

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT CHAYE SARA**

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**"Who is this man who walks in the field towards us?"\*  
Dr. Brachi Elitzur**

Reading the stories of the forefathers in *Sefer Bereishit*, one is struck by the brevity of the description of the life and activities of Yitzchak. While the stories about Avraham occupy 13 chapters and the chronicle of Yaakov's life stretches over no less than 20, all that we know about Yitzchak is condensed into just 5 chapters, and even here, he is mostly a secondary character, except for one chapter which is devoted to him and his life.

Our question is intensified in light of the components of this life story. Yitzchak deals with situations that are highly reminiscent of Avraham's experiences from the moment he arrives in *Eretz Yisrael*:

1. A wife's infertility
2. Famine in the land
3. Complications concerning his wife in Avimelekh's house
4. Covenant with Avimelekh
5. The digging of wells

The text takes pains to emphasize the similarity between Avraham and Yitzchak and amplifies the connection between the events of their lives:

1. The blessing to Yitzchak: "Because Avraham obeyed Me" (26:5).
2. The famine: "And there was famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham" (26:1).
3. The promise of the land and the promise of seed: "And I shall establish the oath that I swore to Avraham, your father" (26:3); "And I shall multiply your seed for the sake of Avraham, My servant" (26:24).
4. The digging of wells: "And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Avraham, his father... and he called their names by the names that his father had called them" (26:18).

In most of the events recounted in the text, Yitzchak is described as responding to a situation rather than as initiating action or being responsible for what happens:

1. Yitzchak is led to the *akeda*, and other than a single verse that exposes something of what is going on inside him, we know nothing about his thoughts and whether (or how) he understands the significance of the journey to the mountain of God. God's appreciation for the devotion shown in this test is directed towards Avraham alone.
2. The longest chapter in the entire Torah is devoted to the search for a wife for Yitzchak, but Yitzchak's actual presence in the story is marginal, almost imperceptible. The criteria for the choice of his wife are set down by his father and his father's servant; he is not consulted.
3. The prophecy concerning the respective natures of his sons and their future is told to Rivka, and she does not share it with him.
4. The dimming of Yitzchak's eyes makes him oblivious to the deception concocted by his wife and son. Their deception upsets the division of the blessings as he had envisioned it, and decrees that he must part from his son and not see him again.
5. Yitzchak is unable to console the son who has been robbed and to cool the desire for revenge that burns inside him.
6. It is Rivka who proposes Yaakov's flight, concealing from Yitzchak the true reason for Yaakov cutting himself off from his home and family.

What, then, is the message of Yitzchak's life? What is the lesson that he represents for future generations, that puts him on a par with his father and his son, in whose name we invoke God's covenant and ask for His mercy:

God's words, "And He said: I am the God of your father – the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov" (*Shemot* 3:6), seem to imply that whoever comes first is granted greater importance than whoever comes later. But His words, "And I will remember My covenant with Yaakov, and My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham..." (*Vayikra* 26:42), come to teach that **all three are of equal importance**. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Bo* 81)

Avraham is blessed with great wealth, and is respected by the rulers of the surrounding areas who discern the divine hand that accompanies him. This allows him to devote himself to his mission of being a "light unto the nations." Avraham is a model of faith and morality, a theological pioneer who calls in God's Name and inculcates moral and legal values among the inhabitants of the land. Avraham's challenge lies mainly in the spiritual realm, and consists of believing in God and disseminating knowledge of Him despite the seeming disparity between God's promises concerning the land and offspring and the reality he experiences. Avraham is motivated by the appeal of being a revolutionary, a bearer of God's

message, a pioneer. This in no way detracts from the enormity of the tests he faces, but it explains the sources from which he draws his strength.

What is Yitzchak's mission?

It would seem that no period in Jewish history is more illustrative of the message and lesson embodied in Yitzchak than the last few generations, in which we have merited to return to the land of our forefathers and to regain sovereignty over our inheritance.

Yitzchak's task is to be Avraham's successor; he is to be the man of action who follows the path paved by the pioneer. This task involves neither originality nor glamor; it brings no new message and attracts no special admiration. Yitzchak is born into something that already exists, and his job is to preserve it even under the most difficult conditions. The enthusiasm aroused by Avraham's revolution has died down; the environment is sometimes even suspicious and hostile. Yitzchak is "he who sows with tears," his spirit unbroken by the treachery of the land and the jealousy of those around him, faithfully maintaining his father's achievements and bequeathing them to his own progeny. Yitzchak is a man of the Land of Israel, stubbornly holding onto its soil and bearing the message of his rootedness in it as the sole condition for ensuring its continuation.

