



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

Different Forms of Power

The professor was wrong. But in his field of expertise, he was always right.

His name was Dr. Dennis Wrong, and his surname made him the object of much teasing, at least during his childhood. He was a prominent sociologist, and I took a course from him while still in graduate school. The course was entitled “The Sociology of Power.”

I learned a lot from him and kept notes of his lectures for many years. Some years after I took the course, I came across a book he had written, based upon those lectures, and discarded my notes in favor of his text. The title of the book was *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses*.

It was in his course that I began to appreciate that “power” need not involve physical coercion. There are many ways to exert power, ways that are much more effective than brute force. This insight has proven helpful to me in many areas of my personal and professional life. It has even helped me come to grips with a problem that is related to this week’s Torah portion, *Toldot* (*Genesis* 25:19-28:9).

The problem to which I refer does not

directly involve the biblical text. Rather, it is derived from the Kabbalistic tradition, from the book of the *Zohar*. In this tradition, each of the patriarchs is assigned a different spiritual virtue. Abraham, for example, carries the banner of *chesed*, or lovingkindness. This is easy to understand because almost every record that we have of Abraham’s behavior involves qualities such as hospitality and concern for others.

The virtue designated for the patriarch Isaac is *gevurah*, and this presents a problem. *Gevurah* means strength or power, and even after carefully reading the entire narrative of Isaac’s life, we find no evidence of special acts of strength that he performed or displays of might that he exhibited.

For example, Isaac was never involved in a war. He was decidedly pacifist in every conflict that he encountered. This is in stark contrast not only to the other patriarchs but to almost every other biblical hero.

Abraham, for example, courageously pursued the combined armies of four kings in order to rescue his nephew Lot. Jacob wrestled with an angel and boasted of his conquest of a portion of land which he “wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow.” (*Genesis* 48:22) Moses slayed an Egyptian tormentor and waged war against Sichon and the giant Og. Joshua is the quintessential general, and the first kings of Israel, Saul and David, led their people in battle.

But Isaac? We find no trace of martial activity on his part. Why then is strength considered his signal virtue? Why does he, of all the biblical heroes, carry the banner of power.

I first found this dilemma articulated in a wonderful book of commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, *MiSinai Ba*, by contemporary Israeli scholar Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv. Rabbi Shaviv discovered a somewhat obscure passage in the Midrash that not only formulates the question but provides an answer. The passage reads:

“Where do we find that Isaac was a strongman, a man of power? Behold: how many wells he did dig! It is written, ‘And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his (Isaac’s) father’s servants had dug... Isaac dug anew... and gave them the same names... And Isaac’s servants, digging in the wadi, found there a new well of spring water... And then they dug another well... He moved from there to dig yet another well...’ (*Genesis 26:15-22*). Behold the power that he possessed!” (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Buber Edition, *Toldot 7*).

Isaac’s power did not resort to coercion and involved neither aggression nor physical force. His was the power of persistence, of the stubborn commitment to pursue his goals despite the obstacles with which he was confronted. He avoids conflicts and seeks alternate paths to his objectives, yet he projects neither weakness nor cowardice. Ultimately, he achieves his objectives and exclaims that they are especially blessed, as we read, “Now at last the Lord has granted us ample space to increase in the land.”

Isaac’s capacity to persist in the face



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of frustration is demonstrated in the very beginning of our Torah portion. There we read of how he and his wife Rebecca face the challenges of infertility. What was his response? Prayer! As we read, “Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife... And the Lord responded to his plea...” (*Genesis 25:21*). The Torah does not tell us just how long he prayed. We are left to “do the math” for ourselves. Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebecca, and sixty years old when Esau and Jacob were born. He persisted in prayer for no less than twenty years. That is how he demonstrated strength and power.

Professor Wrong does not offer Isaac as an exemplar of this alternate form of power. But he does enumerate numerous examples, drawing from history and literature and sociological research, of a wide variety of forms of power which do not involve violence. As always, the discoveries of modern social science find precedents in ancient Jewish texts. Consider, for example, the fact that while the Talmud in Tractate Kiddushin 49b speaks of the strong man as one whose “fellows fear him because of his might”, a contrasting definition is offered in the Talmudic tome entitled *Avot D’Rabbi Nathan*. There we read, “Who is the strongest of the strong? He who can convert his enemy into a friend.”

The Sages memorialize Isaac’s

paradigm in an unforgettable passage in the beginning of the fourth chapter of *Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers*. There we read, “Ben Zoma said... Who is strong? One who masters his evil impulse, as it is written, ‘He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules over his spirit is better than he who conquers the city.’ (*Proverbs 16:32*)”

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the brilliant ethicist who lived in the latter half of the 19th century, explains that besides physical strength there are two models of *gevura*. One way is to “master the evil impulse” and become “slow to anger.” But, insists Rabbi Salanter, such an approach suppresses but does not totally eliminate the evil impulse. A person who chooses this way may be “slow to anger,” but anger still resides within him.

The alternate model is the person who “rules over his spirit.” He totally circumvents his evil impulse. He finds ways, writes Rabbi Salanter, to “conquer the city” by persuading its inhabitants that his rule will benefit them. He demonstrates his care and compassion for them and thus wins them over. This is the preferred way to demonstrate strength.

I conclude by paraphrasing a remark by Rabbi Shaviv in his helpful essay:

Throughout our history, resorting to struggle and even war was often necessary. Certainly Abraham and Jacob, and even Moses, had to follow that route.

But it is so comforting to know that there is another way, Isaac’s way. It is a way which avoids battle and heroically persists in the search for paths to blessings and roads to peace. ■

