

THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF YITZHAK

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לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

I

THE ESOTERIC PATRIARCH

And I will remember my covenant with Ya'akov, my covenant with Yitzhak and my covenant with Avraham I will remember; and I will remember the Land.

We are so accustomed to the many expressions of this triumvirate - the "Avot" - Avraham, Yitzhak and Ya'akov, that we often overlook the unique place of Yitzhak within the patriarchal scheme.

We are first introduced to Avraham, the first genuine hero in T'nakh, at the end of Chapter 11 of B'resheet. For the next 12 chapters, our hero is the central protagonist, nearly always occupying center stage in the unfolding drama of Am Hashem.

From the moment he appears in this world, our eponymous father Ya'akov dominates the scene. With only one significant exception, Ya'akov is the focus of the B'resheet narrative from before his birth (25:22) until the next generation steps into the limelight (35:22). There is only story which separates the grandfather from his grandson - the mission to Haran to find a wife for Yitzhak. Yitzhak, however, is notably absent until the very end of that story - as he has been, raising Midrashic eyebrows, since the Akeidah. A fair assessment of Sefer B'resheet would posit Avraham, Ya'akov and Yoseph as the three central characters - and Yitzhak would be, in the words of one contemporary wag, merely "Avraham's son and Ya'akov's father."

It is, however, quite difficult for the traditional ear to hear these sentiments; the refrain of Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzhak ve'Elokei Ya'akov is too much a part of our religious sensibilities to accept such a limited role for the "middle father".

It is not only creed and patriarchal parochialism which push us to look deeper and wider for the key to Yitzhak; the T'nakh itself continues to regard Yitzhak with such significance that it is an act of intellectual dishonesty to give such short shrift to the noble son of Avraham. Why would God present Himself to Mosheh as "Elokei Yitzhak" (Sh'mot 3:6); why would David himself address: Hashem, God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and of Yisra'el, our fathers, keep this forever in the imagination of the thoughts of the heart of your people, and direct their heart to you; (Divrei haYamim I 29:18) And why is Eretz Yisra'el consistently presented as

This is the land which I swore to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya'akov, saying, I will give it to your seed; I have made you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there. (D'varim 34:4)?

Yitzhak is the most concealed of the Avot; we learn little about him and he occupies a central role in only one chapter of B'resheet. Yet, understand him we must; it is possible that the paucity of information is itself a key to appreciating the crucial link between the generation of pioneering spirit (Avraham) and the generation of foundation (Ya'akov). It is to that task that we will dedicate this week's efforts.

II

THE PROBLEM

As stated above, Yitzhak's place within the narratives of B'resheet is chiefly confined to his role as son (beginning with the promise of his birth in Chapters 17 and 18, the miracle of his birth in Chapter 21 which leads to the expulsion of Yishma'el and Hagar and, ultimately, to the Akeidah) and as father (beginning with the opening of this week's Parashah, where the focus is on his supplication for children, through the dramatic central story in our Parashah of Ya'akov's deception in gaining Yitzhak's blessing). It is only in Chapter 26, when Yitzhak interacts with the P'lish'tim, that we are told anything about the man himself.

Our first question, then, is an overarching one: Why is there so little attention given to Yitzhak's persona?

Once we look at that one chapter, another key question comes to the fore:

For all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them up, and filled them with earth. And Avimelekh said to Yitzhak, Go from us; for you are mightier than we. And Yitzhak departed from there, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and lived there. And Yitzhak dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. And Yitzhak's servants dug in the valley, and found there a well of springing water. And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Yitzhak's herdsmen, saying, The water is ours; and he called the name of the well Esek; because they strove with him. And they dug another well, and strove for that also; and he called the name of it Sitnah. And he moved from there, and dug another well; and for that they strove not; and he called the name of it Rehovot; and he said, For now Hashem has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land. (26:15-22)

Neither Avraham nor Ya'akov experienced troubles with others - save for troubles within the family (Ya'akov's chief nemeses were Esav and Lavan; Avraham's problems were limited to the difficult interaction with Lot's herdsmen). Indeed, Avraham was esteemed by the local tribesmen (they called him a "prince of God") and he was blessed by the local priest (Malkizedek).

