

The Wells he Dug: The Role of Challenges

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

The amount of space dedicated to discussion about well digging in parshas Toldos is hard to understand. We know the importance of the actions of the Avos so that we can learn from their example but what are we to learn from the extensive discussion of wells being filled, dug once more and argued over. The Seforno (Bereishis 26:25) seems to be trying to sum up the lesson when he comments that once they davened they were able to dig a well which was not argued over and Avimelech came to make a treaty and did not bother them further. Is the Seforno suggesting that the story of the wells is simply another example of the efficacy of prayer? I would suggest that there is a different angle here which needs explanation.

The question of why we have difficulties in life is one of the most often dealt with and least well understood questions in Jewish (and otherwise) thought. One of the answers suggested in Jewish thought (see Ramban Bereishis 22:1) is that the vicissitudes of life are meant to help us to reach higher levels and become better people. Rav Eliyahu Dessler (Michtav MeEliyah Chalek 1 p. 19) explains further that this can be put in perspective with the idea that this world is the antechamber to the next (pirkei avos 4:16). The corridor may be difficult to travel through but it is certainly worth it to get to the inner chamber.

The Talmud tells us that the idea that there are challenges in order to spur us to a closer relationship with our Creator are all over sefer Bereishis. The vegetation did not sprout until Adam davened (Chullun 60b) and the Imahot were barren so that they and our forefathers would daven to Hashem (Yevamos 64a). The mother of Tefilla (see Brachos 31a), Chana, who prayed so forcefully and with so much depth did so only after she experienced so much difficulty in her inability to have children. Who knows where the source of the Amidah would have come from if she hadn't had these challenges? Indeed the Gemara (Bava Basra 15a) tells us that Peninah, Chana's co-wife, who taunted her and Satan both have intent for the sake of Heaven. What exactly does this mean? The message seems to be the same. The difficulties we face are really for the sake of Heaven, they have the potential to push us to greater heights than we would otherwise reach.

Rav Dessler gives a parable of a foreigner who doesn't know the language in a city but somehow saves the king's life. As a reward they put him in the king's treasure house with a bag and motion for him to fill the bag. He misunderstands and thinks that they are putting him to work. The second their back are turned he throws the sack down and relaxes thinking he is getting the better of them. When his hour is up and he has almost nothing in his sack, he thinks he is getting away with murder when he outsmarted himself! So too in this world, we find the challenges set before us difficult and it is hard work. However, the challenges are really treasure since they help us to get to a higher level, to get closer to Hashem.

If the purpose of the difficulty is to spur us to action then once we have acted the difficulty many times fades away. Perhaps this is the point that the Seforno is making. The entire story of the wells is to give the message that Yitzchak experiences difficulties in order to spur him to prayer. There is fighting over the wells and the specter of war with a foreign king. Finally, Yitzchak davens to Hashem and connects. At that point the troubles melt away, a well is dug without any arguments and Avimelech runs to him to suggest a peace treaty!

Having this attitude in life can help to make some of our challenges a little more manageable but it is not simple to keep this perspective in the face of real challenges. One of my Rabbeim told me that he had a brother with serious physical and mental challenges who passed away at a young age. Years after his brother passed away, his father confided in him that he felt he had completely missed the point of his having a son with such difficulties. In retrospect, he felt that he was meant to make his son more comfortable and help him as much as possible. He regretted his focus which was entirely on the challenge and the fact that it did not seem fair for him to have to deal with it.

It is difficult enough to be so honest with oneself in hindsight, but to have such an attitude when going through difficulties is even harder. When we are in the midst of crisis and seriously challenged it is hard to remove ourselves enough to contemplate the challenge and its role. Davening is itself a time to pour our hearts out to Hashem and also to regroup and take a new perspective on the purpose of the challenge. It can give us the strength to rise to the challenge and find new strength and reserves where we felt we had none. May Hashem give us the strength to carry through our challenges and not just grow from them but to recognize that we must focus on our response to the challenge rather than the challenge itself. As Victor Frankl said, “between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”