

## ISAAC THE FAITHFUL WIMP

We left off in the Torah yesterday with Hashem Pakad et Sarah, God visited Sarah, wife, Mother, Princess, complicated woman of beauty, purity, and intelligence, a woman who struggled with issues of infertility, relationships with other women, specifically Hagar, and various other tzures. Despite her struggles, our tradition regards her as the quintessential Jewish woman, visiting her with a child as promised and describing her life in the uniquely honorific way of 100 years plus 20 years plus 7 years.

Continuing our theme of getting to know our ancestors and the lessons we can learn from them, we turn to the Akedah, the story we read today and which involves the two men that Sarah Imeinu held most dear to her heart, her husband Abraham and her son Isaac. Although the story is considered Abraham's greatest test, on this second day of Rosh Hashana, I would like to focus on the often forgotten and most denigrated of our patriarchs, Isaac.

In various Torah study groups of which I have been a part, I have heard people call Isaac, passive or weak. That is when being kind. In less kind moments, the word wimp and Mama's boy are the terms I hear. That certainly sounds a bit harsh, but it is because he is rarely involved in the action in the stories in which he appears. If anything, things are done about him, to him, and for him. He often appears to be a pawn, even an object, in the text—whether it's Sarah laughing at his birth, his being circumcised at eight days, Abraham nearly sacrificing him on Mount Moriah, Eliezer having to find him a wife, or his wife and son conspiring against him to give the birthright to Jacob. And yet, as with most human beings, and as we will see with Aaron on Yom Kippur, our strengths and our weaknesses are often two sides of the very same coin. Isaac's actions, or lack thereof, can be interpreted as signs of passivity, weakness, and spinelessness on the one hand, but we could just as easily interpret them as signs of faithfulness, devotion, and loyalty. Whereas some people might view Isaac as a wimp, I view him as a man of simple faith, and, to me, that is something not to be denigrated, but rather, to be greatly admired.

We meet Isaac for the first time at the beginning of Parashat Vayera. He is born, gets circumcised at 8 days, and is named by Sarah after her disbelieving laughter at the miracle of his birth. The Midrash tells us additional information about his birth. According to Talmud Rosh Hashana 11a, the day he was born was the first day of Pesach, a foreshadowing of his near sacrifice on Mount Moriah. He was to be, at least almost, the Kurban Pesach offering. Just in case people might wonder if Abraham, in his old age, could actually be the father, Talmud Bava Metzia tells us that he looked

exactly like his Father to establish Abraham's paternity. According to Midrash Pesikta Rabbati and Tanhuma, on the day of his birth the sun shone with unparalleled splendor, the likes of which have not been seen since and will only be seen again in the Messianic age.

The next time Isaac appears in the text, once again things are being done "to" him, and these are things which, at least according to one definition of the word, are almost unspeakable. Sarah sees Yishmael mitzachek, playing, with Isaac. It sounds innocent enough in English, but in Hebrew it is far more sinister. The word used for play, mitzachek, with a tzadi, does not mean play the way we would use it. Midrash Genesis Rabba sees it as playing at idolatry, imagining Ishmael catching locusts and offering them with incense to an idol. This is somewhat ridiculous, but Rashi translates the word as "mocking, jesting, making sport of teasing," or, as we would say today, "bullying." If we look at the way the word appears in other contexts in the Bible it is even worse, for in most cases it means fondling or implies some sort of sexual abuse. I know how badly we want these two to get along, particularly since Isaac and Ishmael are burdened with the symbolism of being the future of Judaism and Islam. But these are historical anachronisms never intended in the original text. The fact is that in the Bible itself the relationship was troubling and problematic.

The most famous Isaac incident is, of course, the passage we read today, the Akedah. And here is where we perhaps begin to see that Isaac is not just a passive voice who does whatever others want him to do, but that he chooses that path, whether for reasons of loyalty or faith. We imagine that Isaac is a little boy when he goes with his Father to Mount Moriah, innocently unaware of what is about to happen to him. But he is actually 35 years old at the time. If he didn't want to go along with it, at 35, he could have simply said no. His aged father binds him to the wood, but Isaac could have prevented it at any moment, for he could no longer be physically forced to do anything by his Father. There are hints in the text that he is fully conscious of what is about to happen. When Abraham calls to him, Isaac says: "Hineni, Avi, here I am, my Father," implying that he is willing and ready to do what Avraham and Hashem ask him to do. The text also says: "Vayelchu sheneihem yachdav," the two of them walked on together, implying that they were of one mind. In other words, Isaac is complicit. It is called a test of Abraham's faith, yet it is Isaac that seems to be showing the most faith here, whether it's because of his steadfast loyalty to his Father or what Soren Kierkegaard calls faith in the existential "strength of the absurd."

I would argue that it doesn't have to be all that complicated. Isaac is a man of simple faith, with the implication that he believes the events are

supposed to unfold precisely the way they do. I believe he believes that God will not let him die up there on the altar, but that something extraordinary will happen. Once again, various Midrashim fill in the gaps. According to Genesis Rabba 56:4: Instead of running away or even squirming, Isaac begged Abraham to bind him tightly so he wouldn't fidget and make the sacrifice unfit. Again, here is the man of simple faith.

