

And Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivkah, daughter of Besuel the Arami from Paddan Aram, sister of Lavan the Arami (25:20)

Rashi remarks that although Rivkah's background was well-known, the *Torah* repeats it to reinforce its praise of her. She was the daughter of a wicked man and the sister of a wicked man; she was raised in an environment that was wicked. Yet, she was able to maintain herself on a high level of virtue, remaining uninfluenced by her environment. We may question this statement. Is there nothing else about Rivkah that evokes praise for her? In *Parashas Chayei Sarah*, the *Torah* lauds her remarkable sensitivity and her commitment to performing acts of loving-kindness. The *Torah* teaches us that the spiritual emptiness which pervaded the house due to the death of his mother, Sarah *Imeinu*, dissipated when Yitzchak married Rivkah. Are we still to assert that Rivkah's only unique trait was her ability to resist environmental influences?

Horav Zaidel Epstein, Shlita, suggests that *Rashi* is relating in which area Rivkah's remarkable virtues manifested themselves. In other words, her ability to resist the environmental influences is indicative of her unique personality, which catalyzed her acts of *chesed*. Rivkah is distinguished by her ability to overcome the challenge of her surroundings. It is not her virtue--it is her unique personality. This is why Rivkah towers above others.

What is so unique about resisting the effect of one's environment? *Horav* Epstein explains that human nature compels the individual to make every effort to be like his peers. This is a result of the *middah* of *kinah*, the character trait of jealousy. We dress like those in our surrounding environment; we act like them; we are influenced by their ideals and values. We respond in this manner because we have an innate tendency to be envious. Hashem created us with the attribute of *kinah*, so that we should strive to emulate the positive achievements of our peers. "*Kinaas sofrim tarbeh chachmah*," jealousy among scribes increases wisdom. One should seek to become a scholar or a G-d-fearing Jew like his friend. Thus, we can utilize this *middah* to attain a positive effect. In contrast, the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, incites us to employ the character trait of jealousy in a negative manner.

Does man have a guarantee that if he succeeds in attaining a high level of *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, he will not slip back to a lower level? No! The virtue and righteousness we achieve are not inherent. They do not belong to us. Yitzchak *Avinu* was blind and relegated to a sequestered lifestyle at home. There was hope for him. *Chazal* tell us that Yochanan *Kohen Gadol* reigned for eighty years as the epitome of holiness before reverting to become an apostate. Is there any guarantee? No! The outside influence can permeate our psyche to the point that we no longer are in control.

A person about whom we can emphatically assert that he is not inspired by external influences, who is above the pressures and prompting of his environment, is truly a virtuous person. Indeed,

Rivkah had many remarkable qualities, among them her sensitivity towards others. What guaranteed the lasting power of these wonderful attributes? What ensured that these qualities would endure? What proof do we have that they were integral qualities? Her ability to resist and transcend her environment was her most laudatory virtue. Without that, her wonderful qualities were precariously vulnerable to the harsh environment in which she lived.