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STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

DO WE HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE OUR OWN LIVES? Or are we entirely the product of our environment? After all, we are buffeted by manifold influences exerted on our lives from all quarters: the powerful effect of the peer groups of our school and college years; the daily barrage from the media; the more subtle influence of literature, art and even architecture.

All these go together to form a remarkably powerful set of mind bending forces acting on each individual. As a consequence, some sociologists doubt whether most of us are capable of any truly independent view on anything.

An example of someone who *did* express a highly independent stance, based on G-d's Will rather than peer pressure, appears in this week's Sedra¹. There we learn about Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, one of the four famous Matriarchs of the Jewish people.

We first met her in last week's Sedra, Chayei Sarah, when she expressed her determination to leave her home and travel far away to become the wife of Isaac. This was not just a youthful urge to travel, a quest for a change of scene. Rebecca came from an environment of idolatry.

Everyone around her, including her immediate family and the society in which she lived, believed in idols, such as various nature

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forces, and worshipped them, often in a horrible way. Her great uncle Abraham was famous for his rejection of idolatry and his faith in one G-d. But Abraham was far off in the Land of Canaan.

Nonetheless, Rebecca managed to stand above her situation. As Rashi points out, despite her surroundings she managed to arrive at and maintain her own independent view of life: “Although she was the daughter of a wicked man, the sister of a wicked man and her hometown was a place of wicked people, she did not learn from their misdeeds”².

Then, when the servant of Abraham came looking for a wife for Isaac, she seized the opportunity to join the famous family of monotheists. Despite her parents’ reluctance she insisted on going.

In our Sedra this week we see another aspect of her independence. In a personal and revealing account we learn how she coped first with years of childlessness and then with a very painful pregnancy. This culminated in the birth of the two totally opposite twins: Jacob and Esau!

Although filled with immeasurable love and respect for her husband Isaac, she had had a Divine prophecy about the future of their two children, which told her that they would manifest opposite directions in life, and that the younger, Jacob, would be supreme³. This, combined with her down to earth perception of reality, made her determined that Jacob, rather than Esau, should receive Isaac’s blessings. The Sedra tells us how she achieved success in this aim.

For us as parents today, living after the Giving of the Torah, every child is a variety of Jacob (but some children are more complex than others). By contrast, for Rebecca there was a clear choice, but it needed boldness to make that choice. From her we learn strength of character. Rebecca had the ability to stand up for that which she knew was right, risking her own wellbeing in the process.

Through this she ensured the establishment of the Jewish people, us, the children of Jacob.

1. Genesis 25:19-28:9. 2. Rashi to Gen.25:20. 3. Gen. 25:23.

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SEDRA TOLEDOT

A BARGAIN?

'Wow! Yoni, you're so lucky!' Chava exclaimed. It was Yoni's birthday, he was turning 8 years old, and his parents had just bought him a nice digital memo watch as a birthday present.

Yoni was also very excited about it. 'Isn't it great!' he said enthusiastically. 'Look! I can have four alarm calls each day, reminding me about everything. And each alarm has a different tune!' he said, showing the watch to Chava, and letting her hear the different alarm sounds. Indeed, Yoni was very excited about it.

'Yoni! Come quick, the bus is waiting for you!' his mother called out to him. 'OK mom, I'm coming!'

It was 8:15 in the morning and Yoni had woken up late for school. His mother had let him stay up late because it was his birthday. He was very excited to go to school so that he could show his friends his new watch.

That afternoon, coming home from school, Yoni burst through the door. 'Wow! Chava, you'll never guess what happened today at school!' he almost shouted.

'What happened?' Chava asked, interested. 'Well...' said Yoni, 'my friend Jeremy has this really great computer game on a CD, and when he saw my watch he said that he would agree to swap the game for my watch!'

'So...' Chava asked sceptically, 'what did you do?'

'Of course, I swapped it! Wouldn't you?' Yoni exclaimed.

Chava was horrified. 'You are so silly!' she told Yoni, 'that game is worth nothing compared to your watch! How could you do that? You know, you must tell Mummy about what you did!' she said in her big sister voice.

'I don't care! It was worth it!' Yoni said, defending himself.

Chava managed to persuade Yoni to tell their mother what had happened.

'Yoni...' said their mother after hearing the story, 'do you know what Sedra it is this week?'

'Yes, it's Toledot', he said.

'Right!' said his mother, 'and in Toledot, this week's Torah portion, it tells us that Esau sold his firstborn rights to Jacob for a bowl of soup! Do you think that it was worth it?'

'Hmm... no, I don't think so', said Yoni, 'but that was different!'

'Well' replied his mother, 'you are quite right, it was totally different, and G-d really wanted that Jacob should have the firstborn rights. But even so, Yoni, when the Torah tells us something, it is also teaching us many lessons in life. One of the lessons here is not to be too quick to sell or swap things! You have to think about it first!'

Yoni had actually begun to rethink the whole affair.

'Mummy,' he said, 'do you think that I could swap it back?'

'Hmm... We'll have to see...' she said, reaching for the phone. 'What is Jeremy's phone number? I will try to speak to his mother....'

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