Let us review the textual units mentioning Yitzchak and examine the various aspects of his message:

1. The very first words uttered by Yitzchak are the innocent question that he addresses to his father, who conceals from him the purpose of the journey to Mount Moriah:

And Yitzchak said to Avraham his father, and he said, "My father," and he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here is the fire, and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Avraham said, "God will provide Himself a lamb for the burnt offering." And they went, both of them, together. (*Bereishit* 22:7-8)

Yitzchak's age at the time of the *akeda* is a matter of debate among the commentators, with opinions ranging from 13 to 37.<sup>1</sup> Whatever his exact age, the general consensus would be that Yitzchak was old enough to sense the tense atmosphere that would surround such a cataclysmic event. His question indicates a practical orientation that is concerned with issues of "how," rather than the philosophical or psychological issues of "why."

2. The story of Avraham's servant, as noted, constitutes the longest chapter

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<sup>1</sup> According to *Bereishit Rabba* 55:4, *Eikha Rabba Petichta* 24, and other *midrashim*, Yitzchak was 37 years old. According to *Seder Olam* (Milikowsky edition) he was 26. Ibn Ezra (on *Bereishit* 22:4) maintains that he was 13.

in the Torah. The details of the story are conveyed to us in two versions (three, in some cases), with some discrepancies between the text's own account of the events and the servant's recollection of them as conveyed in Betuel's house. The groom who is the reason for the entire event is mentioned only incidentally, and his actual appearance is limited to just two verses, which are replete with information that appears irrelevant to what is going on:

And Yitzchak came from the way of the well of *le-chai ro'i*, for he dwelled in the land of the Negev. And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field towards evening, and he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, camels were coming. (*Bereishit* 24:62-63)

What is the significance of the place where Yitzchak dwells and the time of day that he goes out?

The early commentators, following the example of the *midrashim*, explain that Yitzchak instituted the evening prayer. An exception is Rashbam, who proposes a different reason for Yitzchak's stroll in the field at evening: "To plant trees and to see to the affairs of his workers" (*Bereishit* 24:62).

The majority of the commentators ignore the associations of nature brought to mind by the words "well" (*be'er*) and "field" (*sadeh*). They are unmoved by the evidence of a field in the arid Negev and instead view the entire scene in terms of spiritual pursuits. This perspective is characteristic of a situation of exile or a society devoid of farmers. The well and the field are Yitzchak's "home" in the simplest and most natural sense; the produce of the field with its arid soil are a source of pride for him. The fact that the text describes the climactic meeting as taking place there indicates the profound significance and place of the field in Yitzchak's life.

Yitzchak invests no effort in getting married because his father's instruction that a wife be sought in Charan would involve leaving *Eretz Yisrael*. Yitzchak does not leave the land, as we see later, because of an explicit, direct instruction that he receives from God. The verse describing the encounter between Rivka and Yitzchak tells us what Yitzchak has been doing during the time that the servant was at Betuel's house. Yitzchak returns from attending to matters related to the wells that he dug with his servants, to organize some sort of irrigation for his crops, and at evening, when everyone returns home to rest, Yitzchak continues taking care of his fields and their needs.

3. Rivka is accompanied all this time by a man she does not know. What is the meaning of her dramatic reaction to the appearance of Yitzchak? "And Rivka lifted her eyes and she saw Yitzchak, and she fell [or 'descended'] from the camel" (24:64)?

Abraham notes the centrality of the field as the source of Rivka's

astonishment:

This is Rivka's wonderment, expressed in her description [of Yitzchak as a man] "who walks in the field" – that he does not walk a trodden path, but rather "in the field," amidst the field itself, where there is no path.

The reason for her wonderment reveals itself through a covert inter-textual interpretation. A similar dramatic action, with motifs echoing the description of the encounter with Yitzchak, is to be found in the verses describing Akhsa's reaction to the sight of the field in the Negev:

And Kalev said: "Whoever smites Kiryat Sefer and takes it, to him I will give **Akhsa, my daughter, as a wife.**" And Otniel, son of Kenaz, brother of Kalev, took it; and he gave him Akhsa his daughter as a wife. And it was, when she arrived, that she enticed him to ask of her father for **a field. And she came down from her donkey** and Kalev said to her, "What would you have?" And she said, "Give me a blessing, for **you have given me the land of the Negev**; give me also **pools of water.**" So he gave her the upper pools and the lower pools. (*Yehoshua* 15:16-19)

Both stories describe an encounter between a bride and groom, and in both instances the sight of the field leads to the woman falling from the animal that she is riding. In both cases the field is in the Negev, and both descriptions make mention of a source of water.

