

# Parsha Ponders

Toldos | Nov 17, 2023 | 3 Kislev 5784

## *Fetal movements*<sup>1</sup>

ויתרצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם-כן למה זה אנכי ותלך לדרש את-יְקוֹק

The babies jostled within [Rivka]. She said: “If so, why did I pray for children?” [So] she went to seek [guidance] from Hashem<sup>2</sup>

When Rivka was expecting twins, Yaakov and Eisav, she had a difficult time. No, not the usual struggles of pregnancy. Our Sages tell us<sup>3</sup> that when Rivka would stand near shuls and study halls<sup>4</sup>, Yaakov would try to “run”<sup>5</sup> out of her womb towards them. When Rivka would pass by houses of idol worship<sup>6</sup>, Eisav would try to “run” out of her womb towards them. There are many difficulties with this *Midrash*. How could Yaakov and Eisav, fetuses in the womb, have a sense of good and evil? How could Yaakov be drawn to good, and Eisav drawn to evil?

Regarding the evil inclination, we are taught<sup>7</sup> about an interesting debate between Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi (Rebbe), the leader of the Jewish People, and Antoninus<sup>8</sup>, the Emperor of Rome. Antoninus asked Rebbe when does the evil inclination rule over a person: when the baby is formed, or when the baby is born? Rebbe answered from the moment the baby is formed. Antoninus responded that if that were so, he would kick at his mother until he is freed<sup>9</sup>! Rather, it must be from when the baby is born. Rebbe conceded and brought a verse as support: “Sin crouches at the door”<sup>10</sup>. We see from the conclusion of this teaching that the evil inclination comes only once a person is born. How then could Eisav have been driven towards places of idol worship<sup>11</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the Chida's Penei Dovid parshas Toldos § 3

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 25:22 with Rashi

<sup>3</sup> Bereishis Rabbah 63:6, brought by Rashi *loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Yefeh Toar *ad loc.*, brought by Eitz Yosef *ad. loc.* says that this can't be literal, as why would there be shuls and study halls in those days? He says it means meeting places for *mitzvos* and advice, and places where Eiver's teachings would be shared. Cf. Maharzu *ad. loc.*

<sup>5</sup> Rashi *loc. cit.* He says ויתרצו is understood to be a language of ריצה, running. However, the *Midrash* as we have it says Yaakov would מפרכס, spasm to escape, whereas Eisav it says רץ ומפרכס. This difference in language is noted by Yefeh Toar *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> One wonders why Rivka would walk by houses of idol worship. Maharzu *ad. loc.* notes that by the shuls and study halls it says “stands”, to show that Rivka would frequent those establishments. This was unlike the houses of idol worship, where she would pass by quickly. Seemingly she had no other option but to pass by them

<sup>7</sup> Sanhedrin 91b

<sup>8</sup> It's unclear who this refers to. Some of the possibilities are Antoninus Pius (Emperor for 138-161 CE), Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (161-180 CE), or Caracalla (198-217 CE, also known as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus)

<sup>9</sup> Iyun Yaakov *ad. loc.* notes that since the baby learns Torah from an Angel in the womb (Niddah 30b), and the Torah is an elixir against the evil inclination (Kiddushin 30b), there's no reason why Rebbe can't be correct

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 4:7

<sup>11</sup> Rabbeinu Yeshaya to Genesis *loc. cit.* (by the author of Tosafos Rid); Imrei Noam *ad. loc.* (by Rav Yaakov Dilshkes); Maharsha *ad. loc.*; Be'er Sheva *ad. loc.* All of these sources and their answers were brought by the Chida *loc. cit.*, as will be presented below. Iyun Yaakov *loc. cit.* notes that according to his approach, there's no question, as Eisav had the evil inclination once he was formed. Even though the Torah is an elixir, Eisav already had thrown off the yoke of Torah (see Proverbs 20:11). Yefeh Toar *loc. cit.* also connects this *Midrash* to the *gemarra* in Niddah *loc. cit.* about learning in the womb, but solely to show that Yaakov and Eisav had the intelligence to discern between good and evil. Regarding the inclination towards evil, he suggests that Yaakov and Eisav's “Mazel” (guardian Angel) saw the future of what they will be like and inspired them (see Megillah 3a for a precedent of a person being affected by their *Mazel*, which sees something they don't). Eitz Yosef to Ein Yaakov brings from

A further question against this is from a story told by our Sages. In the days of our Sages, it was understood that if a pregnant woman smelled something delicious, it was life threatening for her not to partake of it. Once on Yom Kippur, a woman smelled something and needed to eat. The Rabbis whispered in her ear that it was Yom Kippur, and her craving went away. The same thing happened to another woman, but when they whispered to her, the craving didn't cease. The Rabbis recited upon her the verse: "The wicked are defiant from the womb"<sup>12</sup>.

The implication from this story is that since the baby didn't care it was Yom Kippur, her craving didn't go away. How could this be, if the evil inclination doesn't enter a person until they are born<sup>13</sup>? Going back to Yaakov, we can ask a similar question regarding his behavior. Our Sages tell us<sup>14</sup> that the inclination for good comes into a person only when they become of age. If Yaakov didn't have an inclination for good, why would he then run towards shuls and study halls<sup>15</sup>?

Some suggest<sup>16</sup> that perhaps this phenomenon with Yaakov and Eisav was just a miracle. However, this doesn't address the issue with the pregnant woman and her craving. As well, there are other teachings of our Sages where a miracle was clearly not at work<sup>17</sup>. Others suggest<sup>18</sup> another approach: there are two stages. First there's the inclination of the intellect, and then there's the inclination that comes out in action.

