

# A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

*This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of Northwood United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam*

## PARSHAT TOLDOT

### DVAR TORAH: LIKE THE STARS

In this week's parshah, Yitzchak Avinu is blessed by God that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the Heaven (Bereishit 26:4). The People of Israel, say our sages, are star-like (see Megillah 16a, Bamidbar Rabbah 2:13) not just in number, but in nature. What does "being like the stars" entail?

Perhaps we can sketch a star-like personality type, based on three prominent characteristics of the stars:

1. Stars are extremely large. Red giant stars, astronomers tell us, can reach sizes as large as 1,000 times the size of our sun. The star-like personality strives for greatness. He engages his mind with great ideas like truth, justice, peace, the relationship between G-d and existence, and he learns great sources like halachah, aggadah, Tanach, and kabbalah. This star-like person is interested in mastery, perfection, and greatness. He is great enough to shine forth to others, big enough to illuminate not only those closest, but even those far away. The star-like tzadik is great.

2. Stars are extremely high up, extremely far away. The closest star, astronomers tell us, is about 4.2 light years away. The star-like personality is lofty, he is an elevated person. He is not petty, not caught up in trivialities, but still appreciates the importance of detail and how minute details can be part of lofty goals. One of the adjectives we would use to describe him is קדוש, as holy. He uses physicality to fulfill his Divine mission but does not belittle himself by indulgence. He has great dignity but does not become aloof or arrogant. He is ethical and moral, wise, helpful and considerate, spiritual and courageous. The star-like tzadik is an elevated individual.

3. Stars are also extremely independent. Though we see them as galaxies, each star stands alone with quite a lot of space around it. The star-like personality is independent. He distances himself from the dependency connected with addictive behavior, and does not depend on outside sources like his work, wealth, or social group for his identity, but it comes from above and within. His identity is G-d given – he is a Jew with a neshamah. Great tzadikim develop a unique personal style. It is astounding how our greatest talmidei chachamim and tzadikim are so radically different from each other. The star-like tzadik is independent.

How does one become a star-like person, an elevated, great, and independent person? The following factors make especially important contributions: Humility – We are compared not only to the stars but also to chol, the sand, and afar, the earth. Ironically, our greatest, most lofty and elevated Jews, have been our most humble: Rabbi Akiva Eiger, the Chofetz Chaim, and Rav Moshe Feinstein – Hillel, David Hamelech, Moshe Rabbeinu. Humility for a Jew means negating one's self to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and that brings about the greatest possible elevation. Talmud Torah – Connecting to the word of Hashem elevates the individual.

Someone who learns Torah for its own sake merits many things ... They reveal to him the secrets of the Torah, and he becomes like an overflowing spring and a river that never stops, and he is modest, patient, and forgiving – and the Torah makes him great and elevates him over all creations" (Avot 6:1). Shabbat – On Shabbat we are given extra spiritual energy, a נשמה יתירה that enables us to elevate ourselves. Shabbat is a day when the negative forces that bring us down are diminished, and we are able to elevate our physical sides through oneg Shabbat. May we and all of Israel be blessed and strive to be like the stars.

## SOURCE GUIDE: BLIND?

Yitzchak became blind in his old age. His blindness is a crucial element in the story that unfolds in the last segment of our parshah, the blessings of Yaakov and Eisav. This source guide builds on commentators who ask the question “Why did Yitzchak become blind?” (All of their comments are based in Midrashim.) They are here divided into three camps: Rashbam and Rabbeinu Bechayei; Sforno and the Daat Zekeinim; and, finally Rashi’s three explanations.

<p><b>Bereishit 27:1</b> It came to be when Yitzchak was aged, his eyes dimmed from being able to see. He called to Eisav his older son and said to him, “My son,” and he responded, “Here I am.”</p>	<p><b>בראשית כז: א:</b> (א) וַיְהִי כִּי זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתְּכַהֵן עֵינָיו מִרְאֵת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת עֵשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנְנִי:</p>
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We will see a number of suggestions in commentaries and midrashim explaining the cause of Yitzchak’s blindness. Do any of them give the simplest explanation – that his blindness was a natural result of aging? Yes – **Rashbam and Rabbeinu Bechayei** do:

