



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Toldot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 14, 2015

Toldot

Blinded by the Light



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Toldot > Blinded by the Light

November 14, 2015

ABSTRACT

Often, when our eyes are closed, we can see the farthest.

Is that why love is blind? Is that why not seeing is sometimes the greatest blessing?

Our forefather Isaac went blind as he aged. What caused his blindness?

Rashi says it was smoke, tears and blessings.

As we shall discover in this sermon, these three causes of Isaac's blindness contain and convey three profound lessons for modern day:

- Life is a non-smoking room.
- When you inspire the tears of angels, you become blind to all else.
- Sometimes to bless the light, you have to be blind to the darkness.

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

1. The Right Glasses (Joke)

A man went to an eye specialist to get his eyes tested and asked, "Doctor, will I be able to read when wearing these glasses?"

"Yes, of course," said the doctor.

"Oh! That would truly be miraculous," said the patient with joy.

"What's so miraculous about it? Why wouldn't you be able to read with the right glasses?"

"Well ... I have been illiterate for so long!"

2. The Eye Chart (Joke)

David leaves London and immigrates to Israel. As soon as he settles down in Tel Aviv, he goes to see the local optician.

"I'm having trouble reading," he says, "maybe you could check my eyes?"

The optician agrees and sits David in front of a large eye chart. "Can you read the letters on the bottom line?" he asks.

"No," replies David.

"So how about the next line up?" asks the optician.

Squinting, David replies, "No, I still can't read them."

"OK," says the optician, "let's start at the top line. Read out the letters please."

"But I can't," says David.

“Are you perhaps going blind?” asks the optician.

“Certainly not,” replies David. “It’s just that I’ve never learned to read Hebrew.”

3. What Blinds Us

Many things blind us: We are blinded by love ... by family ... by faith. We are blinded by our natures and by how we’ve been nurtured. We are blinded by what we read, and in what language we read. Life is full of blinders – and that’s not necessarily such a bad thing.

“Love is blind” is a cliché, but one that conveys a deep truth. Because we are subjectively committed to those we love, we are often blind to their weaknesses. Parents are often oblivious to their children’s flaws; spouses are often unaware of their better-half’s shortcomings (or the other way around). And certainly, when it comes to our own subjective selves, we can be quite delusional about our faults and deficiencies.

This is normal. This is good. That is, as long as we are aware that we have blind spots (not like the fellow that acknowledged: “Yes, I have blind spots, but I know what they are...”). Our blind spots allow us to reach beyond the seemingly sensible and limited, in order to strive for deeper.

But this kind of blindness can also be dangerous, for how are we to know when there is a weakness that should be rectified, a flaw that must be addressed?

It all depends on the catalyst or the cause of the blindness.

Thank heaven we have been gifted with the Torah, which sets a precedent for everything and provides the requisite tools for us to deal with life’s challenges.

4. Parshat Toldot

Thus far, in the Torah's Book of Genesis, we have journeyed along with Abraham and Sarah, our founders. And we have walked with Isaac and Rebecca, the next link in the chain that would become the Nation of Israel. This week, in *Parshat Toldot*, we read about the birth of Isaac and Rebecca's twin sons, Jacob and Esau ... and we also read about Isaac's blindness in his old age:

It came to pass when Isaac was old, and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called Esau his elder son ...¹

Why does the Torah share with us this seemingly negative fact about Isaac? There must be a deep reason for this. But what is it? And what practical lessons does Isaac's weakened eyesight hold for us – you and me – in our modern-day lives?

To answer these questions, we have to ask another: What *caused* Isaac to go blind?

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, answers this question citing three causes: smoke, tears and blessings. Let us look at them one by one.

5. Cause #1: Smoke

Before describing Isaac's blindness, the Torah discusses Esau's marriage:

And Esau was forty years old, and he married Judith, the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath, the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a source of spiritual bitterness to Isaac and to Rebecca.²

¹ Genesis 27:1.

² Genesis 26:34-35.

Why were Esau's wives a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca? Because, says Rashi, these women were idol worshippers. They would burn incense to their false idols and worship these faux deities.

