Dvar Torah Outline

Parashat Toldot: Prayer, Self-Restraint, and the House of Jacob

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explores why Isaac prayed in an open field despite the Talmud's criticism of praying in such a setting. Drawing on Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, he explains the progression from the openness of a field to the boundaries of a house—a spiritual development culminating in Jacob. The contrast between Jacob and Esau teaches that prayer and religious life require humility, restraint, and commitment to a framework beyond one's immediate desires.

I

The question: Why did Isaac pray in an open field?

A. *The Talmud's criticism*

- **Berakhot 34b:** Someone who prays in an open valley is described as brazen.
- Tosafot ask how this can be reconciled with Isaac's conduct:
  - **Genesis 24:63:** "וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לָשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִפְנוֹת עָרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה גְמַלִּים בָּאִים" (Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; he lifted his eyes and saw that camels were coming.)
- The Talmud interprets Isaac's meditation as **the afternoon prayer**.

B. *Why the question is especially striking*

- Rabbi Shulman identifies the patriarchs with three foundational pillars:
  - **Abraham:** acts of kindness.
  - **Isaac:** divine service, particularly prayer.
  - **Jacob:** Torah.
- How could Isaac, the patriarch particularly associated with divine service, pray in a manner considered inappropriate?

II

Rabbi Tzadok: From mountain to field to house

1:30

A. *A progression across the patriarchs*

- Rabbi Shulman presents Rabbi Tzadok's explanation in **Kedushat Shabbat, essay 1**:
  - Abraham related to the future Temple site as a **mountain**.

  - Isaac related to it as a **field**.
  - Jacob related to it as a **house**.
- These are successive stages in developing humanity's relationship with God.
- The criticism of praying in an open field applies **after Jacob establishes the spiritual model of a house**.
- In Isaac's time, the field was still the appropriate setting for his spiritual work.

B. *What distinguishes a field from a house?*

- A field represents openness and the feeling of being unconstrained.
- That freedom can become a religious attitude in which a person approaches God entirely on personal terms.
- A house represents boundaries: entering an established framework rather than allowing every impulse to determine one's conduct.

C. *Isaac's task*

- Isaac lived within the spiritual stage represented by the field, but his life's work was **restraint and self-control**.
- He worked against unbounded openness and toward the boundaries represented by a house.
- His achievement found expression in Jacob, who embodied that next stage.

III

The open side of creation: Freedom and its dangers

3:30

A. *The world represented by the letter* ה

- Rabbi Shulman introduces the Talmud's interpretation of:
  - **Isaiah 26:4:** "בִּטְחוּ בַה' עֲדֵי עַד כִּי בְיָהּ ה' צוּר עוֹלָמִים" (Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord is the eternal Rock.)
- The Talmud reads the divine name's letters as corresponding to two worlds:
  - **י:** the World to Come.
  - **ה:** this world.

B. *Why the letter* ה *represents this world*

- Its shape resembles an open-sided structure.
- Rabbi Shulman illustrates this through the minimum walls of a sukkah:
  - Two complete walls and part of a third.
  - An entirely open remaining side.
- That open side represents the possibility of choosing sin and falling away.

C. *Self-restraint answers the danger of openness*

- Creation leaves room for human freedom; a person can misuse that freedom.
- Isaac's service was to develop the restraint that counters this danger.
- His goal was not merely to remain in the field, but to make possible the spiritual security of a house.

IV

Jacob and Esau: Two responses to the field

6:01

A. *The Torah's contrasting descriptions*

- **Genesis 25:27:** "וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה וְיַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים" (The boys grew up: Esau became a man skilled in hunting, a man of the field, while Jacob was a wholesome man, dwelling in tents.)
- **Esau remains a man of the field:** unrestrained and driven by what he wants.
- **Jacob dwells in tents:** living within the framework established by his fathers.

B. *Even seeking a blessing can remain self-centered*

- Rabbi Shulman points to Esau's demand for a blessing.
- Wanting a blessing does not itself demonstrate submission to God.
- Esau focuses on his immediate desire without adequately considering what he is sacrificing spiritually or eternally.
- This is the underlying brazenness associated with an unbounded religious approach.

C. *Jacob's framework enables continuity*

- Jacob's integrity and restraint create a lasting spiritual household.
- All his children remain part of the Jewish people.
- The "house" protects and sustains what unrestrained openness cannot.

V

Practical lessons: Prayer, humility, and Jewish identity

7:33

A. *Prayer means entering before the King*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that praying inside expresses the proper posture before God:
  - **Intimacy**, rather than distance.
  - **Humility and submission**, rather than entitlement.
  - A **contrite heart** and awareness that we are here to serve Him.
- The setting reinforces that prayer is not simply an expression of whatever a person wants.

B. *We are the children of Israel*

- Our identity follows Jacob's model of a bounded spiritual life.
- This means modesty and restraint—not pursuing every desire of the heart.
- Such boundaries protect against the brazenness that can lead a person astray.

C. *Isaac's restraint makes Jacob's Torah possible*

- Isaac's work of self-control remains part of our spiritual inheritance.
- Within the framework he helped establish, Jacob developed his life of Torah study.
- Restraint is therefore not merely restrictive: it creates the setting in which Torah can flourish.

VI

In Summary

- **Isaac's prayer in the field was appropriate to his stage of spiritual history; Jacob later established the model of the house.**
- **The open side of creation represents freedom, including the danger of misusing it; Isaac's service cultivated the restraint needed to meet that challenge.**
- **Jacob and Esau embody opposing approaches: life within an inherited spiritual framework versus pursuit of immediate personal desire.**
- **Prayer and Jewish life require humility and boundaries, which protect our relationship with God and make sustained Torah study possible.**