

“Yaakov settled in the land of his father’s sojourning ...These are the offspring of Yaakov, Yosef”... (37:1-2)

Rashi cites a parable to explain why the *Torah* mentions that Yaakov settled immediately after mentioning Eisav’s chiefs. He compares this to “a certain flax merchant whose camels entered a town laden with flax. The blacksmith wondered, ‘Where can all this flax be stored?’ A clever man who was standing nearby answered him, ‘One spark can go forth from your bellows which will burn it all up.’ Similarly, when Yaakov saw all the powerful chiefs of Eisav (whose names are written above), he wondered, ‘Who would conquer all of them?’ The *Torah* responds, ‘*These are the offspring of Yaakov, Yosef*,’ implying that Yosef is the solution to the problem.” Yosef is considered Eisav’s nemesis, as it says in *Ovadia* 1:18, “*The House of Yaakov will be a fire, and the House of Yosef a flame, and the House of Eisav for straw.*” Fire without a flame does not have an effect over a long distance. Once Yosef – who is compared to a flame – was born, Yaakov trusted in Hashem to protect him from Eisav. What is the meaning of comparing Yosef to a flame? How does this analogy enhance our understanding of Eisav’s challenge to Yaakov?

In their ethical discourses, *Yeshivas Bais Shalom Mordechai*, explains that Eisav symbolizes the *yetzer hara*, evil inclination, who makes use of every form of guile and deception in order to lead people to sin. In order to triumph over the *yetzer hara*, one must be able to see and understand the *yetzer hara*’s malicious intentions prior to his encounter. Once he has “locked horns” with the evil inclination, since he has already permitted him to come close, he has already been ensnared in his net. It then becomes much more difficult to break loose.

Yosef, the flame, had the capacity to peer into the future in order to perceive his enemy. He understood fully well who Eisav was, what he represented and what his malevolent intentions were. Eisav lived by subterfuge. He dressed and acted outwardly like a saint, but, in truth, he was evil incarnate. He asked intricate *halachic* questions; he married a woman at the age of forty, because that is what his father did. He is compared to the pig who spreads out its split hooves, proudly displaying one kosher sign, concealing the fact that it does not have the inner sign, the chewing of cud. The pig is not kosher; neither was Eisav. When one outwardly acts as a saint, however, only a wise and perceptive individual can perceive the hidden intentions, to recognize the future risks that are involved.

Yaakov feared Eisav’s duplicity. He feared his descendants would fall prey to him. When Yosef was born, however, he was calmed. Yaakov recognized that Eisav’s nemesis, the one who could see beyond the individual, who could look right through Eisav’s deception, had been born.

During the encounter between Eisav and Yaakov, Bilhah and Zilpah and their children were the first ones to meet Eisav. They were followed by Leah and her children. Last, Yosef and Rachel came forward. *Rashi* notes that the first three wives went before their children. Yosef, however, preceded his mother. He said, “My mother is very beautiful. Perhaps, Eisav will take notice of her

appearance and want her. I will therefore, stand in front of her and block his vision.” Yosef was able to anticipate what was going on in Eisav’s mind based upon their initial encounter. He knew with whom he was dealing, and he was prepared. His brothers did not take notice of what he had immediately observed. Is it any wonder that he was Eisav’s nemesis?

The ability to comprehend the consequences of one’s actions, the outcome which presently may be viewed as innocuous, but could later result in disaster, is especially significant for parents and educators. All too often, we tend to disregard the improper behavior of our children and students, calling it mischievous and capricious, when in truth it represents a malignant evil that if left unchecked will devastate us later on.

Horav Yosef Chaim, z.l., mi’Bagdad, relates an incredible story whose moral lesson conveys this truth. There was once a thief who was finally caught. According to Arab law, he was condemned to be executed. The condemned man asked to be allowed to speak to his mother once more before his execution. It seems that he had an important message to communicate to her. Permission was granted, and the criminal was taken from his cell to meet his mother. As to be expected, his mother was grief-stricken, bewailing the terrible fate that awaited her son. He went over to her and bent down close to her as if he was about to whisper something in her ear. He did not, however, say a word to her. Instead, he did a most atrocious and fiendish act: he viciously bit off her ear! Everyone was stunned. Imagine, in the last act of his mortal life, he compounded his treachery by mutilating his broken-hearted mother. The criminal, fully aware of everyone’s disgust with him, turned to the people and said, “You should know that she is responsible for my iniquitous behavior. When I was a child, she never rebuked me when I would take things from others. As I grew up and my taking became stealing she once again looked away, making excuses that I was going through a phase, I had too much energy – everything but the truth. Had she been stern with me, I would never have ended up facing the gallows.”

What a terrible criticism with which to charge a parent. Yet, when we stop to think about it, could it be true? We have only to open up a daily newspaper to read of the “mischief” young people are committing today – from stealing to mass murder. For how long are we going to bury our heads in the ground and attribute the cruelty and treachery to childishness and mischief? Someone has to be the “flame,” to have the capacity to see the results of these actions and have the courage to do something about it.

Chazal tell us that Rabbi Yehoshua’s mother placed his crib in the *bais ha’medrash* from the day he was born, so that his ears would become acutely attuned to the sounds of *Torah* study. But in reality, what can an infant hear or understand? Who knows, however, what impression it left for the future? Rabbi Yehoshua attributed his success in life to the fact that he was raised in the *bais ha’medrash*. Obviously, it left some kind of impression on him. His mother represented the “flame” that a parent should exhibit in raising her children. It is so much easier to prevent a tragedy from occurring than to deal with its aftermath. Regrettably, there are still some whose myopic vision and lack of courage dictate that their level of perception be relegated to hindsight.