<p><b>Rashbam on Bereishit 27:1</b> His eyes became weak – from old age, as we find in the book of Shmuel (Shmuel I 3:2).</p>	<p><b>רשב"ם על בראשית כז: א:</b> ותכהין עיניו - מן הזקנה כמו שמצינו בספר שמואל ועיניו החלו כהות:</p>
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<p><b>Rabbeinu Bechayei on Bereishit 27:1</b> The simple explanation is that dimming of the eyes, impaired vision, is part of the aging process, leaving the verse to focus on Yitzchak’s calling out [to Eisav]. We find, similarly, with regards to Yaakov (Bereishit 48:10), “The eyes of Yaakov were heavy with age.” We also find, with regards to Achiyah Hashiloni (Melachim I 14:4), “For his eyes had stopped functioning because of old age.” What the Torah says about Moshe, of blessed memory: “His eyes didn’t weaken and his vitality was not gone” (Devarim 34:7) was miraculous.</p>	<p><b>רבינו בחיי על בראשית כז: א:</b> ותכהין עיניו מראות - ע"ד הפשט כהוי העינים מנהג הזקנה והכל נמשך על ויקרא. וכן מצינו ביעקב (בראשית מח) ועיני ישראל כבדו מזוקן, גם באחיה השילוני (מלכים א יד) כי קמו עיניו משיבו, ומה שכתוב במשה רבינו ע"ה לא כהתה עינו ולא נס לחה היה זה נס:</p>
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Why would anyone not explain this verse in the most obvious way? The **Netziv** addresses this:

<p><b>Haamek Davar on Bereishit 27:1</b> It should not be explained that old age was the cause of his blindness, for, relative to how long his (Yitzchak’s) life lasted, he was not (now) so old, for he lived another sixty years ... They (our Sages) also based (their explanations) on the word <i>meire’ot</i>, “from seeing”, which seems superfluous.</p>	<p><b>העמק דבר על בראשית כז: א:</b> אין לפרש שהזקנה גרמה זאת שהרי לא הי' זקן כ"כ לפי ערך ימי חייו. שהי' חי עוד ששים שנה ... וגם דקדקו לשון מראות שהוא מיותר ...</p>
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- How would the Rashbam and Rabbeinu Bechayei respond to the two points the Netziv raises?

The **Sforno and Daat Zekeinim** take a radically different direction:

<p><b>Sforno on Bereishit 27:1</b> His eyes dimmed – like what happened to Eili, who did not protest his sons’ [improper actions]. As it says, “He did not stop them (see Rashi, Radak, and Metzudat Tzion there)” (Shmuel I 3:13) and “His eyes were lifted and he could not see” (Melachim I 14:4).</p>	<p><b>ספורנו על בראשית כז: א:</b> ותכהינה עיניו. כמו שקרה לעלי שלא מיחה בבניו כאמרו ולא כהה במ ונאמר בו ועיניו קמו ולא יוכל לראות.</p>
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<p><b>Daat Zekeinim on Bereishit 27:1</b> His eyes became dimmed – because he loved Eisav because the trapped game was in his mouth, and it is written, “For the bribe will blind ...” (Shemot 23:8).</p>	<p><b>דעת זקנים מבעלי תוס' על בראשית כז:א:</b> ותכהין עיניו מראות - משום שאהב עשו כי ציד בפיו וכתוב כי השחד יעור...</p>
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- What is common to both of their explanations?
- Both of them seem to view this as a punishment – but what is the *midah keneged midah*? Why is blindness the appropriate result of either not chastising a child properly or taking what might be called a bribe?
- How can we understand these approaches that critique Yitzchak – each has its basis in Midrashim – in light of what we know about Yitzchak’s piety, high status as a prophet and as one of our Avot?

Finally, **Rashi** brings three explanations:

<p><b>Rashi on Bereishit 27:1</b> 1. [His eyes] became dim – Through the smoke of these [wives of Eisav] (that were offering up smoke and incense to idols). 2. Another explanation is that when he was bound on the altar and his father wanted to slaughter him – at that time the Heavens opened up and he saw the ministering angels crying. They shed tears that fell on his eyes. Therefore his eyes dimmed. 3. Another explanation is [that he became blind] so that Yaakov would take the blessings.</p>	<p><b>רש"י על בראשית כז:א:</b> ותכהין - בעשן של אלו (שהיו מעשנות ומקטירות לע"א) ד"א כשנעקד ע"ג המזבח והיה אביו רוצה לשחטו באותה שעה נפתחו השמים וראו מלאכי השרת והיו בוכים וירדו דמעותיהם ונפלו על עיניו לפיכך כהו עיניו. ד"א כדי שיטול יעקב את הברכות.</p>
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- What is the cause of Yitzchak’s blindness according to each of these three explanations?
- What is the textual basis of each?
- What are the strong and weak points of each?
- See the **Chizkuni, Daat Zekeinim, and the Rosh** (in his commentary on the Chumash) who deal with a difficulty with Rashi’s first explanation – Why didn’t Rivkah also go blind?
- What are the tears of the angels? Why would Yitzchak go blind by them falling into his eyes?

