

Toledot, Generations
Genesis 25:19-28:9
October 27, 2018

On Isaac:

Moving from Abraham's childlike trust to Isaac's work of developing mature faith, independent of outcome. Where Hesed meets Gevurah, where love knows the necessary benefit of restraint, and discipline.

Every Jew hears the perplexing story of the binding of Isaac, even if they go to services only once a year. It is part of our daily liturgy and part of the Rosh Hashanah service. And what are we supposed to make of it? Here is the story of a father and a passive son.

Isaac is a quiet center of many family dramas. His mother, Sarah, gave birth to Isaac in her old age. Then, because of her concern about his birthright, she threw out Hagar and Isaac's brother Ishmael from the tribe. Isaac was almost sacrificed by his father in that drama up on the mountain. And, then his son and his wife deceived Isaac in his blind and waning years.

He is depicted as an introvert, and a contemplative. (Gen 24:63 "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at eventide.") His journey is not one of space and motion and time, but an inward journey of spiritual development, which makes him capable of becoming a powerful and selfless presence. He bridges Abraham's complete unrestrained love of God with the discipline and understanding necessary to live well in this world. He knows the light within the darkness, and can speak with God by Name. He renews the blessing for the next generation, for all the generations, always dwelling by the wellspring, by the Source of the living waters. He can hold the understanding of the roles of darkness and light with such an expansive spirit that he can contain both, and raise them up to God and unite people in *shalom*, wholeness. This is only possible with the patience of the largest view of life, rather than fear and narrow self-interest. He demonstrates the power of the contemplative spirit.

Abimelech was able to see Isaac's quiet strength, and moved toward him with respect and a pact of peace after banishing him from the land. Isaac was capable of receiving him in a kingly manner, welcoming Abimelech with humanity, and not as an historic enemy.

Isaac's restraint and expansiveness of spirit are a model for us. We can learn to follow Isaac in his capacity to comprehend complexity, to hold the tension of the opposites, holding both darkness and light. And by valuing love and peace while taking responsibility for the welfare of all, he was not simply serving immediate self-interest.

Isaac kept digging in the parched desert and connecting to the continuous flow of water, always close to the well spring, the spring of living waters, where ever he was. First redigging his father's wells, and then deepening the practice with refinement of character, in digging four more wells.

The digging of the wells marks his journey. We can deeply consider his journey, connect with his journey through the names of Isaac's wells, and find where his journey is echoed in our own.

We are all Isaac.

Any child who looks into his or her parent's eyes, and is not seen is Isaac. If the parent is wrapped up in his or her dramas, or demons or gods, and when the child looks up, there is only darkness. To varying degrees, of course, we are all left by ourselves on the altar, as a sacrifice. To varying degrees we all know betrayal.

For the resilient, in that moment of knowing abandonment, what appears in that darkness is the budding possibility of transcendent light, of understanding, the well spring of a deeper connection. For the resilient, when we are bound on the altar, we look up, look in, and we know spirit is alive in us, for us. That becomes the gateway to the incomprehensible Divine mystery. Then the task becomes learning to live well with this new understanding of the presence of darkness and light. That is the journey. Understanding gives rise to compassion, expansiveness and faith. It is not destroyed by the narrowness of conflict and hatred, but understands narrowness, also.

p.41 Book of Legends

“...the Holy One appeared above the angels and flung open the firmament. Isaac lifted up his eyes, and, as he beheld the chambers of the chariot, he trembled and shuddered.

The ministering angels stood in rows upon rows, crying and weeping, as they said to one another, “Behold, one who is unique is about to slaughter, and one who is also unique is about to be slaughtered.”

Zohar, Vol 10, p227, footnote 14

See *Pirque de Rabbi Eli'ezer* 31:

“Rabbi Yehuda said, ‘When the blade touched his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed. When he heard His voice from between the two *keruvim*, saying, *Lay not your hand upon the lad* (Gen 22:12), his soul returned to his body...”

niggun

Part I. Preparing for the journey of entering Isaac's path

The Zohar begins this portion with a discussion between Torah and God.