Our second question is, then, why Yitzhak, of all the Avot, was the one to experience such difficulties with his neighbors?

A third question comes on the heels of the second: Avraham interacted with kings of different nations, traveled to Egypt, debated Nimrod (according to the Midrashic account of his early years) and engaged in détente with the king of S'dom. Ya'akov battled Lavan, met Pharaoh, interacted with the Sh'chemites etc. In other words, both Avraham and Ya'akov had social, military, political and religious interactions with a wide range of characters representing different groups and nations. Yitzhak's only interactions - of which we are told - are with the P'lish'tim. What is behind this curious phenomenon?

One final question comes to the fore when we read Chapter 26:

In the earlier chapters of B'reshet, we learn of Avraham's great visions, his excellent hospitality, his valor on the battlefield and his willingness to challenge God Himself. When we meet Ya'akov, we will learn of diligence, of honesty (once he encounters Lavan), of strategy and prayer (prior to his meeting with Esav) and a strong yearning to return to the site of his vision to make a house for God. With Yitzhak, however, we are given no such powerful glimpses.

The only chapter in which Yitzhak is the focus has two narratives which are tied together. First of all, there is a "repetition" of the wife/sister story which Avraham had already experienced twice. After that, the narrative focuses on Yitzhak's (troubled) interactions with the P'lish'tim. All of these interactions revolve around the digging of wells.

Our final question cuts to the gist of this story: What is the significance of these wells?

In order to tackle these questions and gain a greater appreciation of the "middle Patriarch", we'll need to take a step back and investigate an oft- overlooked dimension of the lives of the Avot - their livelihood.

III

THE LIVELIHOOD OF THE AVOT

As mentioned above, Ya'akov's life mirrored, in many ways, that of his grandfather Avraham:

- 1) Both had children with multiple mothers - which caused a great deal of stress within the family.
- 2) Both came from Haran to Eretz K'na'an (Avraham's Aliyah, Ya'akov's return from Lavan's household)
- 3) Both began their settlement of Eretz K'na'an in Sh'chem, moving southward to Beit-El, Hevron and B'er Sheva.
- 4) Both went down to Egypt on account of a famine.

We are also under the impression that both Ya'akov and Avraham (and, we generally assume, Yitzhak) were shepherds. As Rav Yoel Bin-Nun has demonstrated quite convincingly (Megadim

25:53-61), the text quite clearly points us in a different direction. While it is true that Ya'akov was a shepherd while working for Lavan, this was no longer the case once he returned home and achieved financial liberation from his father-in-law's treachery.

There are a number of verses which indicate that the Avot (Avraham and Ya'akov [post-Lavan]) were merchants:

- 1) And Avram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go to the land of K'na'an; and to the land of K'na'an they came. (12:5)
- 2) And Avram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. (13:2)
- 3) And the king of S'dom said to Avram, Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself. (14:21)
- 4) And the servant took ten of his master's [Avraham's] camels, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand; and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. (24:10)
(camels were exclusively used for transporting goods).
- 5) And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rivkah; he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things. (ibid. 53)
- 6) And you shall live with us; and the land shall be before you; live and trade in it, and get possessions in it. (34:10 - Hamor to the sons of Ya'akov)
- 7) And their father Yisra'el said to them, If it must be so now, do this; take of the best fruits in the land in your utensils, and carry down a present to the man, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds; And take double money in your hand; and the money that was brought again in the mouth of your sacks, carry it again in your hand; perhaps it was an oversight; (43:11-12)

That all of our patriarchs had flocks to herd is undeniable; with the exception of Ya'akov's sojourn in Padan-Aram, however, these flocks were always part of the greater wealth and holdings of the Avot. As such, they did not herd the flocks themselves, but had shepherds (or sons) to do that job.