Our Sages teach us<sup>19</sup> that an Angel comes to the womb and teaches the baby Torah. We see that there's some form of intellect for a fetus. The fetus then has the choice to cling to good or to run towards evil. Yaakov chose to cling to good and would get excited at the prospect of shuls and study halls. Eisav was the same but in the opposite direction, running towards idol worship. It's only once the baby is born, when they forget all the Torah that they were taught<sup>20</sup>, that the inclination can now come out in action. First the inclination for evil comes, and only later the inclination for good<sup>21</sup>.

However, the prolific Rav Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai, known as the Chida, is not a fan of this approach. He finds it to be a bit of a stretch. First he addresses the issue of the inclination towards good. He notes that

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Ramat Shmuel another possible resolution. When the *gemarra* says the evil inclination comes when the baby is born, it literally said "when it leaves". Perhaps the intent is once the baby is viable for birth, i.e. able to leave, which Eisav was at that point. See Gur Aryeh *ad. loc.* for another resolution

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 58:4

<sup>13</sup> Maharsha and Chida *loc. cit.*; Tosefes Yom HaKippurim to Yoma 83a s.v. קרי עליה זורו, by Maharam ibn Chaviv.

The Maharsha answers that perhaps through the mother the evil inclination has sway over the baby, but the baby itself doesn't have the evil inclination. The Maharsha admits that this doesn't answer for Eisav

<sup>14</sup> See Avos D'Rabbi Nosson 16:2 and Zohar I parshas Vayeishev p. 179a

<sup>15</sup> This was one of my questions. All the sources the Chida brought only ask about Eisav, but he did bring from Ahavas Chessed to Avos D'Rabbi Nosson *ad. loc.* (by Rav Avraham Weitmund) an inquiry of why didn't these sources address Yaakov

<sup>16</sup> Imrei Noam *loc. cit.* Ahavas Chessed *loc. cit.* says obviously Yaakov was a miracle, so for sure Eisav was as well

<sup>17</sup> See Chida *loc. cit.* Yefeh Toar *loc. cit.* doesn't like this answer, as it begs the question why Hashem would perform such a miracle. He also asks from Yoma *loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Be'er Sheva *loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Niddah *loc. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> This approach is somewhat similar to that of the Iyun Yaakov *loc. cit.*

we actually have sources<sup>22</sup> which directly address how the process unfolds. In fact, a baby *does* have an inclination towards good. It's only once they're born, when the inclination towards evil takes hold, that their inclination towards good is driven out. Once they intellectually mature and come of age, their inclination towards good returns<sup>23</sup>. Yaakov's behavior in the womb then is to be expected.

Regarding Eisav and the evil inclination, the Chida favors the following explanation<sup>24</sup>: Indeed, the evil inclination is given to a fetus in the womb. However, it doesn't have full power over a person. Only once the baby is born does it have full rein. This in fact implicit in the debate between Rebbe and Antoninus. The question posed is when does the evil inclination *rule* over a person<sup>25</sup>. It may happen only when they're born, but the inclination is in fact there in the womb<sup>26</sup>. Eisav took hold of his evil inclination and went with it full steam, leaping towards houses of idol worship, while still in the womb<sup>27 28</sup>.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>22</sup> The Chida discovered that this appears explicitly in Piskei Tosafos to Nedarim § 62. The Piskei Tosafos is a work which summarizes the bottom line ruling of Tosafos throughout Shas. It's unclear who wrote this work. See Shem HaGedolim II § תוס' פסקי תוס', by the Chida, who brings those who suggest it was written by the Rosh or the Tur, but he questions the source for this claim. Here, in Penei Dovid, he refers to the Piskei Tosafos as Tosafos, but it could be because he assumes this comment is based on one of Tosafos themselves. However, we have no such Tosafos. The Chida in Shem HaGedolim notes that there are different versions of Tosafos, and the Piskei Tosafos wasn't necessarily written on the same version we have printed in our gemarros. In Penei Dovid he assumes this comment of Piskei Tosafos is based on the gemarra in Nedarim 32b

<sup>23</sup> The Chida says the Be'er Sheva must have not been aware of this source, for it refutes his proof from learning Torah in the womb. The same can be said for the Iyun Ya'akov

<sup>24</sup> From the Tosefes Yom HaKippurim *loc. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> See Toras Chaim *ad. loc.*, who also notes this change in language

<sup>26</sup> The Chida adds that this works nicely with the verse used by Rebbe as a support for Antoninus: לפתח חטאת רובץ. The word חטאת is feminine, yet the word רובץ is masculine. The idea being that only once the baby exits at the פתח is the evil inclination at its full strength

<sup>27</sup> The Chida uses all of the above to present an exposition based on the understanding of the Kabbalists that Rebbe and Antoninus were reincarnations of Yaakov and Eisav. It fits nicely then that they would discuss the influence of the evil inclination, since they recalled their experiences in the womb in their prior life

<sup>28</sup> The Chida concludes by noting that the question from Eisav was already asked by the Sefer Chassidim § 1037. This is a source which none of the above authorities noticed. The Sefer Chassidim says that those who already had their evil inclination in the womb were from the 974 generations that intended to be created but then were scattered throughout the generations (see Chagigah 13b and Bereishis Rabbah 28:4). These souls are inherently rebellious and had their evil inclination from the onset. See also Reuven Margolios' Nitzotzei Zohar to Zohar *loc. cit.* § 1, who brings almost all the same sources as the Chida. See also his Margalios HaYam *ad. loc.* § 8, for more sources