

PARASHAT TOLDOT

"Avraham Bore Yitzchak..."

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Our parasha assembles all the stories in which Yitzchak features as the hero. It is well known that the Torah recounts very few stories about Yitzchak, and in fact Yitzchak is the dominant character in the events of only one chapter - chapter 26. Immediately thereafter, it is Yaakov who takes the spotlight, and from then on the Torah recounts his life (although Yitzchak lives on for many more years).

The limited number of stories dealing with Yitzchak seems to be connected to his unique status among the forefathers. The scope of this shiur does not permit us to expound on this idea at length; it should merely be noted that Yaakov - like Avraham, his grandfather - departs for Charan, and after living there for many years he is commanded by God to return to Canaan. Upon his return, he follows exactly the path of Avraham, and builds altars in the same places (Shekhem, Beit El and Chevron). This phenomenon leads us to consider whether perhaps Yaakov renewed, or re-started, the process of the selection of the forefathers as founders of the Israelite nation, against the backdrop of the tragic split between him and his brother Esav - both of whom were born as progeny and a continuation for Yitzchak and Rivka, but who nevertheless were not both chosen to fulfill this task: Esav is rejected and Yaakov alone is chosen. In contrast to Avraham and Yaakov, both of whom are chosen by God to establish a nation, Yitzchak stands as the natural and obvious continuation of Avraham, and as such his status differs from that of both his father and his son.

Following the brief introduction above, let us now analyze those of Yitzchak's actions which the Torah does recount and describe. When reading the stories about Yitzchak, it is difficult to avoid being reminded over and over of Avraham. It would seem that this similarity is not simply coincidental and that the Torah itself hints at this - sometimes even explicitly.

At the very start of the stories about Yitzchak (chapter 26) we hear of the famine in the land, owing to which Yitzchak is forced to move to Gerar. In the description of the famine the Torah stresses: "And there was a famine in the land, other than the first famine which was in the days of Avraham." Why should the Torah worry that we might mistakenly think that this referred to the same famine? After all, when Avraham went down to Egypt and to Gerar, Yitzchak had not even been born yet! Apparently, the Torah is deliberately ensuring that we will remember the famine which afflicted Avraham and which forced him to wander to Egypt and to Gerar. Moreover, the Torah - well aware of

the similarity which is to develop further on between the story of this famine and the story of the famine in the days of Avraham - points out that despite the great similarity, we should not think that the same famine is being referred to.

Yitzchak, as mentioned, moves to Gerar, but from God's words to him ("Do not descend to Egypt") we deduce that his first thought was indeed to head for Egypt. In this way the Torah integrates and places in the background the two descents of Avraham as a result of famine - the first to Egypt, and the second to Gerar.

We are also reminded of Avraham in the two blessings which Yitzchak receives. The first takes place on the eve of his departure for Gerar; the second as he finally leaves Gerar. In both, Avraham plays a leading role. The first is simply a repetition of the vow which God makes to Avraham following the Akeda, as God explicitly states: "And I shall establish the vow which I vowed to Avraham your father" (26:3). This is not a new promise, meant specially for Yitzchak, and it would even seem that Yitzchak receives this berakha because of his "zekhut avot" (the merit of his father): "Because Avraham listened to My voice and kept my charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws" (26:5). A comparison of the language used in both vows demonstrates this clearly:

God's Promise to Avraham (at Akedat Yitzchak, 22:16-19): "I shall surely multiply your descendants like the stars of the heaven, and your descendants shall inherit the gate of their enemies, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your descendants because you have listened to My voice."

God's Promise to Yitzchak (leaving for Gerar, 26:2-5): "And I shall multiply your descendants like the stars of the heaven, and I shall give your descendants all these lands, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your descendants because Avraham listened to My voice."

The second blessing which Yitzchak receives is also given in the merit of Avraham, his father: "And God appeared to him that night and said, I am the Lord of Avraham your father; Do not fear for I am with you, and I shall bless you and shall multiply your descendants for the sake of Avraham My servant" (26:24).

The continuation of the story of Yitzchak follows almost word for word the account of Avraham's life: The claim that "She is my sister," when Yitzchak fears that he will be killed for Rivka, mirrors Avraham's problems with exactly the same king, Avimelekh, as well as with Pharaoh (although there are some significant differences, which we shall deal with later on). Following the rapprochement between Yitzchak and Avimelekh they enter into a covenant, and this too parallels the covenant forged between Avraham and Avimelekh.