All of the proof-texts (and there are quite a few more) adduced above refer to either Avraham or Ya'akov - both of whom were involved in barter and trade. Yitzhak, however, eschewed that source of income and turned his focus elsewhere, as we shall see.

IV

YITZHAK AND THE LAND

At the beginning of Chapter 26, we learn about a second famine in the Land. As a result, Yitzhak moves southward, through the territory of the P'lish'tim (we will revisit them further on) on his way to fertile Egypt. At that point:

And Hashem appeared to him, and said, Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you; Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Avraham your father; And I will

make your seed multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these countries; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; Because Avraham obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws. And Yitzhak lived in Gerar; (26:2-6)

Unlike father Avraham (and son Ya'akov), Yitzhak was proscribed from leaving the Land. Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains that Yitzhak was an "Olah T'mimah" (perfect offering) as a result of the Akeidah, and Hutz la'Aretz (outside of the Land) was beneath his status.

Consequently, Yitzhak, alone among the Avot, developed a strong tie to the Land. This can be readily seen in his choice of livelihood:

Then Yitzhak sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year an hundredfold; and Hashem blessed him. And the man became rich, and gained more and more, until he became very wealthy; For he had possessions of flocks, and possessions of herds, and great store of servants; and the P'lish'tim envied him. (26:12-14)

Yitzhak created a revolution within the patriarchal family - from tradesman, he turned to the Land and became a farmer. Yitzhak was the only one of our B'reshet protagonists who tilled the land and found his sustenance there.

This choice of profession wrought a far-reaching change in Yitzhak's life and his ability to continue the Avrahamic mission. Unlike a tradesman (or shepherd) who can easily move from place to place, a farmer is rooted to his land. As a result of this rootedness, Yitzhak did not move from place to place. Unlike Avraham and Ya'akov, whose travels were almost always the cause of their various interactions with others, Yitzhak "stayed put" and, thus, his influence was confined to a more limited range of people and places.

This also explains Yitzhak's association with the "field" (see BT Pesachim 88a). He first meets his wife, Rivkah, while strolling in the field (24:63). In addition, his affection for Esav, the "Ish Sadeh" becomes clearer - Esav was, just like his father, a man of the field.

Note also the wording of the blessing given to pseudo-Esav [Ya'akov] before the actual B'rakhah: And he came near, and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which Hashem has blessed; (27:27)

As Rav Bin-Nun points out, there is one other facet of farming - in apposition to mercantilism - which plays out in the farmer's response to enmity. If a tradesman, merchant or shepherd are threatened by local military upheaval, falling out of favor with the authorities etc. - they do what all nomads do - pack up their tents and move along, taking their sheep, goods or art somewhere safer. The only livelihood which cannot "move" is farming - the roots (symbolized by the wells) which Yitzhak digs deep into the Land give him an unalterable tie to the earth which, in turn, leads to a different response to enmity. Whereas Avraham and Ya'akov were able to move around, avoiding threatening situations (when such avoidance was the proper path), Yitzhak stayed and fought.

This may be an additional aspect of Yitzhak's affection for Esav, the hunter. As opposed to Ya'akov, the shepherd who "dwelt in tents", Esav was a man who carried the firmness of a man attached to his land. The tragedy of Esav was not that he had this characteristic, rather that he corrupted it to the point of planning fratricide.

We can now respond to three of our four questions:

- 1) The narrative of Yitzhak's life is brief because his influence is not wide, it is deep. As opposed to his father and son who traveled and, through their many interactions, inspired many, Yitzhak's impact was more local but far deeper.
- 2) Yitzhak was the only one of the Avot to experience such difficulties in his relations with his neighbors because he was the only one who would not - could not - relocate when troubles were stirred up. Unlike Avraham, who moves away from Avimelekh after the wife/sister incident (Ch. 20) and Ya'akov, who is able to move away from Sh'chem after the massacre (Ch. 34), Yitzhak must deal with the troubles by staying put and fighting.
- 3) We can also appreciate the emphasis on the digging of wells. Not only are the wells a symbol of permanence and a foothold in the country, they represent a deep (as opposed to wide) association with the land.
- 4) We have yet to decipher the relationship between Yitzhak and P'lish'tim - in order to do that, we must take a closer look at this unique peoples (after whom the Romans named the land Palestine).

