

TOLDOS (GENESIS 25:19-28:9)

An 'FFB' Marries a 'BT'

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

(Every generation creates its own lexicon of relevant terms and phrases. Events of recent years have added a few new terms to the Jewish vocabulary. At a rate that is perhaps unparalleled in Jewish history, we are seeing non-observant Jews returning to their roots. There are special Yeshivas that are designed to assist "late starters" in reaching their goals for Jewish scholarship. This concept is often referred to as the "Baal Teshuva Movement." A Baal Teshuva, now commonly known as a "BT," a "returnee," is a person from a nonreligious background who has chosen to become religious. So, if we have now given a special designation to those religious people who weren't always religious, what do we call everyone else? That need has been now met with another new expression -- the "FFB" -- Frum ["religious" in Yiddish] From Birth!)

They were an unusual couple. Their backgrounds could not have been more different. She was a "BT." He was an "FFB."

His father was a respected scholar. Her father was known to his neighbors as a degenerate. He had attended the finest Yeshiva. She was self-taught. In his youth, he had been insulated from the evils of the outside world. She had *lived* in the outside world.

His family welcomed her. Her family wasn't thrilled about the marriage. She had told them that she was marrying him whether they liked it or not.

Could this marriage work?

She had one thing going for her. She had decided to be *Frum*, no matter what. She had made the uncompromising decision to live as a religious Jew.

Her name was Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel. He was Isaac, son of Abraham.

The young couple began their life's journey, looking forward to building a Torah home. They wanted to raise children who would follow the teachings of Abraham and Sarah. There was one problem. Rebecca was barren; there were no children for them to mold into Torah personalities.

They prayed to G-d for a child. Isaac and Rebecca stood in their tent and begged G-d to give them the opportunity to build a family. He prayed for a child. She prayed for a child. G-d accepted the prayers of one of them, and allowed Rebecca to conceive.

Whose prayers did He accept, his or hers? The BT or the FFB? Did G-d listen to the prayers of the *Tzaddik ben Tzaddik*, the righteous child of a righteous parent? Or did He pay closer attention to the *Tzaddik ben Rasha*, the righteous child of a wicked person? Who had worked harder to achieve spiritual greatness? Isaac, who had been born and raised on Kosher food and Kosher values? Or Rebecca, who had pulled herself away from the decadent values of her family and had embraced a Torah lifestyle? Who was more deserving of a Heavenly response to their prayers?

You may be surprised by the answer: . . . and G-d answered **him**, and his wife Rebecca conceived. (Genesis, 25:21)

The Talmud (Yevamos, 64a) explains that the prayers of a *Tzaddik ben Tzaddik*, the righteous child of a righteous parent, carry more weight than those of a *Tzaddik ben Rasha*, the righteous child of a wicked person. Just the opposite of what one might have thought.

Why should that be? Doesn't G-d reward according to effort? Shouldn't Rebecca get more credit than Isaac? Isaac grew up in a Torah home; he knew what was expected of him. It was easy for him to be religious. Rebecca, on the other hand, had to struggle to release herself from the bonds of negative influence. Hadn't she worked much harder to achieve her goals?

The answer is that being a *Tzaddik ben Tzaddik* is not as easy as it seems.

I used to attend services in a Yeshiva for *Baalei Teshuva*. I met fellows who, at the age of twenty-five, decided that spending Friday nights in the bar was not giving meaning to their lives. They have walked away from their old lives and have immersed themselves into Torah study. And they do it with a thirst for knowledge. Every new *Halachah* (law), every new Torah concept, is a new and exciting revelation. Every blessing and prayer in broken Hebrew is an uplifting spiritual experience. It is stimulating and it is exhilarating. It is *new*!!

Contrast this with the student who has been in Yeshiva all his life. He knows about all the complex rules of Shabbos and Kosher laws. He can tell you what blessing to say when you eat ice cream and when you hear thunder. He knows how to check the house for *Chometz* before Passover and whether his family custom is to wear *Tefillin* on *Chol Hamoed*. He knows all the prayers by heart and can recite the Grace after Meals while driving around a traffic jam. For those who have been raised in the religious community, religious observance can sometimes become rote.

Isaac's greatness as a *Tzaddik ben Tzaddik* was not because he already knew it all. His greatness is that he was able to be a *Tzaddik* IN SPITE OF THE FACT that he already knew it all! He was able to serve G-d with the eager excitement of a newcomer to Judaism.

Every evening and morning we read the words of the Shema: *Let these words that I command you **today** be on your hearts.* (Deuteronomy, 6:6) The *Sifri* interprets the word "today" as indicting that "every day you should view these words as new."

Every Mitzvah that we do should uplift us. Every prayer we complete should transform us into a more spiritual person than we were before we began. Every favor we do, every dollar we give to charity, should make us into better people.

Imagine our People standing at Mt. Sinai. They had just received a brand new list of commandments. It was so different; it was so unique. That is how we are supposed to view the Torah every day of our lives. It is not an easy thing to do. That is why Isaac is praised for having been able to do it.

Regardless of whether we are BT's, FFB's, or Soon-to-B's, we should constantly strive to look at Torah and life as a daily opportunity to do something new and special. Do you remember the first time you realized that you love your wife/husband? Do you remember when your child was born? Do you remember when you walked away from that fender-bender that could have been a tragedy? How about the first day on your new job? How about the first day of your *diet*?!

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Savor it. Value it. Enjoy it. Make it count.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2002 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.