

DIGGING FOR WATER

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

What do we really know about Isaac, the second of our three patriarchs? The Torah presents vivid and detailed accounts of the lives of his father Abraham and his son Jacob, but Isaac himself always remains an obscure and mysterious figure. We see Abraham prepared to sacrifice him on the mountaintop. We see Abraham seeking a bride for him. We see him bless his sons when he feels death approaching. And in the between, we see him embroiled in a dogged dispute with the Philistines. Isaac digs wells, and as soon as he finds water, the Philistines fill them or claim ownership for themselves.

What was so significant about the incident of the wells that the Torah saw fit to record it for all time? What does it tell us about the person inside this enigma named Isaac?

The commentators explain that the life work of each of the patriarchs was to blaze a path along which the Jewish people would be able to draw closer to the Creator. Abraham, the paragon of kindness, hospitality and unbounded love, demonstrated that a relationship with the Creator could be forged on the basis of a heart overflowing with compassion. But Isaac perceived that more avenues were required, that it was far too limiting to expect all future Jewish people to derive their spiritual and religious energies from the emotional outpourings of the heart. What would happen if circumstances deprived people of sufficient emotional resources? What if they suffered burnout? Would they also lose their religious and spiritual bearings?

Isaac understood that his mission in life was to complement rather than just duplicate his father's achievements. He bore the awesome responsibility of adding an important new dimension to his father's revolutionary work. Isaac therefore focused on introducing a solid foundation of discipline and rigorous observance. This would provide religious stability, so that emotional expansiveness and inspiration could then bring a person to the most transcendent levels of spiritual experience.

These extraordinary qualities of determination, perseverance and relentless self-discipline were amply illustrated by the incident of the wells. Although the Philistines filled up his newly dug wells with rocks and soil, he was not discouraged. He dug a second set, and once again found water. When the Philistines deprived him of these wells too, he was nonetheless undaunted. He dug a third set of wells, and finally the Philistines, realizing the relentlessness of their opponent, acquiesced. Isaac applied this very same determination to his conduct of his relationship with the Creator, providing his offspring for all time with the paradigm of stable and steadfast devotion.

The mystical teachers also discern a deeper symbolism here. They see the entire affair of the disputed wells as a metaphor for the constant struggle that characterizes the human condition. The water represents the pure spirituality of the soul that lies buried deep underneath the suffocating soil of physicality. A person's life is an unceasing effort to penetrate that physical shell and connect with the spirituality underneath. And unfortunately, success carries no guarantee of permanence. New layers of soil can inundate the liberated water and buried it once again.. Then the process begins again. It takes discipline and determination and a tenacious refusal to concede defeat. With every spade of dirt that was excavated in the search for water, Isaac was sending a powerful message down the halls of time. Never give up. There is water down there. If you refuse to abandon the search for water, you will undoubtedly be rewarded.

The young man was very excited. He had been invited to a Passover seder for the first time in his life, and he couldn't wait to experience this celebrated feast of freedom.

As the seder began, the young man waited eagerly as the Haggadah was read and discussed. When would the feast begin? he wondered. Soon, he became impatient, but he was determined to stay. Finally, the meal seemed about to begin, but to his dismay, all the people were just eating matzoh and bitter greens.

Disgruntled, he slipped away from the table and made a quiet exit. The next day, his host met him in the street. "Why did you leave?" he chided. "Had you stuck it out a few more minutes you would have been served the most wonderful feast!"

In our own lives, we all aspire to bring out the beautiful spiritual and esthetic qualities we harbor deep in our hearts. But just when we feel we have brought them, the grind of daily existence buries them once again under a veritable mountain of rubble. It is terribly discouraging, but it is the way of the world. Life is an unending struggle, and as our patriarch Isaac showed us, determination and perseverance are the keys to ultimate success. Failure is only a temporary setback, and if we dig hard enough and long enough we will reach the sparkling water. Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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