Parshas Toldot · 5785

FIRST IN LINE

BEGIN WITH A GRIN

Patient: Doctor! I'm feeling overwhelmed, this is my first operation!

Doctor: Don't worry, it's my first also.

WHO'S ON FIRST?

At the beginning of parshas Toldos, we read of the birth of twins, Eisav and Yaakov. As always, like an endless joke, the Jew is the underdog. Yaakov Avinu, the select of the Avos, is born as Yitzchok and Rivka's second child, while the red Eisav, the wicked one, is the firstborn.

The pessimistic among us will say, "The deeds of the Avos is a sign for the children," and ever since, throughout Jewish history, we always come in second, we are always lagging behind, always arriving too late and too slowly. But, why? Why does the wicked Eisav always come first, while our forefather Yaakov and his descendants, the Jewish people, are destined to be in second place?

To provide some response and shed some light on this existential issue where Eisav is in first place, while Yaakov is in second place, we will begin with the words of the Talmud (Pesachim 5a) and explain them in light of Kabbalah and Chassidus. The Tanna of the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: For the merit of the three "firsts," they were rewarded with the three 'firsts.' These are 1) to eradicate the seed of Eisav; 2) to build the Beis HaMikdash; and 3) the name of Moshiach. To eradicate the seed of Eisav, as it is written (Bereishis 25:25), "And the 'first' came out red, all over like a hairy garment." That is to say, thanks to the observance of three commandments called "first," the balance of global power is about to change. Eisav "the first" is going to lose his birthright, and at the same time, we, the Jewish people, are going to inherit his place and also merit the building of the Mikdash and the coming of Moshiach. What are these three special commandments? And what is their connection to these three future promised events?

Rashi explains that the three commandments called "first" are the resting from work on the holiday of Pesach, the rest on the holiday of Sukkos, and the taking of the lulav, regarding all

of which is mentioned in the verses: “on the first day.” The Maharsha adds his own touch and explains that thanks to the resting from work on Pesach, we will merit the annihilation of Eisav’s descendants; thanks to the observance of the commandment of Sukkos, we will merit the global Sukkah of peace, namely the Third Beis HaMikdash; and thanks to the taking of the lulav and its accompaniments, about which it is said “And you shall rejoice before G-d,” we will merit the name (and coming) of Moshiach, who will “comfort us and make us rejoice as it is said, ‘You have made us rejoice as in the days of our affliction.’”

The connection between the Sukkos and the rebuilding of the Mikdash is clear, and the connection between the taking of the lulav and the coming of Moshiach is well explained, but what is the connection between the “first” of the Pesach holiday and the annihilation and eradication of the descendants of Eisav, who came out “first”?

FIRST PLACE FINISH

The Maharsha further explains that Eisav is the “first” to enslave the people of Israel in the last exile, and on Pesach, we were for the first time in history redeemed from a nation that had enslaved us, Egypt. Therefore, by observing the holiday that symbolizes liberation from servitude, we will merit liberation from the servitude of being an underdog, and we will move to the “first” place instead of the seed of Eisav.

Moreover, “the leaven” symbolizes the forces of the klipah, the evil inclination, as our sages referred to it: “the leaven of the dough,” and by removing the leaven at the beginning of Pesach (“But on the first day, you shall remove leaven from your houses”), we will merit to rid ourselves, once and for all, of the evil inclination and its wicked deeds. In Likutei Levi Yitzchok, the Rebbe’s father explains a deeper aspect of this topic, through which we can answer the question we started with: why are we always in second place, and why is this going to change in the time of the Geula?

First of all, let’s start with a bit of gematria. The words “on the first day” have a gematria of “crown,” and the crown is the first sefira in the world of the sefiros. In light of the above, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok explains that the reason Eisav came out first is because his spiritual root comes from the world of Tohu that preceded the world of Tikkun, the world of our forefather Yaakov. Eisav was born first because he came from a higher spiritual root, he came from the sefira of Kesser, and therefore he was also born ruddy, red-haired in our language (like the writer of these lines) because the color red symbolizes the power of valor, whose spiritual root is higher than the sefira of Chesed, to the extent that it is rooted in the sefira of... Kesser!

So Eisav symbolizes Kesser, and therefore, throughout this final exile, Eisav and his descendants are the “kings” who rule over the rest of the world, including the people of Israel, because whoever wears the crown is the king!

And what will happen during the redemption? And how is it related to Pesach?

On Pesach, “the King of Kings revealed Himself to them (to us) and redeemed them.” What spiritual level does the expression “King of Kings” symbolize? You probably guessed it by now. It refers to the first sefira of Kesser, because only the king (the King of Kings) has a crown! Pesach symbolizes the revelation of the crown of holiness, and by observing this holiday, we receive within us the wonderful holiness of the crown, thereby replacing Eisav’s crown with Yaakov’s crown, replacing the crown of the kelipos and impurity with the crown of holiness.

This is also reflected in another event that happened during Pesach. The Jews left Egypt with great wealth, the great wealth symbolizes the many holy sparks that exist in the nations of the world in general and in Eisav in particular, and by refining ourselves, we receive them, along with the crown they symbolize, and thus we move to the first place, leaving Eisav behind!

TO CONCLUDE WITH A STORY

We will end with a story about how to be the first to reach Gan Eden, a story from the Medrash (Bereishis Rabba 65:22) which is known by the name: “Yakum Ish Tzeroros.” About two hundred years before the destruction, when the Greeks entered Yerushalayim, and took Yossi ben Yoezer, the head of the Sanhedrin, out to be killed by crucifixion. Outside, a man sat on a horse and smiled a big smile. It was Yakum Ish Tzeroros, the Hellenized nephew of Yossi ben Yoezer. He mocked his uncle and said sarcastically: “Well, Uncle, look at the horse that my master put me on, and the horse that your master [G-d] has you ride.”

Yossi ben Yoezer looked at him and said: “Yakum, if it is so for those who transgress His will, all the more so for those who do His will!” If this is the reward for someone who goes against G-d’s will, what is the reward promised to someone who adheres to His principles? The matter entered the heart of Yakum, he went home, and he performed upon himself the four death penalties of the court. At that moment, Yossi ben Yoezer was dozing off and saw his nephew’s bed rising to the heavens. He smiled and said: “In a brief moment, this one preceded me to Gan Eden...”

May we finally be first, for the true and complete Geula!

Good Shabbos!