

CHIZUK & IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

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The Highs and Lows of the Jewish People

If one learns through the Torah's account of our forefather's odyssey, while bearing in mind that Ma'asei Avot is a Siman LaBanim, the precedents for our people's historical highs and lows become clearly evident. Throughout history there have been many occasions where we were at the mercy of a mighty and oftentimes ruthless ruler, while at other moments - relatively few - in our history, our own stature commanded the respect, and even fear, of others.

In this week's Parsha we read of one such period. Avimelech and his henchmen travel to Gerar in order to meet with Yitzchak Avinu. As the high-level entourage arrives, Yitzchak questions their motivation: "Why do you come to me, seeing as you hate me and have sent me away from you?" We know the backdrop for this meeting: Having become envious of Yitzchak's success the P'lishtim had directed him to leave their turf.

Avimelech says: "Go away from us for you have become stronger than we - ATZAMTA MIMENU. The Radak explains that this term does not mean 'you have become stronger than we', but rather 'your financial wealth and strength was obtained from us' (MIMENU). Repeating the classic xenophobic canard, they accused Yitzchak of stealing their wealth: 'You came with one herd and now you possess many.' This jealousy caused the P'lishtim to fill up the wells dug by Yitzchak in order to force him to leave. Though this was a time of famine and there was great need for water, they were willing to harm themselves out of jealousy of the Jew. (This is sadly reminiscent of Nazi Germany's willingness to dedicate trains to the transportation of Jews to the concentration camps, even when these same trains were sorely needed for their own war effort.)

Avimelech explains what has changed: "We saw plainly that Hashem was with you and we said let there be an oath between us... That you will do us no harm as we have not touched you and as we have done nothing but good to you and sent you away in peace, you are now the blessed of the Lord" (B'reishit 26:26-29).

The P'lishtim realized the Jewish People's deep connection to the Land; they saw how Yitzchak's

departure left them in a sorry state - their own wells drying up and the land turning into fallow wasteland. Though they had heretofore wished Yitzchak would disappear from their lives, they now sought his favor and actively courted his goodwill, hoping to forge a peace treaty which would insure their own future prosperity. Knowing the facts, we wonder at Avimelech's Chutzpa: How could he have described his people's actions as having "done nothing but good to you and sent you away in peace"?

To provide an answer to this puzzle, the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 64:10) retells an interesting episode in Jewish history: "In the days of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, the Roman State ordered the Temple to be rebuilt. Pappas and Lulianus (two brothers who later perished as heroic martyrs) set up tables from Acco as far as Antioch and provided those who came up from the exile of Babylon with all their financial needs." The Samaritans, wanting to thwart this plan, warned the emperor that if the plan were to be implemented then taxes would never be collected. The emperor who did not want to rescind the first proclamation, was counseled to simply change the measurements of the Temple by 5 or 10 cubits, with the expectation that this would lead the Jews to withdraw on their own accord as they would want the Temple's measure-

ments to be exact.

As the people who had assembled to witness the rebuilding heard of the latest decree, they began to weep, and some spoke of revolting against Rome. Fearful of the consequences of such an irresponsible act, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya rose up in order to pacify the crowd. He related the following fable: "One day, while eating the meat of his prey, a bone stuck in a lion's throat. The lion declared a reward for anyone who would remove the bone. A heron came forth, extricated the bone with its long beak, and demanded his reward. The lion answered: "Go away! You can now boast that you entered the lion's mouth and exited in peace." When dealing with a ruthless foreign power, there are times when one should be satisfied by having merely emerged alive. This explains Avimelech's brazenness. In his mind Yitzchak should be thankful for having been allowed to leave Avimelech's territory in one piece!

Throughout our powerless history we have often needed to remind ourselves of Rabbi Yehoshua's wise counsel. In the early 20th century, the Jews in Germany constituted the upper crust of the society, and yet this did not prevent the lion from clamping down its jaws...

Blessedly, here in Eretz Yisrael we have entered a new era. We have

begun to see the fulfillment of the divine prophecy to Yitzchak: "I will be with you and bless you, for I will give all these lands to you and your descendants, and I will fulfill the oath that I made to your father Avraham." Like Yitzchak in this week's Parsha, we have finally seen the turning of the tide, as the nations begin to realize that it is in their own best interest to search us out and court our favor. 🏠👉

Ed. note - Rabbi Roness wrote this piece seven years ago. Reading it in our wars situation, makes things more complicated. Still, we hope you get his point.

These weekly words of Torah wisdom can be found in my recently published book "Eretz Yisrael and Aliyah in the weekly Parsha". It can be ordered by calling 052-336-0553 or by ordering it on Amazon