The comparison to Akhsa helps us to understand the reason for Rivka's astonishment. Akhsa falls from the donkey in an expression of supplication to her father to allay her fear of living in the arid Negev and to ensure her sustenance by providing water sources that will cause the desert to bloom. Likewise, throughout the long journey from Charan to Be'er Sheva, Rivka's eyes scan the wilderness and questions of survival begin to gnaw at her. The sight of the green fields in the Negev comes as a great surprise, and when there emerges from them the figure of Yitzchak – a powerful, tanned, muscular presence whose very essence radiates action – her excitement reaches new heights, and she falls from the camel out of sheer amazement and admiration for the natural wonder that has just appeared before her eyes.

How sharply the encounter between Rivka and Yitzchak contrasts with her meeting with Avraham's servant, several months earlier. She comes upon the servant when he is tired and thirsty and waiting for a woman to come and save him. Yitzchak, on the other hand, is perceived at first sight as the master of the field who controls the sources of water in his environment.

4. The reason that the Torah provides for Yitzchak's love for his son is surprising and seemingly quite uncharacteristic: "Yitzchak loved Esav, for he relished his venison (*ki tzayid be-fiv*)" (*Bereishit* 25:28).

In describing the twins born to Yitzchak and Rivka, the text emphasizes the lack of symmetry between them – their contrasting appearances, natures, and occupations. The brief unit conveying this information serves as a substitute for a photo album displaying how the family conducts itself.

The demonization of Esav in the *midrashim* – based, among other things, on the description of his appearance ("*admoni*" [red] – a shedder of blood") – appears to arise from his characterization as the prototype of Israel's enemies throughout the generations (Edom, Rome, Christianity), and is not necessarily entailed by the plain reading of the text. On the face of it, the verses seem to be noting his strength and physical development from the moment he is born, hinting to his spheres of occupation, which exploit this physiological advantage for work in the field and hunting for the family. Yitzchak's love for Esav arises from their shared love of the field and of nature and from Yitzchak's knowledge of how this characteristic serves as an advantage in the realization of God's promise of the land. As the pioneer of agricultural settlement, Yitzchak is eager to develop Esav's hunting abilities, which will help to make the promise of inheriting the land a reality.

5. Yitzchak, in contrast to Avraham, receives a Divine command not to leave *Eretz Yisrael* for Egypt, despite the famine:

And God appeared to him and He said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land **which I will tell you**. Sojourn in this land, and **I will be with you and I will bless you**, for to you and your children will I give all these countries, and I will establish the oath which I swore to Avraham, your father." (26:2-3)

This is the first time that God has spoken to Yitzchak, and in these words, He reveals his destiny. The words "the land which I will tell you" seem redundant, on the assumption that the command is given to Yitzchak while he is already dwelling in that land. The expression is added in order to create an association with the parallel command and promise given to Avraham:

"Go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains **which I will tell you**" (22:2); "And I will make you a great nation, and **I will bless you**, and make your name great, and **you will be a blessing**." (12:2)

At the same time, these words emphasize the distinct destiny meant for each of them: Avraham is required to devote himself to disseminating faith in God, while Yitzchak's devotion is to be expressed in love of the land and remaining upon it even in times of crisis. The continuity of divine chosenness depends on the realization of the specific task entrusted to each of them.

6. The only chapter that is devoted in its entirety to Yitzchak describes his successes in cultivating the land and in exposing water sources and his experiences in the wake of this success:

And Yitzchak sowed in that land, and in that year he received a hundredfold, for God blessed him. And the man grew great, and he went forward and grew until he became very great. And he had flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and a great many servants, and the Pelishtim envied him. (26:12-14)

The chapter is full of allusions to the tests experienced by Avraham (the taking of Sarah to the house of Avimelekh; the quarrel of the shepherds; God's reassuring words, "Do not fear"; and the covenant with Avimelekh), but here they take place against the background of the wells. Yitzchak's whole life revolves around the wells.

