

Parshat Toldot

Isaac's Strength

Introduction:

Of all the Avot, the Torah's description of Yitzchak is the most concise. Avraham's life is charted with rich detail. We know of his journey to Egypt, his argument with Lot, his war, his hospitality, his covenants, Hagar Yishmael, the Akeida. We have a full description. Yaakov too; we know of his epic struggle with his brother, his many wives and the complicated events of the birth of their children. We follow his sojourn in Aram, and Lavan's trickery, we see his favoritism of Joseph, his descent to Egypt and his grand funeral. Abraham's story spans 14 Chapters, Yaakov spans 25, and Yitzchak spans maybe 6 chapters.

But it is not just the quantity that is lacking with Yitzchak, it is the quality and tone of these stories. The stories that do describe Yitzchak frequently feature Yitzchak as a silent secondary character. In the Akeida, certainly a significant moment in Isaac's life, it is Avraham who is being tested; Yitzchak is merely the sacrifice.

The story of the betrothal of Rivka (Rebecca) is a further case in point. In Tanakh we frequently have repetitive "type scenes" in which we may compare multiple instances of a repeated story, and observe the similarities and differences. An example would be Abraham at the entrance to his tent, greeting guests and extending hospitality, and then its corollary – Lot at the gate of Sedom greeting guests and extending a meal and a bed for the night. We all know how the stories are so similar and so different!

In the classic betrothal scene (Moses, Jacob, Bereshit 29:10 and Shemot 2:17) the gallant prospective groom arrives in an unknown place. He realises that the bride (and her flock) are in need of water. Moses, confronts the aggressive abusive shepherd that torment Tzipora and her sisters. Yaakov single-handedly removes the heavy rock that protects the well, and with this heroic act, proceeds to encounter the young woman who will become his wife.

How about Isaac? In that betrothal scene, Rebecca is the water-drawer, she is the active one, generously providing water to the stranger from afar – Abraham's slave! Isaac stays at home. His bride is betrothed by the servant and then brought to him. Isaac is absent.

A further blow to Isaac's persona is the famous account of the deceit surrounding the blessing to Esau. Isaac is depicted as blind, a person easily tricked and manipulated. Is this the image that we would like to see of one of our Avot? A person who lives in the shadows? A feeble, ineffective personality? Is this indeed a correct assessment of Yitzchak Avinu?

I believe that this is not the proper understanding of Yitzchak, and I believe that the key to Yitzchak's dynamic personality may be located in a most overlooked chapter; Chapter 26.

Chavruta Study:

1. Study Ch.26

Obviously, this chapter contains a number of sub-stories. Pay attention to the stories within this chapter

2. Yitzchak and Avraham:

How does Yitzchak reflect/connect with Avraham in this perek?

Give at least 5 examples. (look for reflected/repeated stories AND explicit mention of Avraham.) In this context, see also Rashi on 25:19

1. What image emerges from Yitzchak after all this?
2. Why is Avraham's "presence" so evident here?

3. The story of the wells.

Chart the struggle that Yitzchak wages over his agricultural/water rights. Do this by gauging: 1. Avimelech's attitude to him; 2. The names of the wells and their significance.

What might be the significance of this story?

1. See the Sephorno on v.12
2. Ramban on v.20
3. Radak on v.23

YITZCHAK BEN AVRAHAM (20:19)

Rav Steinsaltz in his wonderful book, Biblical Images, framed the personality of Yitzchak in a new and refreshing light. I will quote a few passages from his famous essay about Yitzchak:

"Most of the deeds connected with Isaac's name were actually accomplished by other people; and what little he did on his own seems no more than a repetition, with slight variations, of what his father had done. He dug the wells that his father had dug, experienced his own version of his father's encounter with Abimelech and with Pharaoh. In other words, there was only a slight variation on the same theme..."

So how are we to understand Yitzchak's individual contribution? Rav Steinsaltz continues:

"It is known that the sons of great fathers, talented and significant as they may be in their own right, have to contend with parental glory and from the beginning, feel themselves as inadequate, burdened with lesser or greater degrees of helplessness.

...This apparently was Isaac's essential problem: to find his own place in a world dominated by the genius of his father. He did the only thing left for him to do: He carried on. And the task of the "successor" has always been one of the most unrewarding of all the tasks in history. It has often been said that "all beginnings are difficult," but continuation can be even more difficult. The capacity to persist is no less important than the power to begin. In all the significant revolutions of history it is evident that the first generation – the "founding fathers" – usually have to struggle against formidable objective forces. But the verdict of history ... whether it was a glorious victory or merely a passing episode, lies with their successors – the generation who have to fix and stabilise the revolution.