V

THE P'LISH'TIM

Among all of the nations which have surrounded Am Yisra'el during our various eras of settlement and sovereignty in the Land, the P'lish'tim stand out as the most troublesome, on the one hand, and the most puzzling on the other hand.

The P'lish'tim have a unique place in the books of Shof'tim and Sh'mu'el. Both of those books of T'nakh are, more or less, records of the various battles fought over sovereignty of the Land. Among all of our enemies, those who subjugated us and those we defeated, the P'lish'tim are the only nation without a king. True, there were the "five P'lishti captains" (Shof'tim 3:3), but there was no king. In addition, the wars against the P'lish'tim are hard to understand, both politically and militarily. As opposed to conventional warfare, over territory or power, the P'lish'tim fight in more of a "nuisance" manner. Beginning with Shamgar ben Anat, who killed 600 P'lish'tim with an oxgoad, through the trials of Shim'shon with the P'lish'tim, up until the Davidic wars against P'leshet, their behavior makes little sense.

For example, when David runs to P'leshet, he finds sanctuary there, even though the P'lish'tim all recognize his position as future king. When Shim'shon is captured by the P'lish'tim, they want nothing more than to sport with him. When the P'lish'tim take the Aron captive (I Sh'mu'el 4:11), they

keep it in various P'lish'ti cities, each of which experiences a Divine plague as a result of their holding the Aron. Nonetheless, they continue to hold onto it well beyond a reasonable time - to what end?

It has been suggested that the P'lish'tim, unlike any other nation, were not hungry for territory or power. They were, plain and simple, opposed to the sovereignty of Yisra'el over Eretz K'na'an. There was no conventional war with them, because they were not fighting a war, per se. As such, they were quite happy to give David sanctuary; what better disgrace of the people of Yisra'el and their God than to see their king on the run. When Shim'shon is taken captive, they have no interest in killing him; rather in seeing him disgraced. And what more powerful symbol of the fallen fortunes of Yisra'el as a sovereign nation than the capture of the Aron?

Parenthetically, this is why the P'lish'tim never bothered Am Yisra'el outside of their Land - nor when Am Yisra'el was under foreign rule. What irked the P'lish'tim and drove them to their constant belligerence against us was the desire to degrade Am Yisra'el and Elokei Yisra'el. (The most outstanding example of this attitude is found in the Yitzhak narrative itself; see below.)

We now understand why Yitzhak specifically had interactions - fractious at that - with the P'lish'tim. Yitzhak, the patriarch who set his roots firm and deep into the Land, was the symbol of a permanent and strong Avrahamic (later "Jewish") presence in K'na'an. That was a constant thorn in the side of the P'lish'tim - but Yitzhak refused to allow them to force him off the Land. Note how "ridiculous" their behavior was in this interaction. When there was a famine in the land (26:1), they went out of their way to seal up Avraham's wells which Yitzhak had redug. They were so concerned with driving Yitzhak off his land and depriving his flocks of water - that they would deprive themselves of water in the process.

We can now put the whole picture together. Unlike Avraham, who began the call to monotheism and unlike Ya'akov whose job was establishing the family of Yisra'el, Yitzhak was the patriarch who strengthened and affirmed our claim to - and relationship with - Eretz Yisra'el. As a result, little is told about him, as mentioned, because his influence was "local", yet deep. As a man of the land, he does not have the luxury of avoiding conflict by moving - and digs wells to demonstrate his permanent and deep connection with the land. The P'lish'tim, the nation which e'er challenges our claim to the land as a sovereign nation of God, is most threatened by Yitzhak and, as such, are his constant nemesis.

