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Musings on Mortality

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1.

THE DAY OF MY DEATH

On the words,¹ “I do not know the day of my death” (in our *parshah*), Rashi comments:²

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha said: When a person approaches his parents’ age of death, he should worry {that he might die} five years beforehand and five years afterwards, and Yitzchak was 123 years old. He said, “Perhaps I will reach {only} my mother’s age of death, who died at 127, and I am within five years of her age {of death}.” Therefore, {Yitzchak said} “‘I do not know the day of my death’ — it might be in proximity to my mother’s age {of death}, or it might be in proximity to my father’s age {of death}.”

We need to clarify:

- a) Why does Rashi seek an explanation for Yitzchak’s statement, “I do not know the day of my death,” when Yitzchak **himself** gave the reason earlier {in this passage}: “He said, ‘See now, I have grown old’” (and therefore, “I do not know the day of my death”)?
- b) Why does Rashi include the name of this teaching’s author? What about this explanation is unclear that is clarified by knowing that this interpretation was given by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha?³

¹ *Bereishis*, 27:2.

² Quoted from *Bereishis Rabbah*, sec. 65, par. 12.

³ {The Rebbe explained that whenever Rashi includes the name of a teaching’s author, he does so to clarify something in the verse or in his commentary.}

2.

FOUR OPTIONS

The explanation: In the previous *parshah*, the Torah says,⁴ “Hashem blessed Yitzchak,” and Rashi remarks:

Avraham was afraid to bless Yitzchak because he foresaw Esav coming forth from him. Avraham reasoned, ‘Let the Master of blessings come and bless whomever He pleases.’ So the Holy One came and blessed Yitzchak.

This being the case, the following question arises regarding our verse: Since Yitzchak was blessed by Hashem Himself, from the **Master of blessings**, it certainly included a blessing for long life. So at 123, Yitzchak had no cause to wonder about the day of his death. The sure evidence of this was that both Avraham and Sarah, who also were blessed by Hashem, lived longer than 123 years.

Rashi, therefore, says that Yitzchak’s concern stemmed from him reaching an age that was five years prior to his mother’s age at her passing. So, when he said “I have **grown old**,” he didn’t mean old age in general, but a specific age connected to “his mother’s age {at her passing}.”

But this can’t be right: How does this rule make sense considering that Yitzchak, in the end, lived 180 years,⁵ far longer than five years “within... the age” of his mother {at her passing}? Rashi anticipates this question and says that Yitzchak’s concern about his age was multifaceted: He was worried that his lifespan might be five years **shorter** or five years **longer** than his parents’ lifespan, and that the term *parents*, אבותיו {lit. “fathers”}, could either mean his mother’s lifespan or his father’s. Since Yitzchak lived 180 years, it turned out that his lifespan was five years **longer** than his father’s.⁶

⁴ Bereishis 25:11.

⁵ Bereishis 35:28.

⁶ {Avraham passed away at 175.}

3.

WHERE IS HASHEM'S BLESSING?

Seemingly, even after Rashi's explanation, a difficulty remains: Hashem's blessing to Yitzchak certainly augmented the goodness that Yitzchak experienced in all the particular aspects of his life. And of course, the blessing would have extended his actual lifespan, too — so that he lived longer than he would have naturally. But if people **commonly** died close to their parents' age of death, Hashem's blessing to Yitzchak certainly would have lengthened his life **further** than just reaching the age of his parents' age of death. This leads to the question:

- a) Why did Yitzchak not live longer than 180 years? If this was the number of years that he could have expected to live naturally, how did Hashem's blessing contribute to his longevity?

- b) The same question can be asked about why, already at an age of 123, Yitzchak said, "I do not know the day of my death": Since this was the **minimum** number of years he should have naturally lived (five years **less** than the shortest age of his parents' age), and Hashem's blessing certainly **supplemented** some time to those years — why was he already worried, at age 123, that he might soon die?

4.

POTENTIAL AGE

The explanation:

When Avraham was just 100 years old, and Sarah was just 90, they were already considered not just “old,” but “coming on in years”⁷ — they already spent all of their days — all the days allotted to them (and the fact that they ended up living longer was because of **their** specific blessing from Hashem).

Accordingly, we can assume that naturally, without Hashem’s blessing, at 105, Yitzchak would have already reached **the** oldest age expected based on “his parents’ age {of death}”: Five more years than the allotted age (minus the blessing) of his father (since “his parents’ age {of death}” refers to their allotted time — without considering the blessing of the Master of blessings).

Hence, both in actuality and according to Yitzchak’s understanding, Hashem’s blessing had added substantially to Yitzchak’s years. In fact, Hashem’s blessing to Yitzchak had added the **same** number of years to Yitzchak’s life as Hashem’s blessing to Avraham added to Avraham’s life:

Ultimately, Yitzchak lived 180 years — so Hashem’s blessing added 75 years on top of the maximum 105 he could have expected to live (five more years than his father’s allotted 100 years). This turned out to be the same number of years that Hashem’s blessing added to his father Avraham, who lived for 175 years: 75 more years than the allotted 100, as discussed above.