Between the episode of "She is my sister" and the covenant, the Torah hints at another interesting comparison between father and son, concerning the digging of the wells. Here the Torah emphasizes that Yitzchak dug out once again "the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Avraham his father," since "all the wells which the servants of his

father dug in the days of Avraham, his father, had been sealed up by the Pelishtim" (26:18,15). Moreover, Yitzchak himself stresses this connection by naming the wells: He calls them "names like those names which his father had called them." And just as the servants of Avimelekh stole Avraham's wells ("And Avraham chided Avimelekh because of the well of water which the servants of Avimelekh had stolen" - 21:25), they also once again steal those dug by the servants of Yitzchak.

This in effect summarizes all that we know about Yitzchak; we have seen how the events of his life parallel almost exactly those of his father's life (with the important exception - which we have left out of our discussion - of Yitzchak's sowing of the land and the great abundance of produce with which God blesses him) and how the Torah itself draws our attention to this phenomenon.

What is the significance of this amazing similarity between the lives of these two forefathers?

We have already hinted above at Yitzchak's status as the continuation of his father rather than as the initiator of a new path (in contrast, obviously, to Avraham, as well as to Yaakov). But beyond this, let us examine the details of the principal relationship described in the chapter, the relationship of Yitzchak and Avimelekh. (In fact, everything that we are told about Yitzchak relates in some way to Avimelekh: the descent to his kingdom - Gerar - because of the famine, the story of "she is my sister" and Avimelekh observing Yitzchak and Rivka through the window, the battle between the servants of Yitzchak and the servants of Avimelekh over the wells, the covenant between Yitzchak and Avimelekh).

In order to understand the significance of the story, let us first turn to the similar circumstances involving Avraham (20:1-18).

Following God's message to Avimelekh in a dream ("Behold, you will die because of the woman whom you took"), Avimelekh addresses sharp words to Avraham: "What have you done to us, and how have I wronged you, that you have brought a great sin upon me and upon my kingdom? Things which should not be done you have done to me" (20:9). It is noteworthy that Avimelekh raises the moral problem -it is a "great sin" to take a married woman, even according to the legal system of Gerar, and Avraham almost caused Avimelekh to transgress this serious sin. Avraham, for his part, answers that it is the citizens of Gerar themselves who do not follow this moral standard: "For I said, but there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me for my wife." [It should be remembered that the concept of "fear of God" as used in the Torah invariably refers to personal conscience; a natural, inborn morality.] In other words, we have before us a moral conflict between Avraham and Avimelekh, with each claiming that the other has an ethical defect. The Torah refrains from passing explicit judgment, but it would seem that there is a slight hint in support of Avimelekh. While Avraham claims that there is no fear of God in his kingdom, the Torah describes how, when Avimelekh tells his servants that he almost sinned with a married woman, they are very fearful: "And the people were very afraid." It seems that there is, after all, some measure of moral conscience in Gerar.

Furthermore, the question which Avimelekh poses to God: "Will You kill even a righteous nation?" - i.e., his concern for Divine justice, is strikingly similar to Avraham's question to God before the destruction of Sedom. There Avraham protests before God, "Will You destroy the righteous together with the wicked?" In the argument over the fate of Sedom, Avraham is presented as a moral pillar with whom God "consults:" "For I know him, that he shall command his children and his household like him that they should keep God's way, to perform righteousness and justice" (18:19). This status of Avraham is now threatened by Avimelekh, who suddenly is also presented as a moral character seeking justice. Regardless of whether this view is accurate or not, at the conclusion of the story Avimelekh is certainly presented as a character who performs kindness. Despite Avraham's actions, which almost caused him to transgress a "great sin," Avimelekh nevertheless gives him sheep, cattle, servants, and even offers him land: "Behold, my land is before you - dwell wherever is good in your eyes." Bearing in mind Pharaoh's reaction in the same situation - "And Pharaoh commanded men over him and they sent him and his wife away" (12:20), Avimelekh appears in a particularly favorable light. In contrast to Pharaoh who banishes Avraham, as we might reasonably expect in relation to a person who almost caused a great sin and because of whom God's wrath was aroused, Avimelekh offers Avraham the opportunity to live in his country, and plies him with gifts. This story seems to glorify Avimelekh at the expense of Avraham's unique moral stature. It is true that immediately thereafter we read of the theft of Avraham's wells by Avimelekh's servants, and the position of the two characters is abruptly exchanged - Avraham now chides Avimelekh (21:25) while Avimelekh is forced to excuse and defend this theft. Nevertheless, Avraham gives Avimelekh sheep and cattle, just as Avimelekh previously gave him gifts. On the basis of this reciprocity Avraham and Avimelekh make a covenant as equals, facing each other on equal footing from the point of view of their moral values.

