

Date: 28 Cheshvan 5786 (November 19, 2025)

Torah Portion: Toldot

Topic: Yitzchak's Success

As it is written (Gen. 26:16), “And Abimelech said to Yitzchak, ‘Go away from us; for you are much mightier than we.’” Rather, the Midrash explains that Abimelech’s statement was not merely a recognition of Yitzchak’s might but a protest against his enrichment at the Philistines’ expense: “Go away from us, for you have been enriched by us!” Abimelech was essentially saying to Yitzchak, “All those riches with which you enriched yourself—did they not accrue to you from us?” That is to say, “at our expense, for your wealth was derived from local resources. Had you not been here, we would have utilized them and accumulated the wealth that you acquired in our stead.” Previously, before your arrival in Gerar, you possessed but a single flock; now you have many.

The commentators explain that the basic understanding of *עָצַמְתָּ מִמֶּנּוּ* (*atzamta mimennu*) is “you have become mightier than we,” in a comparative sense. However, the Midrash reinterprets the phrase as “you have become mightier *from* us,” emphasizing causality rather than comparison. The *Ohel Yaakov* elaborates on this interpretive divergence, suggesting that there are two types of success: one that arises from a slow, natural progression, and another that appears as a miraculous and abrupt ascent. The difference is not only in perception but in its sociological implications—gradual success invites envy and appropriation, as others believe they could have achieved the same had they made similar efforts. Meteoric success, on the other hand, is often dismissed as a result of divine favor or luck, making it less likely to provoke jealousy.

The Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 91a provides an analogous principle when discussing disputes over perceived divine favor. There, Rabban Gamliel asserts that material success in this world does not necessarily correlate with merit, as the righteous may suffer while the wicked may prosper. This Talmudic insight parallels the Philistines’ initial belief that Yitzchak’s wealth was a function of circumstance—i.e., the land—rather than personal or divine merit. Only after his continued prosperity post-expulsion did they come to recognize its metaphysical source.

The Zohar (I:137b) offers a deeper mystical dimension to this episode, interpreting Yitzchak’s growth as a manifestation of divine *gevurah* (strength) channeling into the physical world. According to the Zohar, Yitzchak represents the attribute of strict justice, yet paradoxically, his material success signifies an act of divine mercy in this world. The Philistines’ inability to comprehend this dichotomy reflects their limited spiritual perception, mistaking external material conditions for the true source of blessing. Thus, their initial reaction—envy and expulsion—is rooted in spiritual blindness, while their eventual approach to Yitzchak indicates a dawning recognition of divine providence beyond human control.

Midrash *Tanchuma* (Toldot 5) adds that the Philistines’ request to form a covenant with Yitzchak was not merely political or economic but existential. They saw in Yitzchak a vessel of divine presence, a continuation of the covenantal promise made to Avraham. Their desire to establish a treaty was an attempt to attach themselves to this sanctity, albeit retroactively. In this light, the peace treaty is not only a cessation of hostilities but an act of submission, an acknowledgment that Yitzchak’s success was not the result of exploitation but of divine selection.

This transformation is confirmed in the subsequent verses (Gen. 26:27–28), where Yitzchak questions Abimelech’s motives—“Why have you come to me ... you drove me away from you!”—and they reply, “We have indeed seen that YHWH has been with you.” Their statement marks a theological shift: no longer attributing Yitzchak’s success to local advantage, they now see it as divinely ordained. This recognition negates their prior envy and leads to reconciliation. As Rashi notes *ad locum*, their change of heart is a rare biblical example of enemies conceding not only defeat but error, driven by an encounter with undeniable providence.

Moreover, the *Me’am Lo’ez* (on Gen. 26:13–14) observes that the Philistines’ envy was ignited not solely by material accumulation, but by Yitzchak’s spiritual influence on the local population. His ethical conduct and unwavering faith served as a rebuke to their hedonism, making his presence a moral threat as much as an economic one. Hence, their actions were as much a rejection of spiritual contrast as of material imbalance.

In sum, this episode encapsulates a recurring biblical motif: the tension between covenantal blessing and external misunderstanding. Yitzchak's experience in Gerar mirrors the broader historical dynamics faced by Yisrael—prosperity leading to suspicion, exile followed by vindication. By examining this narrative through the lenses of Midrash, Talmud, and Zohar, we uncover a multilayered understanding that transcends mere historical reportage, revealing enduring truths about divine providence, human envy, and the nature of spiritual greatness.

Shalom.