Quoting Zohar:

“Come and see: When the blessed Holy One desired—when it arose in His will—to create the world, He gazed into Torah and created it. For every act of creation throughout the world, the blessed Holy One gazed into Torah and created...

As He was about to create Adam, Torah exclaimed: ‘If a human being is created and then proceeds to sin, and You punish him—why should the work of Your hands be in vain, since he will be unable to endure Your judgment?

He replied, ‘I have already prepared *teshuvah*, returning, before creating the world.”

Zohar, Vol II, Daniel Matt translation, p. 257.

Now Isaac dwelled by the well of "*Be'er Lahai Roi*"

“This is "*A well of living waters--Isaac, as it is written, Isaac dwelled by the well Lahai Roi, precisely! The well--Shekinah, (la-hai), of the Living One—(Hei), Life of, the Worlds: Righteous One, Vitality of the Worlds; they are not to be separated. He lives in two worlds: above, upper world; and with the lower world, enduring, glowing through Him.*"
Ibid., p.261

“Come and see: The moon is illumined only when seeing the sun; upon seeing Him, She shines. So, this *well, sees the Living One*, precisely, and is then illumined, sustained by living waters, *seeing the Living One—to be filled and illumined by this Living One.*"
(Ibid., p. 261.)

Isaac dwelled by the well of living waters: the Living One, Shekinah, Life of the Worlds, the Righteous One, Vitality of the Worlds. They are not to be separated. Isaac lives in two worlds: above, the upper world; and enduring in the lower world, glowing though the Presence.

This well is of the indwelling Presence, a living connection flowing between heaven and earth.

The Well of Living Waters, where the Living One knows me, sees me.

How can we bear to be seen unless we know *teshuvah*, unless we know we are met with compassion? The pain would be unbearable without it.

Wholeness includes all parts of our nature, the spiritual and the embodied. The animal and the cunning both issue from us. These are the twins. We are both of the twins of Isaac, both Esau and Jacob. We know this.

“For they have established that a person really has two angelic messengers from above to couple with him, one on the right and one on the left, coupling with him, appearing wherever he does anything, called the Good Impulse [*yeitzer ha-tov*] and Evil Impulse [*yeitzer ha-rah*].”

Ibid. p. 305

Esau--ruddy, hairy, of the earth, a hunter in the fields and woods.

He is a fully mortal human.

His angel is the angel of death.

His path is the conquest of the raw, base forces in the world, harnessing his *yeitzer ha-rah* for the good.

Jacob's path is the cultivation of the *yeitzer ha-tov*. His is the path of refinement. Jacob is described as simple, over-reaching, and cunning. Yet, he is the one, in the work of his life, who dreams the ladder between heaven and earth. He wrestles with the divine messenger face to face and prevails, although wounded. He opens up to transcendence, becoming Israel. And we are all included, as Israel.

In the Zohar, that angel with whom Jacob wrestles is Samael, “power and strength of Esau, who made peace with Jacob”.

Zohar, Vol II, Daniel Matt, translation, pp. 305-6

“Come and see: Since Jacob trusted in the blessed Holy One and all his ways were for His sake, *He caused his enemies to be at peace with him*—Samael, power and strength of Esau, who made peace with Jacob. Since [Samael...] made peace with [Jacob...] and confirmed those blessings, Esau made peace with [Jacob]; and until Jacob was at peace with that official appointed over him, Esau did not make peace with him. So everywhere power below depends on power above.”

