



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Strength, Patience, and Hope

When I was a young boy, I had two distinct images of a strong man. One was of Charles Atlas. Do you remember him? If you do, you are no longer a youngster. Pictures of Charles Atlas appeared on the rear cover of the comic books that I voraciously read as a child. His muscular body was presented as the model of strength, and all of us "97 pound weaklings" were urged to correspond with Mr. Atlas, who, through his "dynamic tension" technique, could make similarly muscular men out of all of us.

The other image was of a man I knew

who attended the small synagogue that my father, of blessed memory, frequented every Monday and Thursday, when the Torah was read. I don't think that anyone in the *shul* knew the man's real name. Everyone referred to him as "the *Shtarker*," the Strong Man. I was then no more than eight years old, so to my eyes, he was at least seven feet tall. He was certainly head and shoulders above everyone else in that tiny synagogue. His physical prowess was demonstrated when he lifted the Torah after the Torah reading concluded. He lifted it high and extended his arms so that ten or twelve of the Torah columns were exposed. My memory may deceive me, but I think that no one else in the *shul* was ever given the honor of lifting the Torah. No one else could compete with the *Shtarker's* feat.

Over the years, I have come to reflect upon the many "*shtarkers*" in the Bible. Samson is one obvious candidate for the title. But even kindly Abraham was a warrior, and a victorious one. Jacob was proud of his triumphant use of "my sword and my bow." Moses was able to slay the Egyptian who tormented his Jewish victim. Joshua, Saul, and David were all "*shtarkers*" who led their people in battle.

One biblical figure stands out as a "non-*shtarker*," a gentle soul, perhaps even a pacifist. I refer, of course, to Isaac, the hero

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of the Torah portion we read this week, *Parashat Toledot* (Genesis 25:19-28:9). Isaac commits no aggressive acts, however legitimate they might be, and never even asserts himself verbally.

I have long been conscious of the contrast between Isaac and the other major characters of the Bible. But only recently was I made aware of a fascinating problem. It was brought to my attention by Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv in his excellent book on the weekly Torah portions, entitled *MiSinai Ba* (*He Came From Sinai*). Rabbi Shaviv concurs with my view of Isaac as a decidedly non-militant personality. But he is troubled by the fact that in the Jewish mystical tradition, the trait of *gevurah*, strength, is assigned to Isaac and not to the other Patriarchs. Thus, in Kabbalistic terminology, Abraham represents *chesed*, compassion, and Jacob stands for *tiferet*, harmony. It is gentle Isaac who carries the banner of *gevurah*. How are we to understand this perplexing attribution of strength to that patriarch who seems to least exemplify it?

Rabbi Shaviv answers this dilemma with the following provocative sentence: "Forgoing the military option is itself a show of strength." I can accept his formulation, but I choose to modify it slightly. The way I see it, there are two types of strength. One way is to exert power. Abraham chose that way when he waged war against the four kings in the story we read just a few short weeks ago. Similarly, Joshua and David found that way necessary in their struggles.

But Isaac knew the secret of another way

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of demonstrating strength. He faced challenges that he could have met aggressively. More than once, he faced hostility. In our *parasha*, we read of the enmity he confronted at the hands of the Philistines, who stopped up the wells he needed to water his flock. In verses 13-22 of chapter 26, we read "...The Philistines envied him... They stopped up all the wells his father had dug..." What was Isaac's response? Not war! Rather, "Isaac departed..." He left the scene, he dug new wells, but again he faced violent opposition. "The herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with him..." They continued to stop his wells. In response, he dug another well and dug yet another well. He persisted, swallowing his pride and suppressing every impulse of striking back violently. Ultimately, he prevailed. Finally, he dug a well which was uncontested.

Some find his patience in the face of his enemies frustrating. But *Midrash Tanchuma* finds it admirable and remarks: "Behold! See what strength Isaac possessed!" The Midrash validates Rabbi Shaviv's contention that sometimes, "forgoing the military option is itself a show of strength."

There is a verse in the biblical *Book of Proverbs* which is particularly apt here.

It reads, "Better to be forbearing than mighty; to have self-control than to conquer a city." (*Proverbs 16:32*).

Isaac's method of achieving goals persistently but patiently is again demonstrated in a very different context in this week's Torah portion. We are told that he was forty years old when he married Rebecca, whereas his children were not born until he was sixty. He suffered twenty years of disappointing childlessness. It would have been perfectly appropriate for him to take another wife, or a concubine, during those twenty years. After all, his father Abraham had done just that, marrying Hagar when Sarah could not bear him a child. Could Isaac not have assumed that Rebecca would have given her consent to such a move, as did his mother Sarah?

Isaac rejected that option. Instead, again patiently and persistently, he chose to pray. He prayed fervently, year after year. The great medieval commentator Rabbi David Kimchi, or Radak, remarks: "He prayed consistently and for a long period of time because he loved Rebecca exceedingly. He did not wish to offend her by taking another wife. Therefore, he persisted in prayer until the Lord answered him."

There are many texts in our tradition that give support to Isaac's way of demonstrating strength. One that particularly intrigues me is this Talmudic statement: "Who is the strongest of the strong? He who transforms his enemy into a friend." This was Isaac's way. He asks us to strive to convert our enemy into a friend.

Another text illustrates that strength is

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more about patient self-control than physical might. It is found in the Talmudic tractate *Kiddushin* 40a, where the tale is told about a certain Rabbi Zadok, who resists the attempts of a particularly powerful noblewoman to lead him astray. He exerts moral strength, and to him the Talmud applies the following biblical verse: "Bless the Lord, O His angels, mighty creatures who do His bidding, ever obedient to His bidding. Bless the Lord, all His hosts, His servants who do His will." (*Psalms* 103:20-21)

Isaac's way recognizes the necessity for great patience and forbearance. If we adopt Isaac's way, we must be prepared for a lengthy process before our challenges are resolved. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, words which have been memorialized in a popular song, "An eternal people does not fear the long and arduous path."

Patience is necessary for those who follow Isaac's way. But a wise woman taught us that patience is but another name for hope. That woman was Jane Austen, who put these words into the mouth of one of the characters in her great novel, *Sense and Sensibility*: "Know your own happiness. You want nothing but patience—or give it a more fascinating name: call it hope." ■

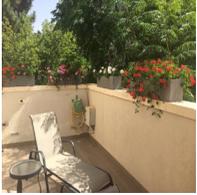
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