The journeys of Yitzchak are differentiated from those of Avraham by means of their highly symbolic concluding phrases. While Avraham's travels from one place to the next end with a "calling in God's Name" and the building of an altar ("And he went on his journeys from the Negev to Beit El... to the place of **the altar which he had made** there in the beginning, and **Avram called there in God's Name**" [13:3-4]), Yitzchak's travels end with the digging of wells and the names he gives to them:

And he moved from there, and he dug another well, and over this they did not quarrel; and **he called its name Rechovot**... And he built an altar there and **he called in God's Name**, and he pitched his tent there, and there **Yitzchak's servants dug a well**. (26:22; 25)

7. Yitzchak's blindness serves to expose the different tasks of his two sons. This exposure explains his original decision to award the blessing of the land and of sovereignty to Esav:

And Yaakov approached Yitzchak, his father, and he felt him, and he said: "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav." (27:22)

Yitzchak is sensitive to the different traits embodied in each of his sons, and he views both of them as necessary for the continuation of the realization of God's promise of the land. Yitzchak intends to divide his blessing between the two of them. Yaakov will receive Avraham's blessing and will continue to pave a moral, religious path; his voice will carry out the role of calling in God's Name. Esav will continue Yitzchak's life-work of inheriting the land and defending it. Yitzchak views both of his sons, jointly, as the successors of the destiny set forth for his father and for himself – but he does not share this intention with Rivka, and this changes the course of history. Yaakov, who started off with a

tremendous store of religious and moral wisdom, will need a 20-year exile in which to acquire Esav's skill in hunting (or "trapping" – both literally and metaphorically). The time he spends in Lavan's household shatters his innocence, builds his character, and gives him practical skills. With his return to the land, he will begin to carry out his religious mission of teaching the ways of God and of morality, while at the same time finding practical ways of dealing with those seeking his harm.

8. The story of the stealing of the blessings is full of sensory descriptions concerning Yitzchak: his vision, which has grown dim; his desire for tasty dishes ("Make me savory food"); the apparent compensation for the absence of sight through the sense of touch ("Come near, I pray you, that I might feel you, my son"); and the voice that misleads him ("The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav"). In the face of this blunting of senses, the power of the sense of smell stands out prominently:

And he drew near and kissed him, and he smelled the smell of his garments, and he blessed him, and said, "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which God has blessed." (27:27)

The betrayal of his body, which distorts Yitzchak's sound judgment, blurring the distinction between Yaakov's wholeheartedness and Esav's charlatantry even when his sons are standing before him, is momentarily neutralized by the inspiration of the fragrance of the field – the source of Yitzchak's vitality and his life's mission – which adheres to his son's clothes.

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A few years ago, I accompanied a group of my students on a tour of the Ein Harod cemetery led by Yair ben Ari z"l, a member of Kibbutz Ein Harod Ha-Meuhad. Yair, in his own special way, led us into the period of the early *aliyot* to *Eretz Yisrael* through inscriptions on the gravestones of these early pioneers. The *aliya* stories, with all the physical difficulties that they entailed, were far less powerful than the description of the emotional neutrality enforced upon that generation. Men and women who submitted to their emotions and revealed any sort of weakness in the face of personal loss were met with reactions of scorn and disdain, to the point where many of them committed suicide. The heroes of the pioneering enterprise were those who, despite the treachery of the ground, the swamps, and the diseases, got up every morning to do their day's work and settled the land by the sweat of their brow. Yitzchak's example and lasting inspiration cried out from each and every gravestone in the Ein Harod cemetery. The love of the land and of its soil and the concern for ongoing settlement of it, sometimes at the expense of nurturing marital and family life, were infused with their full significance by the shining example set by Yitzchak.

Nechama Leibowitz offers an interesting interpretation of a verse from the consolation of *Yishayahu*: "While those who wait upon God will renew their



strength; they will rise up with wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary; they will walk and not faint" (*Yishayahu* 40:31):

This verse raises a question: as we know, the general rule in *Tanakh* is that the two parallel parts of a verse proceed from the lighter form or scenario to the more intensive one. Thus, this verse should read, "They will walk and not faint, [and even if] they will run – they will not be weary." Why, then, is the order here reversed?

In moments when we are raised up on waves of enthusiasm, we are all capable of one-time acts of heroism. We are able to elevate ourselves to great heights; we can gallop forwards. It is far more difficult to fulfill one's daily obligations, to follow the beaten track even after the initial excitement has worn off, when the glorious glow of the vision has grown dim, when we encounter challenges and obstacles. It is difficult to remain consistently steadfast in the face of all of this without tiring. Therefore, the order of the verse is correct: "They will run [with galloping enthusiasm] and not be weary," but even when they have to walk, to continue, without racing, "they will not be faint." (Nechama Leibowitz, *Daf le-Tarbut Yehudit* 11, Tevet 5734)

The one who walks is the diligent master of the field in all his glory:

"Who is this man that walks in the field towards us?" And the servant said, "He is my master."

Translated by Kaeren Fish