...One does not ascribe to the second generation the same glorious qualities that capture the imagination. The sons' task is to hold steady and not to create. Or as the Bible story puts it, they have to dig again the wells that the fathers dug before them and that have become blocked up.

... Isaac's task therefore, even if lacking in splendour or legendary exploits, is of utmost value and significance ... "These are the generations of Isaac ... Abraham begat Isaac" ... Isaac not only justifying Abraham, but establishing him for ever... Paradoxically, were the events of his life dramatic and momentous like those of his father, he would have lost this distinction of being a true successor. In order to fulfil his role successfully, he had to repress any urge for assertion or self-expression. He was not allowed to be anything else, either different or something new. His destiny was to be the one who carried on.

... Isaac is the symbol not of the power that breaks through limitations and creates, but of the power that conserves and maintains things in their place."

So what has Rav Steinsaltz added to our understanding? Rav Steinsaltz freely admits that Yitzchak is characterised by a certain passivity, a lack of dynamic activity. And yet this is not to be viewed as a deficiency in Yitzchak's personality but rather a unique challenge, a point of strength. Yitzchak is "the second generation." Rather than creatively initiating, leading his own revolution, Yitzchak's historic role lies in solidifying the path set by Avraham. If each successive generation continues to precipitate change, then a tradition is never set in place, a movement cannot take shape. It is only when the new steps that are taken successfully reach a state of stability, of permanence, it is then that we might say that a long-lasting change has been enacted. And so, Yitzchak must follow meticulously the path of Avraham, digging those wells again and again, so that Avraham's life mission does not fall into decay.

It might be (and indeed Rav Steinsaltz raises this possibility¹) that Yitzchak yearned for a more dynamic role. He held himself back however, in a spirit of heroic restraint² - what the Kabbalists call "gevura," or "pachad," the quality of resistance, boundaries - withstanding movement. This is a thankless task, but an essential one.

Rav Steinsaltz has given as a framework in which to understand Yitzchak's inaction. And yet, despite the power and heroism engendered by this image, I still find myself searching for more. We have an impression whereby our Avot are men of action, of achievement. Did Yitzchak simply follow Abraham's lead and copy him? Did he not innovate a thing? Nothing? Even if Yitzchak is destined to follow Avraham's path and to take it into posterity, did he not expand Avraham's vision at all?

BERESHIT CHAPTER 26

On the one hand, there is no Chapter which might emphasise Rav Steinsaltz's thesis more than this Chapter. Throughout the chapter Yitzchak follows Avraham.

This applies to the storyline:

1. The desire to leave the country (in the direction of Egypt) due to famine. (26:2)
2. The story with Avimelech and Rivka ("She is my sister!" – 26:7)
3. Yitzchak re-digs Avraham's wells and calls them the identical names that his father called them. (26:18)
4. Yitzchak also makes a covenant with Avimelech and names/ finds significance in the name Beer Sheva³.

But it also applies to God's communication to Yitzchak in which he is clearly seen as an extension of Avraham:

1. God promises Yitzchak that his offspring will inherit the Land "and I will establish the oath **that I promised Avraham** your father." (26:3)
2. God promises: "I will multiply your offspring like the stars of the heaven and I will give your offspring all these lands inasmuch as **Avraham obeyed my voice** and kept my charge etc." (26:5)

Why not: "inasmuch as you, Isaac, obeyed my voice"?

3. "And God appeared to him (Yitzchak) and said: **I am the God of your father Avraham**. Fear not ... I will bless you and increase your offspring **for the sake of my servant Avraham**." (26:24)

So, here are the proofs for Rav Steinsaltz. Yitzchak and Avraham are one. Rashi even suggests that Yitzchak looked identical to Avraham. Avraham's promises are Yitzchak's promises. Avraham's covenant is Yitzchak's covenant.

YITZCHAK THE FARMER

But there is another narrative within Chapter 26:

Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The Lord blessed him. And the man grew, and continued to grow until he was great⁴. He acquired flocks and herds, and a large household. The Philistines envied him. And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Avraham filling them with earth. And Avimelech said to Isaac: Go away from us, for you have become too strong for us. So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the Wadi of Gerar and dwelled there. Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father.. he gave them the same names that his father had given them. Isaac's servants digging in the Wadi, found a well of water. The herdsman of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herdsman, saying: 'The water is ours!' He named the well Esek (Controversy) because they contended with him. And they dug another well. They disputed over this one also; so he named it Sitna (Enmity.) He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rechovot (Expanse), saying: 'Now at last the Lord has granted us ample space and we have been fruitful in the land.'

