

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Toldos

“AND THE MAN [YITZCHOK] WAS GREAT...AND THE PLISHTIM WERE JEALOUS OF HIM...ALL OF THE WELLS THAT AVRAHAM’S SERVANTS HAD DUG...THE PLISHTIM STOPPED UP...” (BEREISHIS 26:13-15)

The “wells” refer to Avraham’s students

THE PLISHTIM were very jealous of the wealth that Yitzchak had accrued. The simple reading of the *pasuk* describes how this jealousy motivated the Plishtim to destroy some of Yitzchak’s material possessions – the wells that his father Avraham had dug. However, Rabbeinu Bechaya (*ibid.*) gives an alternate explanation for these verses. He says that the “wells” refer to Avraham’s students, whom he had converted to belief in Hashem. Driven by their jealousy, the Plishtim “closed the hearts” of these converts by luring them back to their original idolatrous beliefs. Yitzchak had to use his “might,” Rabbeinu Bechaya tells us, to overcome their efforts and bring his father’s students back to monotheism.

How were they able to destroy all of Avraham’s efforts?

This was not a theological quarrel that the Plishtim had with Yitzchak. Avraham’s conversions are not mentioned by the *pasuk* nor by Rabbeinu Bechaya as being the source of their envy. They were jealous of Yitzchak’s material acquisitions, not his spiritual accomplishments. If so, why did they express their hostility against Yitzchak by corrupting the disciples of his father Avraham? Avraham’s students had nothing to do with Yitzchak’s material wealth!

This insanity can drive a person to destroy indiscriminately

Secondly, how were they able to destroy all of Avraham’s efforts? Avraham was a highly skilled teacher and motivator; the Plishtim had none of these skills. Outreach was Avraham’s *raison d’être*, his lifelong quest to benefit others with the ultimate *chesed* – serving Hashem as the only true G-d. We can be sure his students did not take a “quickie” conversion course, but rather built their *emunah* methodically and carefully, recognizing Hashem’s kindness and exposing the falsehood and emptiness of idolatry. Before converting, they had to have the moral strength and courage to stand up against the entire civilized world. How could such great *talmidim* be influenced by the Plishtim, working with the falsehood and deceit of idolatry, and motivated by petty and illogical jealousy?

There is no such thing as “petty” jealousy. One who is jealous of another human being is afflicted by a disease which consumes him, rotting his very bones (Mishlei 14:30). As the *Mesilas Yesharim* explains, it is a form of foolishness which gains nothing for the person and doesn’t inherently affect the other person. The only loser is the envious person himself, who stew in bitterness for no practical benefit. From the Plishtim we learn that this insanity can drive a person to destroy indiscriminately, without limits, without rhyme or reason. We also derive that this evil trait has such power that it can motivate and empower unskilled, inexperienced people, using only lies and falsehood, to conquer the living spiritual fortresses created by the true teachings of an Avraham Avinu.

On the other hand, we can see the power of *emes*, of the strength of Torah. Despite the spiritual devastation the Plishtim had wrought, stopping up and closing the hearts of these converts, Yitzchak was able to overcome these forces of evil and restore their belief in Hashem. One person, with the searchlight of truth, can dispel a vast sea of darkness fueled by powerful, venomous jealousy. May we recognize the powerful spiritual forces at play in our lives, to beware of the lethal effects of jealousy and other negative *middos*, and to use the potent energy of Torah and *mussar* to illuminate our lives as we climb ever higher in serving Hashem.