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## THE MOTHER OF YAAKOV AND ESAV

**A**nd Yitzchak sent Yaakov, and he went to Padan Aram to Lavan the son of Besuel the Arami, the brother of Rivka, the mother of Yaakov and Esav. (Bereishis 28:5)

Rashi, puzzled by the fact that the Torah graphically describes how these twins, Yaakov and Esav, were born to Yitzchak and Rivka at the beginning of the Parsha, comments that he does not know what the above verse comes to teach us at the end of the Parsha. The Divrei Yosher asks why is the Torah revealing this fact here, that Rivka is the mother of Yaakov & Esav?

The emphasis of the way Yaakov served the Ribono shel Olam was completely different to the way Avrohom and Yitzchak served Hashem. When Avrohom was given the commandment of *לך לך מארץ - לך לך מארץ* - go for yourself from your land - the Midrash describes how he was told to forget his family and the people he was connected to in his country. He had to separate himself totally from his old world, in order for his name to become great and reach the pinnacles of human dignity. Hence he was called Avrohom Ha-Ivri because the whole world was on one side with its philosophy on life and he was completely on the other side with his view on life. Ultimately through this process of separation Avrohom would be in a position to teach the knowledge of Hashem to the entire world so that everyone would recognise the oneness Hashem.

We also find very similar movements of major disconnection that were necessary for Yitzchak's service of G-d. For, as soon as Sarah saw Yishmael dabbling into idol worship, promiscuity and murder, Sarah told Avrohom to banish Yishmael from the house in order that he should not have a negative influence upon Yitzchak. Hakodosh Boruch Hu agreed to her plan since it would have been impossible for Yitzchak to reach the greatest heights of spiritual inspiration and sanctity with such a disturbing influence around him. These heights of holiness could only be achieved by separating Yitzchak from the corruption that was in his proximity.

Yaakov's approach to serving Hashem was firstly predicated by being sent away to a wicked place. Yaakov's challenge was to be placed in evil surroundings and yet have the strength of character to withstand the pervasive evil influence around him. The degree of achievement in accomplishing this mission was hinted to in the message which Yaakov sent to Esav on his return to Eretz Yisroel with the words, "עם לכן גרתי" - with Lavan I lived". Rashi famously explains that the word "גרתי" is an anagram of the number "613" - "תרי"ג". Yaakov was hinting to Esav that in spite of living under the same roof as their uncle Lavan he had not been assuaged by Lavan's pernicious evil, to the extent that he had been able to keep all of G-d's 613 commandments in total perfection.

Similarly the Torah itself testifies to this supreme effort of Yaakov when it describes how when he came to the city of Shechem he was in a state of perfection. "ויבא יעקב שלם עיר שכם". Chazal tell us that this *שלם* - "perfection" was in the Torah that Yaakov adhered to assiduously without ever succumbing to the constant struggles against the evils that surrounded him for so many years. In truth this approach to serving his Master was a preparation for his children for when they would be led into exile and would have to live in the very many negative environments of the nations of the world. This challenge of inner strength that the people of Israel required, was in order that we would not be influenced by cultures which were the antithesis of the scales of values and morals of the Jewish way of life.

The Divrei Yosher asks where did Yaakov derive this special quality of will-power not to be persuaded to conform to the world around him while actually living in that world?

The Midrash explains that the verse at the beginning of the Parsha, "and Yitzchak was 40 when he took Rivka the daughter of Besuel the Aramean", is coming to teach that Rivka's father and brother were both tricksters par-excellence along with the citizens of their locality. However Rivka was and always remained as a righteous individual, literally a "rose amongst

the thorns". The Midrash is informing us that Rivka possessed this great inner strength not to be influenced by her surroundings even though she had grown up in a family and place of wicked people. It was this great character trait that enabled her to retain her righteousness.

It appears therefore that it was this particular trait of Rivka that was passed on to Yaakov so that he would have the inner resolve to remain true to his Torah convictions in the house of his uncle and this would prepare the pathway for his descendants to survive the onslaught of such punishing exiles in Jewish history.

In reality this ability not to be influenced by the people who surround you was also inherited by Esav since he used it to grow and maintain a level of wickedness, in spite of the fact that he was brought up in a home that was surrounded by unparalleled levels of righteousness.

According to this reasoning we can now shed light on the difficulty in the verse at the end of our Parsha, "and Yitzchak sent Yaakov and he went to Padan Aram to Lavan the son of Besuel the Aramean the brother of Rivka, mother of Yaakov and Esav." Rivka had such inner will-power not to be influenced by her evil brother and father, that she bequeathed this special quality of non-conformity, as the mother to Yaakov and Esav, on to her two sons. Yaakov used it for growing in righteousness and Torah even in an environment that was so alien to this dignified approach to life and unfortunately Esav used it to perpetuate evil and paranoia. It was now on the verge of leaving the rarified spiritual environment of his parents for the depravities of his uncle's home did Yaakov need to bring to the fore his mother's special qualities of the power of non-conformity.

This personality trait of being able to resist the powerful influence of a negative environment that stunts spiritual growth and the spread of human dignity comes from our mother Rivka and her son Yaakov. This was all Divinely guided by the hand of Hashem so that their children and all their subsequent generations would rise to the challenge of coping with the pernicious influences of millennia in exile.

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- Rashi (25:22) brings that Esav whilst still in the womb pushed out when his mother passed places of idol worship. How could he do that when we hold that the evil inclination only comes to a person after they are born?