...Avimelech came to him from Gerar with Ahuzaath ... and Pichol, his army chief. Isaac said to them, 'Why did you come to me seeing that you have been hostile to me and have driven me away from you?' And they said ' We now see plainly that the Lord has been with you and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will do us no harm just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in Peace..' They made a feast, and they ate and they drank. Early in the morning they exchanged oaths ... That same day Isaac's servants came and told him of the well that they had dug, and said to him, 'We have found water!' He named it Sheva; therefore the name of the city is Beer Sheva to this day." (26:12-33)

The first thing that we should notice here is that Yitzchak DOES take a new path a path untrodden by Avraham. Yitzchak is a farmer, and a very successful farmer too! What does this mean? What is the significance of this?

Avraham was a shepherd. He wandered from place to place, a nomad, with no permanent dwelling place. Avraham is transient. He never settles in a single location and when his wife dies he has no real-estate to call his own. Yitzchak is a man of the land. He farms the land, and grips the land, argues over land. And a farmer is fixed in place. The wells don't move, the fields do not move.

Maybe the clearest representation of this shift is the comparison between the two namings of the city Beer Sheva, both in Avraham's covenant with Avimelech, and with Yitzchak's covenant. With Avraham, the number Sheva – seven refers to seven sheep (21:30) Where does the number seven come from with Yitzchak? It is apparently the seventh well⁵. Three wells of Avraham, and this is the fourth well of Yitzchak. Now, not only does Yitzchak exceed his father in the number of wells dug, but his "seven" is a permanent seven, a fixed mark on the landscape. Avraham's "seven" were sheep; movable, mortal animals. Yitzchak makes his mark in the depths of the earth, in the well which probes the barren soil for life-giving water.

But this is not the only way in which we experience Yitzchak's individuality. Let us dwell upon Yitzchak's connection to land. Chazal⁶ have already suggested that Yitzchak's special quality relates to agriculture; "the field." It is in the fields that he is to be found when Rivka arrives, and many mefarshim⁷ see him as engaged in farming and not prayer. Here in Ch.26 Yitzchak demonstrates his flair for the agricultural life. Indeed might we suggest, precisely upon the lines suggested by Rav Steinsaltz, that Yitzchak is the patriarch who most prominently expresses Eretz Yisrael. Avraham makes the journey to Eretz Yisrael, but Yitzchak lives there, and lives there all his life. It is one thing to come to a country, but a country is only a viable place to live if a person can live there all his life, from the moment he is born, until his death. It is here in chapter 26 that God restricts Yitzchak from leaving the Land of Israel, and it is in the Perek that Yitzchak demonstrates his deep connection with the land.

Regarding Eretz Yisrael, we can suggest that each of the Avot represent an archetype as regards their involvement with the Land of Israel:

Avraham is the "Oleh" – the immigrant. He begins in Mesopotamia and comes to Eretz Yisrael.

Yitzchak stays his whole life in the land.

Yaakov leaves the land, and returns to it, and then leaves again, returning again posthumously.

These are three classic models for the Jewish people. Avraham represents the initial desire to emigrate to the land. Yaakov illustrates the notion that though Jews are thrust into Galut, exile, they will eventually find their way back home, they will return, in life, or even in death.

Yitzchak however is integrally connected to Eretz Yisrael. He never leaves. For a land to be considered a homeland, one must be able to spend every day of one's life, from birth to death, in the land. Yitzchak represents this type of association. In this manner, he is certainly deepening and establishing a firm foothold in the land, solidifying Avraham's mission, giving Avraham's journey to Canaan a broad foundation and a firm base, giving it roots and stability.

But we should realise that by focussing on the land itself, Yitzchak isn't simply copying his father. He is taking his father's legacy and building it in a fresh way. He is creating a new reality. Hazal see Isaac as particularly holy – "Olah Temimah." This is shaped by his role as a sacrifice in the Akeida, but possibly it

relates to his exclusive residence in the land of Israel. giving form to his father's vision, his way.

THE WELLS AND THE PEACE TREATY.

The story of the wells gives us clear insight into Yitzchak's character. Having been banished from Gerar due to his material success – apparently he was accused of monopolising the economy, talking resources from the dominant population, the Philistines, Yitzchak relocates to the unsettled sand-dunes of Gerar to begin again. Each time he finds water there is conflict. The names of the wells give us the mood of the moment: Controversy, Enmity. But Yitzchak does not give up. Yitzchak demonstrates a phenomenal tenacity, patience, endurance. He digs again and again. And it is upon his third attempt that the arguments cease: Rechovot – Expanse.