Ibid., p. 305-6

“If one comes to purify himself and engage in commands of Torah, that Good Impulse coupled with him overpowers the Evil Impulse, who then makes peace with him, turning into his servant. But when a person relapses, setting out to defile himself, that Evil Impulse overpowers and overwhelms the Good Impulse...Indeed, when that person comes to purify himself, how potently he is empowered as the Good Impulse prevails. Then *He causes his enemies to be at peace with him*, for that Evil Impulse is overturned by the Good Impulse...So when a person follows the commands of Torah, *He causes even his enemies to be at peace with him*—the Evil Impulse.”

Ibid., p. 305

Jacob and Esau make peace, become whole.

How is that possible, that the two sides can meet in the middle and embrace?
How is it that their Father blesses both twins?

Real strength comes from knowing we can hold, witness, know anything.
Then the light can emerge from within the darkness.
Both Jacob and Esau are essential, twin halves of our selves. Acceptance is the beginning of refinement.
Teshuvah transmutes the obstacles into wisdom.
This is our work.

Chant: Ayecha? Hineyni. (Where are you? I am here.)

Silence

Part II. Path of refinement

During a time of famine, Isaac lived in the land where his father had resided. He lived there with God's blessings and permission from Abimelech, the King of the Philistines. He drew upon the wells that his father had dug. Abimelech became alarmed at Isaac's success and the wells were stopped up, and Isaac was ordered to go away.

(Gen 26:15-16)

Isaac left that place and:

"Isaac dug anew the water well which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them."
(Gen 26:18)

Isaac reestablished the flow of his father's well.

The Sefat Emet wrote:

"My grandfather and teacher used to say this about the wells the patriarchs dug. Everywhere there is a hidden point of God. We only have to remove the external covering in order to reveal that innermost point which is called 'a well of living waters'."

Sefat Emet, Arthur Green, translator, p. 37.

From the Zohar:

"Abraham endeavored and dug a well of water. Isaac, following him, endeavored and dug a well of water. Jacob found it prepared and sat down by it. They all went striving after it, to fortify themselves fittingly in perfect faith."

Zohar, Vol II, Daniel Matt translator, p. 282.

"Therefore the patriarchs fortified themselves in supernal faith--for the sake of the supernal well, in which dwells mystery of perfect faith."

Ibid.,p.283

"So it is written: *You will be like a watered garden*. What does this mean? It's supernal waters never cease for all eternity; this garden, watered by them, is saturated constantly.

Like a spring--that flowing, gushing river whose waters never cease.

Come and see: a well of flowing water. This is the supernal mystery within the mystery of faith: a well containing *a spring*, filled by that *spring*...

Come and see: That spring and the well are one, all called 'well' for the inflowing fountain never ceases and the well is filled. Whoever gazes at this well will gaze at the mystery of supernal faith. This is the symbol of the patriarchs striving to dig a well of water within supernal mystery. One must not separate fountain from well; all is one"

Ibid.,p.284

(some silence)

And Isaac's servant found new springs of water, which were not his father's.

These new springs are the three wells of Isaac's experience, his own path.

These are our wells, where we necessarily must stop for a while and do our work.

This is the necessary work of *teshuvah*. The possibility of *teshuvah* grows from all our betrayals.

The first well is the well of Contention, Deception, Strife. (*Esek*)
(Gen 26:20)

"Oh YHVH, deliver my soul from lying lips!" (Psalm 120:2)

Ibid., p. 295

Whose lying lips are these?

Do I lie to myself?

Is this the well I want to drink from? Is this where I want to abide?

Do I have the courage to be honest?

Isaac can leave this place behind.

What do we need to leave behind? Sometimes we need to leave something behind over and over again before something new can happen.

(some silence)

The second well is the well of Harassment, or Hatred. (*Sitnah*)
(Gen 26:21)

Who is harassing whom? Myself, the ones closest to me?

Am I being harassed?

Is this the well I want to drink from? Is this where I want to abide?

Do I have the courage to detach from my harassing nature?

How does my hatred serve me?

Can I leave this behind, over and over again, until it no longer becomes the well I draw upon?

Isaac leaves this place.