Genesis Rabba tells us some other interesting tidbits as well. In 65:10, it says that angels cried when Abraham raised the knife, and the tears fell in Isaac's eyes and made him blind. Others say he looked directly at Shechina at that moment and was blinded, explaining the later incident with the birthright. The most fantastical Midrash of all, Pesikta de Rabbi Eliezer 31 and Leviticus Rabba 36:5, tell us that Isaac actually died and was resurrected, and we get the line Michayei hametim in the Amidah from that moment. The Midrash goes on to explain that harsh judgments against Israel are mitigated when we recall Isaac's near death experience. This is a little too close to Christianity for my comfort zone, but the rabbinic sages portrayal of Isaac is clearly all about faith.

The next several incidents of Isaac's life show a similar passivity/faith in Divine Providence. Let others act, and it will all work out. Abraham's servant Eliezer goes out and finds Isaac a wife, Rebecca. After Eliezer picks her out at the well, he brings her to Isaac, she sees him, she falls off her camel, he brings her into his Mother's tent, and the text says: "Vaye'ehaveha, he loved her." He doesn't even know her yet, but it's as if he's thinking: "if she's good enough for Eliezer and for Abraham, she must be good enough for me." Interestingly enough, Isaac is then the only one of the patriarchs who is monogamous.

When Abraham dies a few verses later, Isaac comes together with Ishmael to bury him. Considering their traumatic childhood, there could have been animosity or fear as in the coming together of Jacob and Esau a few chapters later, but there is nothing said at all, other than that they came together to bury their Father. The calm and silence says a great deal. Meeting up with the very brother who may have abused him does not seem to bother Isaac at all. Once again, he demonstrates his faith that things will work out the way they are supposed to.

Materially, in fact, things do work out for Isaac, as the text tells us he becomes very, very wealthy, gadal m'od. He digs some wells, he settles disputes with the other inhabitants there, he gets blessed by God with the promise that he will make of himself a great nation, and he makes a treaty with Avimelech. It all seems to work out well, just as Isaac believed that it would.

Tragically, toward the end of his life, though, his family takes advantage of that same faith in Providence and circumstance in giving the birthright and blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. His blindness, real or metaphorical, becomes central to the story, as Rebecca and Jacob conspire to trick him into giving the birthright blessing to Jacob. The poignancy of Esau's pain is palpable, as he asks his Father, "don't you have a blessing for me," which he does give him, though it's not a very kind blessing: "by your sword you shall live." Again, our strengths are our weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. There is a fine line between faith and passivity. Isaac's faith in other human beings and in the idea that things will work out is seized by others to their advantage.

So that's a summary of Isaac's life. What do we learn from it? Should he really be called a wimp? I think when we do so it says far more about us than it does about Isaac, and is actually a sign of what I would call 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Jewish neuroses. We want our children, our heroes, to have done something—to have gone to Harvard, to have established a business, to have won a Nobel Prize, to have cured cancer. Or at least to have been named to the gifted and talented program, the all star team in their chosen sport, and won an award for being the 1<sup>st</sup> grader

most likely to bring social justice to our world. Minimally, we as Jews seem to want our heroes to be people of action rather than faith. While Judaism is primarily a religion based on action and deeds, I would contend that far too many of us have real issues with faith in general. That's why we often denigrate Isaac for it.

When it comes to that word, faith, I should point out that I am referring to at least three different kinds of faith. There is faith in God, faith in humanity, and faith in fate or Providence--that things and events will work out for the good. For me personally, I have tremendous faith in Hashem, in my personal connection to God, that God cares about our world, and that God will be there for us in our time of need. When it comes to human beings, things are more complex. I have met many human beings who have certainly justified my faith in them, but we live in a world where a Holocaust occurred not so long ago, and there are still genocides happening all over the world. As far as faith in fate or Providence (we can call it either one, depending whether the idea is connected to God or not in your personal belief system), I am pretty good on the big things, but not so good about the little things. While I thank God every day for the many blessings in my life, I often assume that little things will NOT work out (I will not find a parking space. The store will be out of what I need. I will miss my flight. My favorite sports team will lose the game.) Isaac provides inspiration to me as

a man of simple faith, a man who passed on the tradition, who is content with his lot, and, who, by the way, made a nice living as well. Saying he was a man of simple faith does not mean his faith was simplistic. He simply chose to believe in God's providence and in the goodness of other people. As a result, he was content that events would work out the way they were meant to.

In the end, while we may judge him harshly, while we may recoil from what we not so lovingly call his wimpiness, the rabbinic sages judge him almost wholly for the good. According to Bava Batra 17a: Isaac was one of three people who had a foretaste of world to come in this world, one of six over whom the angel of death had no power, one of seven whose bodies were not devoured by worms, one of three upon whom the yetzer hara had no sway. The Mincha service and offering are attributed to Isaac, according to Berachot 26b. Most tellingly, he was the only one of the patriarchs whose name wasn't changed. He didn't need to add a Heh, God's name, to his own as his parents did, Avram to Avraham and Sarai to Sarah, to be a part of the covenant. He didn't need to wrestle with God as his son did, having his name changed from Yaakov to Yisrael, meaning one who struggles with the Divine. He simply chose the path of belief, loyalty, and faith. May it be God's will, that during this new year, 5773, that we, as individuals and as a people, be blessed with just a little bit more of these "Isaac-like" qualities in our own lives.