



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Yitzchak's Countenance

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת יִצְחָק, בֶּן-אַבְרָהָם: הוֹלִיד אֶת-יִצְחָק
(בראשית כה:יט)

“These are the offspring of Yitzchak, son of Avraham; Avraham begot Yitzchak.” (*B'reishit* 25:19)

Rashi notes a glaring redundancy: ‘Why does the verse repeat the fact that Yitzchak is Avraham’s son? There is no apparent need to restate “Avraham begot Yitzchak.”

Rashi answers that the Torah felt compelled to add that “Avraham begot Yitzchak” to address the fact that the scoffers had been saying that Sarah, who had lived for so long with Avraham without bearing a child, must have become pregnant by Avimelech. In order to refute this slander, God made Yitzchak’s features so undeniably similar to Avraham’s that even the scoffers had to admit that it was indeed “Avraham who had begotten Yitzchak” (Rashi, 25:19).

The Beit HaLevi’s Question

Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik’s zt”l namesake and great grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik (1820-1892) in his work *Beit HaLevi* asked: ‘Why call them “scoffers?” They were much worse than

scoffers. They claimed that Avraham, the righteous leader of the generation, was not Yitzchak’s legitimate father. Would it not have been more accurate for Rashi to employ the word *reshaim*, the wicked of the generation?’

The *Beit HaLevi* follows with a second query: The people were aware that Avimelech was punished for absconding Sarah. To assert that Avimelech is the biological father is simply ludicrous. What was their intent in making this claim?

Rabbi Soloveitchik (1903-93) responds to his great grandfather’s query. In this context the Rav offers a conceptual idea which more broadly elucidates Yitzchak’s unique role as a forefather of the Jewish nation.

Yitzchak’s Identity

We know so little about Yitzchak’s life. Strikingly, the Torah assigned three *parshiot* to the life of Avraham and even more *parshiot* to the life of Yaakov. In contrast there is not a single *parsha*, with the possible exception of Toldot, in which Yitzchak is the dominant figure.

One of the only episodes the Torah shares about the life of Yitzchak is the event surrounding ‘the wells’. The *Plishtim* had stopped up his wells by filling them with dirt. The *Plishtim* claimed that invading

armies could use these wells for water supply and they needed to be destroyed (Rashi).

Rabbi Soloveitchik stated that this is more than a story about wells. The following verse in the passage is essential to interpreting its deeper meaning: “And Yitzhak again dug the wells of water which they had dug in the days of his father, Avraham (26:18).”

Additionally, the verse which follows, describing the wells, employs the term ‘*Be’er mayim chayim*’ which literally means a ‘well of living water.’ Fresh water is a symbol of Torah and wisdom and sustenance. In biblical times the well was also a place where it was common for people to gather and disseminate and receive information.

According to the Rav, the *Plishtim* stopping up the wells of Avraham symbolically alludes to the idea that in their eyes Yitzhak had little chance of retaining his father’s doctrines. ‘The scoffers of the generation’ refused to believe that Yitzhak would inherit his father’s ideology. They laughed at the idea that a young lad of the new generation would continue to carry on Avraham’s vision. When Avraham died, people said, his entire philosophy will perish (*Mesorat HaRav, Bereishis*, p.195)

Moreover, the scoffers contended that he will be drawn to other influential personalities of his day. This is the meaning of Rashi’s comment that the scoffers said that Yitzhak was ‘a descendant of Avimelech’. He would be apt to be influenced by the milieu and societal

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norms of his day.

Therefore Rashi states that Yitzchak's features were identical to his father Avraham. This can be understood figuratively. He mirrored his father's pathway. Yitzchak courageously carried on the precious legacy of his parents.

The name given to Avraham's son at the time of birth is emblematic of the notion that others questioned Yitzchak's capability of maintaining his father's teaching. The Rav quoted the commentary of *Yonatan ben Uziel* who translated the word Yitzchak to mean laughter. In other words, people laughed at the event. They sneered at the idea that this child would be the bearer of his father's teachings and uphold his enormous legacy.

Finally, returning to the pasuk cited above, Rabbi Solovetichik cited the *Ibn Ezra* who posited that the Hebrew term *holeed*, as in, *Avraham holeed et Yitzchak*, does not merely mean that he begot a son. Rather it means to raise, or to nurture. Therefore there is no redundancy in the verse. The Torah is teaching that Avraham successfully inculcated his values in his beloved child. Throughout his lifetime Yitzchak loyally embraced and solidified the principles and ethos he imbibed during his upbringing. (*Mesorat HaRav, Bereishit*, p. 184)

Yitzchak in the Eyes of the Kabbalah

In this context the Rav cited the classic Kabbalistic notion that each forefather represents a particular trait: Avraham = *Chesed*, Yitzchak = *Gevura*, and Yaakov =

Tiferet.

Yitzchak's persona is identified with the trait of *Gevurah*. How is this to be understood?

The simplest way to translate *Gevurah* is strength. Yitzchak's *gevurah* relates to his inner strength and conviction. He was determined to internalize the successes and accomplishments of his father. Avraham was a revolutionary, Yitzchak was not.

The tradition which teaches that Yitzchak was the quintessence of *gevurah* relates to his distinctive capacity to retreat and withdraw. Yitzchak was concerned with preserving his father's innovations.

Yitzchak was the perfect man to follow in the footsteps of his trailblazing father. Avraham's contribution would have been completely lost had it not been for Yitzchak. He 'unplugged all the wells' - he also 'called the wells by the same name that his father had named them.' The intent of this episode is meant to teach that Yitzchak does not seek his own fame. Yitzchak heroically succeeded in concretizing his father's legacy.

The Face of the Vilna Gaon

The Rav shared the following personal episode which sheds light on his perspective regarding the personality of Yitzchak.

"The Rav recalled that when he was a youth in Khaslavichy, the secretary of the *bet din*, who was a very old man, recounted to the young Yosef Dov that he recalled as a boy

having seen a very old cantor, who when he was a child, had been a member of an itinerant choir that would go from town to town. The cantor had himself recalled that once, when this choir was in Vilna to perform, he had seen a very imposing man, tall and handsome, walking in the street surrounded by his disciples in a semi-circle. When he inquired who the man was, he was told that he was the Hasid of Vilna [In his lifetime, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), because of his pious ways, was called the Hasid).

Hearing this made a powerful impression on the Rav. He had met another man who had met another man who had seen the Gaon.

“I felt the link between generations, the confluence of the mighty streams of the mesorah, not only in the immediacy of the relationship between the generations of the tradition, the dialogue that transcends time.” (The Rav, Rakeffet, Vol 1, p.410)

Each forefather contributed an essential teaching to the character of the nation of Israel for eternity. To be a Jew means steadfastly safeguarding the teachings received from the previous generation. The idea of meeting a person, who met a person who saw the face of the Vilna Gaon is emblematic of an unbroken chain.

The face of Yitzchak took on the facial features of his father Avaraham. The *mesorah* of our people lives on in those who possess the *gevura*, the deep devotion to our faith's glorious past. Ensuring a celebrated future. ■

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