In an earlier *Covenant and Conversation* I quoted the Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 1816-1893, dean of the yeshiva in Volozhin), who made the sharp observation that Isaac and Rebecca seem not to have communicated closely. Rebecca’s “relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca” (Commentary to Gen. 24: 65).

The Netziv senses this distance from the very first moment when Rebecca saw Isaac “meditating in the field” at which point she “covered herself with a veil.” He comments, “She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind.”

Their relationship, suggests Netziv, was never casual, intimate. The result was, at a series of critical moments, a failure of communication. It seems likely that Rebecca never informed Isaac of the oracle she had before the twins, Esau and Jacob, were born, in which God told her “the elder will serve the younger.” That apparently is one reason she loved Jacob rather than Esau, knowing that he was the one chosen by God. If Isaac knew this, why did he favour Esau? Therefore he probably did not know, because Rebecca had not told him.

That is why, many years later, when she heard that Isaac was about to bless Esau she was forced into a plan of deception: she told Jacob to pretend he was Esau. Why did she not simply tell Isaac that it was Jacob who was to be blessed? Because that would have forced her to admit that she had kept her husband in ignorance about the prophecy all the years the children were growing up.
Had she spoken to Isaac on the day of the blessing, Isaac might have said something that would have changed the entire course of their, and their children’s, lives. I imagine Isaac saying this: ‘Of course I know that it will be Jacob not Esau who will continue the covenant. But I have two quite different blessings in mind, one for each of our sons. I will give Esau a blessing of wealth and power: “May God give you the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth ... May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you” (Gen. 27: 28-29). I will give Jacob the blessing God gave Abraham and me, the blessing of children and the promised land: “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham” (Gen. 28: 3-4)’

Isaac never did intend to give the blessing of the covenant to Esau. He intended to give each child the blessing that suited them. The entire deceit planned by Rebecca and carried out by Jacob was never necessary in the first place. Why did Rebecca not understand this? Because she and her husband did not communicate.

Now let us count the consequences. Isaac, old and blind, felt betrayed by Jacob. He “trembled violently” when he realised what had happened, and said to Esau, “Your brother came deceitfully.” Esau likewise felt betrayed and felt such violent hatred toward Jacob that he vowed to kill him. Rebecca was forced to send Jacob into exile, thus depriving herself for more than two decades of the company of the son she loved. As for Jacob, the consequences of the deceit lasted a lifetime, resulting in strife between his wives, and between his children. “Few and evil have been the days of my life,” he said as an old man to Pharaoh. Four lives scarred by one act which was not even necessary in the first place since Isaac did in fact give Jacob “the blessing of Abraham” without any deception, knowing him to be Jacob not Esau.

Such is us the human price we pay for a failure to communicate. The Torah is exceptionally candid about such matters, which is what makes it so powerful a guide to life: real life, among real people with real problems. Communication matters. In the beginning God created the natural world with words: “And God said: Let there be.” We create the social world with words. The Targum translated the phrase in Genesis 2, “And man became a living soul” as “and man became a speaking soul.” For us, speech is life. Life is relationship. And human relationships only exist because we can speak. We can tell other people our hopes, our fears, our feelings and thoughts.

That is why any leader – from a parent to a CEO – must set as his or her task good, strong, honest, open communication. That is what makes families, teams and corporate cultures healthy. Everyone must know what their overall aims are as a team, what their specific role is, what responsibilities they carry, and what values and behaviours they are expected to “There is a human price when we fail to communicate. For us, speech is life. Life is relationship. And human relationships only exist because we can speak.”
exemplify. There must be praise for those who do well, as well as constructive criticism when people do badly – criticism of the act not the person, who must feel respected whatever his or her failures. This last is one of the fundamental differences between a “guilt morality” of which Judaism is the supreme example, and a “shame morality” like that of ancient Greece (guilt makes a clear distinction between the act and the person, which shame does not).

There are times when much depends on clear communication. It is not to much to say that there was a moment at which the fate of the world depended on it. It happened during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war. At the height of the crisis, as described by Robert McNamara in his film, The Fog of War, John F. Kennedy received two messages from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. One was conciliatory, the other far more hawkish. Most of Kennedy’s advisers believed that the second represented Khrushchev’s real views and should be taken seriously.

However one man, Llewellyn Thompson Jr., had been American ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 and had come to know the Russian president well. He had even spent a period of time living with Khrushchev and his wife. He told Kennedy that the conciliatory message sounded like Khrushchev’s own personal view while the hawkish letter, which did not sound like him, had probably been written to appease the Russian generals. Kennedy listened to Thompson, gave Khrushchev a way of backing down without losing face, and the result was that war was averted. It is fearful to imagine what might have happened had Thompson not been there to establish which was and which wasn’t the real act of communication.

Parents and leaders must establish a culture in which honest, open, respectful communication takes place, and that involves not just speaking but also listening. Without it, tragedy is waiting in the wings.

“Honest, open, respectful communication involves not just speaking but also listening.”