

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Toldos

Refining the Jewish People

וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבְּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתִּלְוֶה לְדָרֶשׁ אֶת ה'.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ.

The children agitated within her, and she said, "If so, why am I thus?" and she went to inquire of Hashem.

Hashem said to her: "Two nations are in your womb." (25:22-23)

Chazal¹ explain Hashem's words to Rivkah as alluding to two great personalities who would be descended from her: Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi from Yaakov and Antoninus of Rome from Esav. We need to consider how telling Rivkah that these two great men would come from her served as the answer to her inquiry. In truth, if we wish to see how this was the answer to her question, we need to look more carefully at the question itself, as it is phrased somewhat cryptically. What exactly does Rivkah mean by asking "If so, why am I thus?"

The Venom that Came with the Fruit

To understand the background to all of this, the Meshech Chochmah refers us to a statement of the Gemara elsewhere,² that at the time of the sin with the *Etz Hada'as*, the snake injected a venom into Chava, and hence into mankind. This venom remained within

¹ *Avodah Zarah* 11a, quoted in Rashi to our *pasuk*.

² *Shabbos* 146a.

the system of humankind; however, in Yaakov's days it departed from him and his family. What is the nature of this venom, and how did it come to depart from Yaakov?

The Meshech Chochmah explains as follows. The *pasuk*³ describes the original state in which Man was created as “*yashar* – upright.” This refers to the fact that his essential inclination was toward good. However, this situation itself changed with the sin of the *Etz Hada'as*. From this point onwards, the drive towards evil entered man and became part of his internal makeup, so that it was no longer true to say that his essential inclination would always tend toward good. This was the “venom” with which the snake injected Chava – the inner drive towards evil which became part of the mankind's fundamental makeup.⁴

This situation continued until one man came and began to reverse it – Avraham Avinu. Through his monumental spiritual and moral achievements, he was able to initiate the process of refining and separating once more the pure from the impure. This refinement found expression in the radically divergent makeup of his two sons, for Yishmael “drew out” the impurities, leaving Yitzchak to receive and embody that which was pure within Avraham. This process continued in the next generation as well, with Esav drawing out any remaining impurities from Yitzchak, leaving Yaakov as the pure finished product, finally rid of the snake's venom.

Understanding Rivkah's Question

All of this brings us back to Rivkah's question in the beginning of our parsha. The children are agitating within her and this leads her to ask, “Why am I thus?”

As we mentioned, the process of refinement of the future Jewish people began with Avraham's children and continued with those of Yitzchak.

With one difference.

The two children of Avraham, representing contrary elements, were each born of a different mother, for the pure within Avraham – Yitzchak – was carried by Sarah⁵ and the impure – Yishmael – was carried by Hagar. Apparently, this itself was part of the process of separation. This was the question plaguing Rivkah, for as we know, the agitation of her children within her was a product of Yaakov trying to escape when she passed by a *Beis Hamidrash*, and Esav doing likewise when she passed by a house of idolatry. Recognizing the conflicting nature of her two children, she then asks “Why is it thus with me?” What she means to ask is, why is she carrying both the pure and the impure child, unlike the first generation where the two were carried by different mothers?

Having understood the question, what is the answer?

3 *Koheles* 7:29: “אשר עשה האלקים את האדם ישר”.

4 See Ramban to *Bereishis* 2:9 and *Nefesh HaChaim shaar* 1 Chap. 6.

5 Elsewhere, the Meshech Chochmah explains that this was the reason that Hashem told Avraham to listen to Sarah's voice and defer to her judgment when she insisted that Hagar and Yishmael be sent away (*Bereishis* 21:12). Having received only the pure from within Avraham, her outlook was thus purer than his! (Meshech Chochmah *ibid.*)

Hashem informs her that “there are two nations in your womb,” which the Gemara interprets as a reference to the two great personalities of Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi and Antoninus, the former being descended from Yaakov and the latter from Esav. What Hashem is doing is explaining why she is carrying Esav as well, for although he himself is impure, he nonetheless carries within him certain pure personalities who will be his descendants – represented here by Antoninus, who, as the Gemara describes,⁶ was an extremely moral person who held Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi in the highest esteem.⁷ It is in consideration of future pure descendants such as these that Rivkah carries not only Yaakov, but also Esav!⁸

6 See e.g. *Avodah Zarah* ibid.

7 Another example of a pure quality descendant from Esav is the Tanna R' Meir.

8 The implication here is that there were to be no such high caliber descendants of Yishmael who would warrant him being carried by Sarah.