At the conclusion of this encounter, then, Avraham and Avimelekh stand as colleagues and equals. Each has caused the other a moral wrong, and each has in turn forgiven his fellow.

Against this backdrop Yitzchak once again descends to Gerar, but this time the circle is closed, and from here onwards it is clear who holds the upper hand in this moral conflict. In order to understand this, let us examine the differences between the Avraham-Avimelekh relationship and the Yitzchak-Avimelekh relationship.

First of all, in the story of Yitzchak, Rivka is never actually taken to Avimelekh's palace, such that the moral problem created is much less serious than was the case in the time of Avraham. On the other hand, this time Avimelekh neither presents Yitzchak with gifts nor offers him his land (actions which aroused our approval and appreciation in his dealings with Avraham), but rather follows Pharaoh's example and banishes Yitzchak from the country: "Go from us, for you are much mightier than us" (26:16). His servants, however, continue in their old habits and once again steal the wells which Yitzchak's servants have dug.

If in the previous story we were left with some uncertainty as to the identity of the moral hero who arises from the stormy relationship - Avraham or Avimelekh, it is now clear that Avraham's son has prevailed in this conflict with Avimelekh and his servants, and he has the upper hand. This conclusion is further supported by the covenant which each of the forefathers forges with Avimelekh: When Avimelekh suggests to Avraham that they forge a covenant he mentions the favors which he has performed: "And now swear to me by God, Behold, lest you deal dishonestly with me or with my children or with my grandchildren; like the kindness which I have performed towards you so shall you perform towards me, and towards the land in which you have dwelt" (21:23). Indeed, Avimelekh has performed kindness with Avraham, and for this reason Avraham is duty-bound to respond favorably to his request - "And Avraham said, I will swear." Avimelekh's later request to Yitzchak pales in comparison: "Lest you perform evil towards me, when we have not harmed you and we have done you only good, and we are sending you in peace" (26:29). The differences are immediately apparent: While Avimelekh speaks to Avraham in terms of "the kindness which I have performed towards you" he can mention to Yitzchak only that "we have not harmed you," and while he reminds Avraham that he has dwelt in the land - "and with the land in which you have dwelt," he can mention to Yitzchak only the fact that he is being sent away cordially - "and we are sending you in peace." Yitzchak has no sense of obligation to the covenant which Avimelekh offers; unlike his father, he owes Avimelekh no favors, and therefore he agrees to the covenant on the basis of his position of strength. In Avraham's time, when Avimelekh returns to Gerar after the forging of the covenant, he remains active and in control of the situation: "And Avimelekh rose up, with Pikhol, captain of his army, and they returned to the land of the Pelishtim." Following the covenant with Yitzchak, in contrast, Avimelekh is portrayed as a passive character subject to Yitzchak's mercies: "And Yitzchak sent them, and they went from him in peace."

As we mentioned at the beginning of the shiur, Yitzchak's status is different from that of Avraham and Yaakov. He is the natural and clear continuation of Avraham, but let us not be deceived into thinking that in continuing Avraham's mission he simply repeats his father's actions. In retracing his father's footsteps he closes circles which were left open and which require a decisive conclusion. The question of who represents a moral person, when asked in the context of Sefer Bereishit, is a truly critical one, since God tells us explicitly that the choice of Avraham as the progenitor of a new nation is bound up with his moral world and that of his descendants: "For I know him, that he shall command his children and his household after hi, that they should keep God's way, to perform righteousness and justice" (18:19). Clearly, when Avraham's moral foundations are called into question, or when there is someone else who appears on the stage of history supposedly representing a world of righteousness and justice, this would seem to threaten his special status and selection. Therefore the Torah finds it necessary to clarify and emphasize that in this moral conflict, Avraham and his descendants prevailed over Avimelekh and his servants.

For further study:

1. Immediately following the covenant with Avimelekh, God tests Avraham with the Akeda. Find the many expressions in the description of the Akeda which are reminiscent of the parasha concerning Avraham and Avimelekh, especially in light of the meaning given to the Avraham-Avimelekh encounter in today's shiur. What does this add to the meaning of the Akeda?
2. The digging of the wells is an exact metaphor for the relationship of Avraham and Yitzchak as described in the shiur. Explain.
3. Compare the naming of Be'er Sheva by Avraham (21:31) and Yitzchak (26:32-33). Notice that Yitzchak's reason is "unto this day."