The smoke of this incense irritated Isaac's eyes, weakening them and ultimately blinding him.³

6. Cause #2: Tears

The second cause that Rashi cites is a result of the *Akeidah* – Abraham's offering of Isaac as a sacrifice to God, which (as we know) God forestalled.

When Isaac was bound on the altar, and his father Abraham was about to offer him up to God, the ministering angels wept. Their tears fell upon Isaac's eyes. As a result, his eyes grew dim, and later in old age, he became blind.⁴

7. Cause #3: Blessings

The third cause cited by Rashi has to do with Isaac's son, Jacob, who – with the help of his mother Rebecca – “tricked” Isaac into giving him the blessings intended for his twin brother Esau.

Esau was the firstborn, and as such, was Isaac's favorite. But Esau was corrupt and morally bankrupt, something which Isaac did not see (for reasons discussed elsewhere).

Isaac had intended to give special blessings to Esau, but Jacob convinced his blind father that he was Esau, and thus he was the one who received the blessings of the firstborn.

³ Tanchuma, Toldot 8. Pesikta Rabbati 12.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 65:6.

This is what happened:

And he [Jacob] came to his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" And Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you have spoken to me. Please rise, sit down and eat of my game, so that your soul will bless me."

...And Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come closer, so that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob drew near to Isaac his father, and he felt him, and he said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau."⁵

Because the blind Isaac believed that Jacob was Esau, he blessed him as follows:

"May the Lord give you of the dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine. Nations shall serve you and kingdoms shall bow down to you; you shall be a master over your brothers, and your mother's sons shall bow down to you. Those who curse you shall be cursed, and those who bless you shall be blessed."⁶

So, says Rashi, Isaac was blinded so that he would give these blessings to the person who deserved to receive them – Jacob not Esau.⁷

From these three causes of Isaac's blindness,⁸ we can learn three lessons that apply to our modern-day lives.

8. Lesson #1: Smoke

Lesson number one:

Clarity is seeing the world for how it truly is, as designed by its Creator. We all have this ability – indeed, it is our pure and natural state.

⁵ Genesis 27:18-19, 21-22.

⁶ Ibid. 28-29.

⁷ Genesis Rabbah 65:8.

⁸ See Likkutei Sichot vol. XV, pp. 211-216 for a nuanced and scholarly discussion on this.

But sometimes (or more often than that), this clarity is made opaque by the smoky, shadowy substance of materialism. The surface of the material world is superficial, concealing its true inner reality. Matter by its very nature is false and fading, distorting and confusing. It may project power and strength, but everything material and corporeal is temporary, mortal, degenerating and subject to the laws of erosion. Simply put, the body conceals its soul. Packaging hides the product within. Very often the sizzle is far greater than the steak. The smoke far more powerful than the fire.

When you are pure and holy, impurity and profanity blinds you. An overwhelming dose of raw materialism can blind a sensitive soul. Isaac was the epitome of purity and translucence. Isaac never left the purity and clarity of the Holy Land.⁹ When Esau's wives brought their unholy "smoke and mirrors" into his world, Isaac's pure gaze and far-seeing vision was blurred.

From this we learn to be aware how easily falsehood can blind us. Anything that blows too much smoke – smokescreens that introduce too much distortion into our lives – is not good for the clarity we so desperately need. It blinds us to our vision and purpose.

We must surround ourselves only with clear ideals and non-smoking areas of life (so to speak). Anything foreign to our faith in God – indeed idolatry is called foreign worship (*avodah zarah*) – will only confuse and blind us to our true purpose.

So, lesson number one is never to be blinded by the smoke of matter, but to remain clear headed in our pursuit of spirit.

⁹ Perhaps this is why only Isaac was affected, and not Rebecca. See Likkutei Sichot ibid.

9. Lesson #2: Tears

Lesson number two:

Tears are the expression of the soul. They bathe the soul. Tears flow during or after spiritual, life-altering experiences. When one has experienced such true depth, one ultimately becomes blinded to anything shallow.

