



Will the Real Yitzchak Stand Up?

After reading about Avraham's pathfinding journey to Eretz Yisrael (Canaan) and learning of his exploits, his *Chesed*, his concern for humanity, and even his prowess in battle, we are dismayed perhaps to confront Yitzchak's apparent passivity in our Parsha. Indeed, Yitzchak is known as "Pachad Yitzchak" – 'The fear of Isaac,' an accolade that does not, at first glance, compliment our revered ancestor. Moreover, he is introduced as the "son of Avraham" (Bereishit 25:19), not someone in his own right.

Rav Steinsaltz observed that Yitzchak took very little initiative in his lifetime; most of the activities associated with Yitzchak appear to have been done by other people. Even his wife Rivka was found for him. If Yitzchak achieved something, it was to preserve his father's wells – a seeming copy of the efforts made by Avraham in his encounters with Avimelech.

Perhaps the pivotal event in Yitzchak's

life was the Akeida, the "Binding of Isaac." On the surface, it seems that, once again Yitzchak is submissive. We do not find him resisting. He only asks, "Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" The only other word he spoke was "Father" – to which Avraham responds simply, "Here I am."

Now, however, the narrative begins to offer us a clue as to Yitzchak's prowess. For Avraham tells him that God will see to the sheep, and at this point, the "two of them walked on together." The father and son, alone in the world, are united in their mission. Even when later it dawns on Yitzchak what is happening, the two are together.

We ask ourselves, how could both Avraham and Yitzchak reconcile themselves to an act that flew in the face of all that Avraham believed? To an act that mirrored the heathen practice of the peoples around, child sacrifice? To an act that seemed merciless, murder, in fact – an act forbidden even to the children of No'ach? Why did Avraham not object, as he did on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gemorra?

As Elie Wiesel writes: "The father and son walked away, one to slaughter, the other to be slaughtered, responding to the same call, sharing the same allegiance."

Together, they gathered the wood, arranged it on the altar; together they set the stage for the drama to unfold.” What we see is the unswerving faith in Hashem exerted by father and son. This enduring faith was the redeeming feature, the lesson for their ancestors, that in the face of adversity, we do not despair.

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True, Avraham may have predicted the outcome, knowing of the promise that his Yitzchak will succeed him and that his seed will be the heirs to Eretz Yisrael. So was this a set-up? Why then did Avraham not take Hashem to task? All the tests, all the suffering and effort to reach the Promised Land and to preserve his integrity in the face of opposition would have been for naught. Perhaps, as Elie Wiesel suggests, this was a test for God: Would the Almighty, too, see this test to its horrific climax?

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Avraham returns to his lads alone. What happened to Yitzchak? Was he traumatized? Was he afraid to look his father in the face? Was he mortified by the death of his mother who, according to the Midrash, died when hearing of the “sacrifice?”

To Yitzchak’s credit, despite everything, he continued with his life. As he followed his father to the altar, so his mission was to maintain his father’s tradition. He would never be an empire builder. Yitzchak’s challenge, as Rav Steinsaltz records, was finding his own place in a

world dominated by his father’s genius. He carried on. Yitzchak taught us about the importance of maintaining the tradition: There was no blaze of glory, no thanks, just a relentless struggle.

Yitzchak rebuilds the wells that were blocked. Those shafts represented the source of life, Torah, if you will. To paraphrase Wiesel, Yitzchak personifies the second generation. He continued his life not in fear but in awe of Hashem. Yitzchak’s passivity turns out to be “the sign of his instrumentality.” In his heart, he preferred Esav to Yaakov; maybe Yitzchak could have been a person of action. But Yitzchak teaches that everyone has a time and place.

Yitzchak represents *Gevurah*, the aspect of *Din*, justice and restriction, and acts as bulwark to Avraham’s attribute of *Chesed*, loving-kindness. Yitzchak thus prepares the stage for Yaakov who will launch the Jewish family and represent *Tiferet*, that harmonious balance between *Din* and *Chesed*.

May we have the insight and understanding to know when to take on the role of Yitzchak and when to be the pathfinder. ■

Regarding *Divrei Menachem* on Parshat No’ach: Of course the dove brought No’ach an olive leaf, and not as printed.

Shabbat Shalom!

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