VI

MA'ASEH AVOT SIMAN LABANIM

Ramban, throughout his commentary on B'resheet, understands the events which befell our ancestors as "signposts" for their children:

Regarding the famine which drove Yitzhak to P'leshet, he states: In my opinion, there is also included in this subject a reference to the future. Avraham's exile into Egypt on account of the famine is an

allusion to the exile of his children there. His going to Avimelekh however was not an exile for he resided there of his own volition. But Yitzhak's going [to the land of Avimelekeh] on account of the famine does allude to an exile since he left his place against his will and went to another land. Now Yitzhak's exile was from his own place to the land of the P'lish'tim, which was the land in which his father had resided. This alludes to the Babylonian exile, which took place in the land in which their ancestors had resided, namely, Ur Kas'dim.

Know further that this Babylonian exile mentioned is mirrored in the events which befell Yitzhak in that they did not take his wife in the land of the P'lish'tim. Rather, his lot there was only exile and fear. At the beginning, Avimelekh said "He that touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death". Later, he regretted it and said "Go from us". Afterwards, he returned and made a covenant with Yitzhak. Similarly, in the Babylonian exile, they were exiled there because of the burning heat of famine (Eikhah 5:10) and, while there, they were neither subjugated, nor were they treated harshly. On the contrary, their leaders were princes in the government. Later on, they said, "Whosoever there is among you of all His people - his God be with him - let him go up". Even alerting the princes and governors beyond the River to help them. Later on, they ceased work [on the Beit haMikdash] and it ceased "for a season and a time". Later, they changed their policy and gave permission for the construction of the Beit Hashem... (Ramban 26:1)

IN explaining the wells, he comments: Scripture gives us a lengthy account of the matter of the wells when in the literal interpretation of the story there would seem to be no benefit nor any great honor to Yitzhak in that he and his father did the identical thing. However, there is a hidden matter here since Scripture's purpose is to make known a future matter. A well of living water alludes to the House of God which the children of Yitzhak will build. This is why Scripture mentions "a well of living waters", even as it says: "A fountain of living waters, the Eternal." He called the first well "Esek" (Contention), which is an allusion to the First Beit haMikdash, concerning which the nations contended with us and instigated quarrels and wars with us until they destroyed it. The second well was called "Sitnah" (enmity), a name harsher than the first. This alludes to the Second Beit haMikdash, which has indeed been referred to by this very name: "In the beginning of his reign, they wrote sitnah against the inhabitants of Yehudah and Yerushalayim. And during its entire existence they were a source of enmity unto us until they destroyed it and drove us from it into bitter exile. The third well he called Rehovot ("spacious"). This is a reference to the "Future House", which will be speedily built in our days, and it will be done without quarrel and feud, and God will enlarge our borders, even as it says: "And if Hashem your God enlarges your border..."(Ramban 26:20)

VII

POSTSCRIPT

It is hard to study this beautiful Parashah, especially in light of the observations presented above, without seeing some powerful parallels to the ongoing relationship between Am Yisra'el and Eretz

Yisra'el. The farmer who builds an intense and committed relationship to his land was a foreign figure in the Jewish mindset for over a thousand years (ever since the Caliphate moved the Jews into the cities during the Geonic era). It is only with our return to our Land and our reestablishment of Jewish rule over Eretz Yisra'el that this figure became, again, a beloved and honored person in our collective consciousness. It is not the tie to the earth which we esteem, but the tie to the Land where our full potential as a holy nation, a kingdom of Kohanim, which moves us. Whereas Avraham's accomplishments helped lead us to Sinai and Ya'akov's spirit has been with us through every step of Galut, it is the model of Yitzhak Avinu which animates and empowers the fertile imagination of Jewish nationhood as we return, rebuild and rededicate ourselves to the fertile soil of Eretz Yisra'el.

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