.
- This lesson was learnt by one of our Sages, Choni Hame'agel Taanit 23a, from a man planting a carob tree from which he would never eat, for the sake of future generations. Choni Hame'agel got instant miraculous results from Hashem when he sought them, but he also had to learn that making long-term investments for the future are also essential.

How does this link to the challenge of climate change?

- This can be paralleled to how humanity is trading long-term environmental stability for short-term convenience and profit. The present is important, but we cannot lose sight of the needs of future generations or even of our own needs in the coming decades.
- Indeed, if we would be wise to consider the long-term impacts of environmental destruction, *kal va'chomer* we should consider the short-term impacts already transpiring.

3. *The Duty of the Jewish People - a blend of spiritual and physical engagement*

What is the original quote?

וַיִּגַּשׁ יַעֲקֹב אֶל־יִצְחָק אָבִיו וַיִּמְשְׁהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר הַקֵּל קוֹל יַעֲקֹב וְהִיָּדַיִם יָדַי עֵשָׂו: וְלֹא הִכִּירוּ כִּי־הֵיוּ יָדָיו כִּיָּדַי עֵשָׂו אָחִיו שְׁעָרַת וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ: (בראשית כז:כב-כג)

So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. **“The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.”** He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him.

(Bereshit 27:22-23)

¹See Rashi on Bereshit 25:32.

What is the interpretation?

- Although Yaakov is more of a spiritual figure, while Esav is more worldly, Rivka urges Yaakov to employ cunning, one of Esav's qualities, in order to receive a bracha from Yitzchak, which she believes rightfully belongs to Yaakov.
- Yitzchak is confused when Yaakov engages him, because he cannot reconcile Yaakov's spiritual demeanour ("the voice is the voice of Yaakov" - i.e. the voice of prayer) with his down-to-earth, pragmatic behaviour ("the hands are the hands of Esav").
- This perplexed statement ultimately becomes the new mission statement of Yaakov, to engage in spiritual values, while taking action to ensure those values are implemented on earth. Later, he will be given the additional name of Yisrael, **כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל** (Bereshit 32:19) reflecting that dual mission.

How does this link to the challenge of climate change?

- While some believe that spirituality involves placing trust in Hashem that He will look after things and solve all our problems without us having to lift a finger, Judaism emphasises the need to take practical action to implement Hashem's values - **לתקן עולם במלכות ש-ד**
- Hashem has given us the world making us responsible for its welfare - **השמים שמים לה'** **והארץ נתן לבני אדם** (Tehillim 115:16). To this end, He has blessed us with the insight necessary to identify problems and the skills to be able to address them; to cure illnesses, to address poverty, to establish justice and to facilitate spiritual growth. Climate change is one of the many challenges which He has entrusted us to address.
- Climate change is also not merely an equal challenge among many. It is a challenge that significantly exacerbates [illness](#), [poverty](#) and more, and therefore by solving it, we stand to solve many of the world's challenges at the same time.
- The story of the man who refuses the rescue boat and helicopter because he trusts that Hashem will save him.

4. Our deep connection to the Earth

What is the original quote?

**וַיִּזְרַע יִצְחָק בְּאֶרֶץ תְּהוֹמָה וַיִּמְצָא בְּשָׁנָה תְּהוֹמָה מֵאָה שְׁעָרִים וַיִּבְרַכְתּוּ יְהוָה:
(בראשית כו:יב)**

Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. Hashem blessed him.

What is the interpretation?

- Prior to Adam's sin, mankind was in harmony with the natural world. But sin created alienation between man and the earth, bringing a curse upon the earth, and a curse upon man that the land would not yield its produce readily (Bereshit 3:17-19).

- However, Yitzchak, who would meditate in the fields (Bereshit 24:63) was able to restore a harmonious spiritual connection between mankind and the earth, so that it would yield plentifully to an extreme, both in terms of its produce and its underground water sources.
- Chazal had a deep connection with the rhythms of nature, as evidenced by the times at which we daven, the laws of ברכות whereby we appreciate how our food is made, and the intricate agricultural laws of Seder Zera'im.

How does this link to the challenge of climate change?

- In the Post-industrial period, the modern person has lost a lot of this sensitivity to nature's rhythms, often not knowing where our food comes from or how to look after the needs of our environment.
 - Climate change has brought home the reality that Chazal taught us, that we are deeply connected to our environment and that Hashem put in place a symbiotic relationship between us and the earth that must be respected and maintained.
 - We have a powerful opportunity to re-discover that original relationship that is so embedded in Jewish history and law, restore the natural balance that has been lost, and ensure that we support the earth, just as it supports us.
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