When Isaac was a young man, he had the most profound spiritual experience a person could have – the binding and dedicating of life to a purpose greater than life itself. At the apex of this spiritual and enlightening event, the heavens themselves opened up and the tears pouring from the eyes of the ministering angels fell into Isaac's eyes. Thus, his pupils were exposed to what true light is all about.

This moment opened Isaac's eyes to truth and blinded him to all else. When one sees the bright face of heaven, how could one ever be satisfied with seeing the dark plains of earth?

In a nutshell, lesson number two for us is this:

We must seek out such profound spiritual experiences that anything else will pale in comparison. Once we set such a high barometer for light, everything and anything else will not be worth looking at.

[This is one of the reasons we cover our eyes when reciting the Shema prayer – to block out the hypnotic power of seeing the physical surface.

Notice how we close our eyes when we embrace a loved one, or when we experience anything profound. It's as if we are traveling into a new dimension, which the physical eyes cannot relate to and their being open will only distract us from].

After the *Akeidah*, Isaac saw everything with his soul, for physical eyes are inadequate to perceive such sublime visions. We must expose our children to similar sights – be they holy books or holy moments (such as amazing Shabbat experiences, sincere hugs, loving words). These moments and experiences will “blind” them to anything less worthy or more mundane.

10. Lesson #3: Blessings

Lesson number three comes in answer to an obvious question: Why did God have to cause the blinding of Isaac just so Jacob would receive the blessings?

There had to be a much simpler way to get Isaac to bless Jacob. Instead of blinding Isaac, why did God not reveal Esau's corruption to Isaac who then would *want* to bestow the blessings of the firstborn upon the righteous Jacob? What compelled God to blind Isaac, so that Jacob could then "trick" his father into thinking that he was Esau and bless him instead?

Perhaps this was God's reason:

Often times we think the best way to bless someone is to curse someone else. Often times we elevate one individual by denigrating another. We think we must vilify one person to praise another. Yes, we have all done it, believing it was right.

But God did not want to talk badly about his son to Isaac, even if that son was the wicked Esau.¹⁰ God preferred to cause Isaac to go blind so that he would bless Jacob.

We should emulate God whenever we feel compelled to speak negatively or disparagingly about another person. If God would not speak badly about Esau to Isaac, even when the blessings and the future of the world hung in the balance, how could we ever speak badly about someone else, when nothing as important is involved?

Often times we think that the only way to highlight the good is to put down the bad. Often times we think that, in order to bless the righteous, we must first curse the wicked.

Not true – to bless Jacob you have to focus on Jacob and be blind to Esau. Talking badly about Esau will not help Jacob.

Sure, we should never bless the darkness, but sometimes the best way to fight it is not to harp on it, but to focus on the light instead.

¹⁰ Compare with Likkutei Sichot XV, pp. 215-216. C.f. Kiddushin 18a.

11. Great Light, Great Eyesight (Conclusion)

In the Talmudic lexicon, blindness is referred to as *sagi nahor*, which literally means “great light,” or “great eyesight.”

This seems to be a strange way to describe blindness, for isn't blindness the opposite of “great light” or “great eyesight?” Doesn't blindness happen when one cannot see and when one feels in the dark? How can it be called the “great light” when it is the absence of light?

In answer, let us consider that there are various reasons for blindness. One may be blind because one cannot see – in which case one's eyes perceive too much darkness and little (if any) light. Or, one may be blind because one sees too much – in which case one's eyes absorb too much bright light, indeed so much so that one is blinded by it.

Our loved ones can blind us – love is blind – not because there isn't enough emotion there but because there is too much. Today we are blind to reality not because it isn't there, but because it is there to an extent that surpasses our limited material vessels. The eye can only see that which it can contain and capture; everything else is overexposure – too much light and too much energy.

That said, let us end on this note:

It is our job to blind the material, superficial world with powerful spiritual light. Better that the world see too much light and expand its vessel to absorb more light than remain in the dark with not enough light.

There is nothing wrong with being blinded by the light; in fact, it is often the only way that we can truly see.

Shabbat Shalom!

© Copyright 2015 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.