We close with the **Maharal’s** comment on this Rashi:

<p><b>Gur Aryeh on Bereishit 27:1</b> ... Through the smoke of those [wives of Eisav] who were making burnt offerings to idols. Because Yitzchak had a <i>kedushah</i>, a holiness, that was not standard <i>kedushah</i>, but a higher and more intense <i>kedushah</i> because he was offered as a sacrifice sanctified to Hashem on the altar (Bereishit 22:9) – his eyes dimmed. For vision is more holy (than other faculties) because vision is <i>sichli</i>, it is part of the realm of mind. Therefore it was impossible that the vision of the holy Yitzchak could be connected to the filth of idolatry. These are words of much wisdom that are known to the wise – that vision through the power of <i>kedushah</i> was fitting to Yitzchak, and when there was filth they dimmed.</p>	<p><b>גור אריה על בראשית כז:א:</b> בעשן של אלו. פירוש שהיו מקטירין לעבודה זרה, כי מפני שהיה ליצחק קדושה, לא קדושה כמו שאר קדושה, רק קדושה יתירה, שהיה קרבן קדוש לה' שנקרב על המזבח (לעיל כב, ט), ומפני גודל הקדושה שהוא קרבן לה' - לכך כהו עיניו, מפני כי הראיה היא יותר קדושה בעבור שהראות ענין שכלי, לכך לא היה אפשר להתחבר ראות יצחק הקדוש עם טנופת עבודה זרה. ואלו דברים הם דברי חכמה מאוד יודעים לחכמים, שראוי ליצחק ראיות העין בכח קדושה, וכאשר היה שם טנופת - כהו עיניו.</p>
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## “FATHER” AND “KING”, BY RABBI MENDEL FARBER

“And there was a hunger in the land besides the hunger that was in the days of Avraham. And Yitzchak went to Avimelech the king of Plishtim to Gerar” (Bereishit 26:1). The emphasis in the verse seems to imply that Yitzchak was going primarily to Avimelech and not to the land of the Plishtim, the Phillistines. What is the significance of that emphasis?

Rashi in Tehillim tells us that Avimelech was not the personal name of the king of the Plishtim, but was the title that all the kings of the Plishtim held. What a strange title for a king! The melech component means a king, but why was the av, the father, added?

The land of the Plishtim occupies a unique geographical location that also has great spiritual significance. Geographically the land of the Plishtim joins Eretz Mitzrayim, Egypt, to Eretz Canaan. And so does it join them spiritually. Mitzrayim represents the physical tumah – impurity – which we call taavah (lust) and Canaan represents the spiritual and intellectual tumah we call avodah zarah (idolatry). Both taavah and avodah zarah were combined in the Plishtim. Mitzrayim opposes the physical kedushah of Yisrael, and Canaan opposes the transcendent kedushah. Plishtim combines the two. The king of the Plishtim not only united his people around a common ideal, which is the function of the king; he also gave his people their physical identity, the function of a father. The Plishtim’s ideal was idolatry and its physical nature was taavah. Its monarch was a king and also a father – a deviant king and a deviant father.

Our avos, our forefathers, implanted within us the strength to withstand both of those tumahs. Avraham who was the father gave us the physical kedushah, and Yaakov the ish tam yosheiv ohalim, dwelling in the tents of Torah, gave us the spiritual kedushah. Yitzchak, who was between Avraham and Yaakov, joined the two. Yitzchak, the link between spiritual and physical kedushah, went to neutralize the opposition of Avimelech, the link between spiritual and physical tumah. His destination was truly Avimelech.

Today, when promiscuity threatens to drown us in its tumah, we must strengthen the link between the physical and the spiritual. Shabbos is one of the fortresses of that connection, when we connect and raise the mundane six days to the heights of the Divine ideal, the kedushah of Shabbos.

A good Shabbos to you all.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of  
Chaya Mirel bat Avraham, ז"ל

We join all of Israel in mourning for  
the victims of Tuesday morning's terror attack., ה"ד.

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*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at [www.darchenoam.org](http://www.darchenoam.org) +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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