Why did the arguments cease? It would seem that the local inhabitants of Gerar realised that Yitzchak was here to stay. They could push him aside, but he would always come back. And each time, he was more successful. They could not overpower him. And so, they had to come to terms with him. They realised that Yitzchak saw himself as having a right to the land just like they did. After all, he took unworkable territory and "made the desert bloom."

After his third success even Avimelech comes in a surprise visit, offering him a peace treaty, a pact of mutual recognition and friendship. Avimelech saw Yitzchak's power and influence. He saw his superior economic power and calculated that it would be better to ally himself with this new tribe in the region. He witnessed his moral superiority, he saw his stubbornness and unremitting determination and he realised that rather than have Yitzchak as an adversary, he should make a covenant, a treaty. Peace only comes as a result of Yitzchak's unyielding stand, his bold resolve, his constant effort and toil.

Yitzchak establishes himself as a fixture in the land, but it is an up-hill struggle, a battle at every step. In the end, however, he emerges victorious.

With this in mind, we emerge with a view of Isaac that is removed from a passive, feeble and pallid character⁸. He isn't merely the second generation, the individual who is forced to replicate his father's mission. He isn't a personality in stasis, frozen in a form determined by his father's image. Yitzchak takes on his father's achievements with an impressive energy, and a powerful determination, but this is just the platform from which he starts. He sets his task to work tirelessly for the causes to which he has been educated and to which he is dedicated and he adds his own verse. In particular as relates to Eretz Yisrael, his contribution is unique and unparalleled. (See 26:23-4.)

When thinking about Yitzchak in a contemporary mind set, I cannot help but see certain messages here for our time. Sometimes we have the feeling that we are living in an era in which the State of Israel has already been founded; the exciting formative period of the pioneer generation has been and gone. We now face challenges, ongoing denial of our rights to our land, aggression. Yitzchak's personality has relevance and pertinence specifically in our times. We need the same defiant spirit of determination and tenacity, the same resolve to build and rebuild the land and the dream.

"The Lord appeared to him and said: Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land... reside in this land and I will be with you and bless you." (26:2-3)

Shabbat Shalom

For Further Study

1. It is worthwhile to spend some time thinking about the first half of Ch. 26 - the story of Avimelech taking Rivka, reflecting Avimelech and Sarah. Here is yet another incident in which Yitzchak reflects Avraham. And yet there are significant differences. See the article by Yoni Grossman from the VBM: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.58/06toldot.htm>. He presents a similar thesis to ours regarding the Yitzchak-Avraham dynamic based upon the Avimelech–Yitzchak-Rivka parsha.

2. I have always seen a tremendous connection between the "wells" story here and Agnon's famous short story "From Foe to a Friend." (Me'Oyeiv Le'Ohev. It can be found in the volume of his writings : Elu v'Elu.) There the story is clearly about settlement in Eretz Yisrael and that only by standing firm will we convince our enemies to make peace with us. I see the message of this Perek as something similar.

Try to get hold of the story¹. You might agree!

¹ Rav Steinsaltz suggests that Yitzchak's attraction to Esav is that "Esav symbolises the forcefulness of precipitate action," and was "conspicuously the opposite of Yitzchak. The attraction came from the fact that "Esav represented so much of what Isaac wanted to be."

² See Rav Soloveichik's famous article, "Catharsis" where he develops this theme of "retreat" extensively.

³ Compare ch.21:22-34 with this chapter.

The naming of Beer Sheva by Yitzchak presents something of a problem seeing that it clearly has that name in Abraham's time (and earlier – see 21:14.) Some suggest that rather than naming the city, he simply found a new significance in the events via linkage with the name of the place. But see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Seforno on 26:33 for some other possibilities.

⁴ Most translators translate this in respect to Yitzchak's wealth, and this probably because of the following passuk which talks about material possessions. Indeed this might be the p'shat. But the Hebrew seems to indicate, or allow for, wider connotations in its repeated usage of the ambiguous word "vayigdal/gadel/gadol" and have tried to preserve this in the way I have translated the passuk.

⁵ Seforno 26:33

⁶ Pesachim 88a - Avraham is associated with "Har"; Yitzchak with "Sadeh – field"; Yaakov with "Bayit."

⁷ Rashbam, Hizkuni 25:63

⁸ Earlier we suggested that at the well-side Rivka is active whereas Isaac is absent. Might this story come to redress the balance?

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