(some silence)

The third well is the well of Ample Broad Space, *Rehovot*
(Gen 26:22)

"Who is *Rehovot*? That expanse encompassing all sparkling stars, a bubbling spring whose waters never cease, as is said: *A river issues from Eden to water the garden* (Gen 2;10). That is *Rehovot, Expanses*. There she *raises her voice*, upper and lower, and all is one....

Once one knows the mystery of Wisdom and prepares himself within, what is written? *Afterward build your house*--the soul within one's body, to be cultivated so that one becomes consummate."
Ibid., p. 286

Refinement completed.

This ample, broad space can hold all aspects of our humanity.

Everyone's humanity.

Can I let all of who I am show up, be conscious?
Can I know all manner of suffering and joy?

Do I have the courage to allow all to be present, to be revealed in due time?

Do I want to abide here and drink from these waters?

Am I willing to drink from this well?

"*YHWH will guide you*, continually, and satisfy your soul in scorched regions... and invigorate your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail."(Isaiah 58:11)
Ibid., p. 283, footnote 189

"So it is written: *You will be like a watered garden*. What does this mean? Its supernal waters never cease for all eternity; this garden, watered by them, is saturated constantly.

Like a spring—that flowing, gushing river whose waters never cease.

Come and see: a well of flowing water. This is a supernal mystery within the mystery of faith: a well containing *a spring*, filled by that *spring*...

Come and see: that *spring* and well are one, all called 'well' for the inflowing fountain never ceases and the well is filled. Whoever gazes at this well will gaze at the mystery of supernal faith. This is the symbol of the patriarchs striving to dig a well of water within supernal mystery. One must not separate fountain from well; all is one."

Ibid, p. 284.

Chant:

V'hayitah k'gan raveh - You will be like a watered garden.

Silence

Part III. The seventh well

This is the well of the Oath at Beersheba.

This is the place of the generations.

This is the place where Abraham made a pact of peace with Abimelech, planted a tree and invoked the name of God. (Gen 22:30-34)

This will become the place of departure for Jacob after his great deception, where he leaves from in order to have the dream of the ladder, which carries the angels from heaven to earth and earth to heaven. (Gen 28:10)

For Isaac this is the place where God speaks to him and gives him His blessing.

Isaac builds the altar for God here.

He invokes God by Name. He knows God's Name.

Only then does he begin digging the well.

That same powerful king, Abimelech, who dismissed Isaac from his lands, now comes to Isaac wanting a pact of peace. Abimelech recognizes Isaac's true strength. Peace between them is promised.

A promise, an oath, is an act of faith.

Only after that act of faith is water discovered in the well. The spring within the well begins to flow.

(as retold from Gen 26:23-33)

We discover faith, the deep well of faith after our conversation with God...after

we construct an altar to raise up what we need to offer....and we make a pact for peace....then we can discover the deep spring within this well. Its depth is infinite and touches mystery. The spring is continuous. Its source is outside the limits of time and place.

Here is our altar by the well.

Here is our offering of *teshuvah*.

Here is the water.

If one comes to purify himself and engage in commands of Torah, that Good Impulse coupled with him overpowers the Evil Impulse, who then makes peace with him, turning into his servant. But when a person relapses, setting out to defile himself, that Evil Impulse overpowers and overwhelms the Good Impulse, as we have established. Indeed, when that person comes to purify himself, how potently he is empowered as the Good Impulse prevails. Then *He causes his enemies to be at peace with him*, for that Evil Impulse is overturned by the Good Impulse. Therefore Solomon said, *Better to be lightly esteemed and have a servant* (ibid. 1:9). What does this mean: *and have a servant*? The Evil Impulse. So when a person follows the commands of Torah, *He causes even his enemies to be at peace with him*—the Evil Impulse."

Ibid., p. 305.

The darkness becomes the servant of light. It is a necessary union on our spiritual path.

**Chant: Kosi R'vayah, My cup overflows
(Psalm 23:5)**

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