This was also Yitzchak’s assumption in his concern that perhaps his number of years would be five years fewer than “my mother’s age.” His calculation was as follows: Hashem’s blessing already added for him the number of years that the blessing added for his mother: Sarah’s allotted life expectancy was 90, and with Hashem’s blessing, she ended up living for 127 years — 37 years longer. So Yitzchak’s potential years (in his estimation, without the

⁷ *Bereishis* 18:11.

blessing) would have been a mere 85 years (five years fewer than his mother). And just as it was for his mother, the blessing would have added 37 more years to his life. Consequently, he began worrying after his 122nd year — in his 123rd year.⁸

5.

YITZCHAK'S LOST YEARS

However, a difficulty remains: Rashi wrote earlier that Avraham passed away five years **before** his allotted time on account of **Hashem's** second blessing to him:⁹ “You will come... in a good old age.” It was this second blessing that prevented Avraham from witnessing {his grandson} Esav adopt a wayward lifestyle. Since, owing to Hashem's first blessing, Avraham should have lived 180 years, we must say that Yitzchak, who also received this blessing, should have granted five **more** years than his father's allotted time of 180 years, and Yitzchak should have lived to the age of 185.

The answer to this is alluded to in Rashi's addition, “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha said”:

The Gemara¹⁰ discusses answers from various *Tannaim*¹¹ on the question, “How did you merit longevity?” Each *Tanna* notes **several** items {in Jewish observance} concerning which they were especially scrupulous, resulting in their meriting longevity. This question (“How did you merit longevity?”) was also posed to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha. He responded: “In all my days, I never looked at the image of a wicked man.” He associated his longevity with only one strict observance¹² — that he was always careful not to look at the image of a wicked person.

⁸ {37 years after he turned 85.}

⁹ *Bereishis* 15:15.

¹⁰ *Megillah* 27b ff.

¹¹ {Sages of the Mishnah.}

¹² {As opposed to the others who offered several reasons.}

This implies that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha was of the opinion that being careful not to look at the face of a wicked person is equivalent to several stringencies that promote longevity. And from the positive, we can infer the negative: When a person *does* look at the face of a wicked person, it detracts from his longevity.

It is now understood why Yitzchak lived only for 180 years: He had **not** refrained from looking at Esav. Although Yitzchak hadn't realized that Esav was wicked, simply looking at Esav deducted from the 185 years that Yitzchak was supposed to live in order to be **within** (five years of) his father's lifespan. Hashem's blessing accomplished that his lifespan was extended so that it would be comparable to his father's.

6.

YITZCHAK'S LOST YEARS

Rashi's commentary also includes "the wine¹³ of Torah":¹⁴

Yitzchak's fear that he would live five years less than his "mother's age" — the lowest, natural possibility (moreover, he considered only the 127 years that Sarah had actually lived, ignoring the fact that she was meant to live longer if she hadn't heard news of the *Akeidah*, when "her soul flew out")¹⁵ — was because of a deeper reason: Yitzchak was on the same spiritual plane as the vector of *gevurah*.¹⁶ Therefore, he looked at and evaluated everything from the perspective of the attribute of *gevurah*.

This was Yitzchak's behavior in relation to **himself**. However, when he blessed **someone else**, his blessing reflected the highest level of the extreme

¹³ {Deeper, mystical ideas in Torah.}

¹⁴ *HaYom Yom*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Rashi on *Bereishis* 23:2 {"The account of Sarah's demise was juxtaposed to the binding of Yitzchak because of the news of the 'binding' — that her son was prepared for slaughter and was almost slaughtered — her soul flew out of her, and she died."}

¹⁶ {Lit., "might"; the second of the seven Divine attributes, associated with the restraint of Divine revelation and restricting the effusion of Divine light to lower levels of existence.}

opposite of (*gevurah* and) constriction: It included both matters of “heaven” and of “earth.” And of these heavenly and earthly matters, his blessings focused specifically on “the **dew** of the heavens and the **fatness** of the earth”¹⁷ — blessings even more sublime than Yaakov’s blessings to his sons, and Moshe’s blessings to the Jewish people.

Yitzchak is the forefather of every Jew and so we have inherited some of his qualities. Therefore, his way of blessing serves as a lesson pertinent to every Jew’s *avodah*:¹⁸ Even when a Jew conducts himself according to strict standards {in areas of Jewish law}, exemplifying the mode of *gevurah*, this strictness should be directed only to himself. In contrast, when engaging with another Jew, the other person must be treated with *chesed*.¹⁹ One must relate to him positively and shower him with an abundance of good, with no constraints or limitations, including, too, the broadest measure of “the dew of the heavens” and “the fatness of the earth.”

— From talks given on Shabbos *parshas Toldos* and *parshas Vayishlach*, 5728 (1967)

¹⁷ *Bereishis* 27:28 {the blessing Yitzchak gave his son Yaakov}; see *Torah Or*, s.v., “*re’eh reiach beni*” {which explains the deeper meaning of these blessings}.

¹⁸ *Torah Or*, beg. of “*Va’eira*.”

¹⁹ {Lit., “kindness” or “grace”; refers to the Divine attribute that parallels the above human qualities. Thus, it is associated with the effusion of G-dly light and energy to lower levels of existence.}