

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Esther *bas* Avrohom Avinu *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Yitzchak’s Akeidah

PARSHAS TOLDOS 5778

There was one perplexing matter with which we left off our discussion of parshas Vayeira regarding the seminal event of *Akeidas Yitzchak* (“Binding of Yitzchak”). The issue at hand related to the matter of attribution; while both Avraham and Yitzchak displayed great dedication to fulfill Hashem’s will, it appears that Yitzchak is singled out in a distinctive way. Such is apparent not only from the familiar title of this episode – “*Akeidas Yitzchak*” – but also from the body of the prayers. For example, when we invoke the memory of this event on Rosh Hashanah in the blessing of “*Zichronos*” (Remembrances), we conclude with an exclusive focus on this patriarch: וַעֲקִידַת יִצְחָק לְזֵרְעוֹ הַיּוֹם בְּרַחֲמִים תִּזְכּוֹר – “And may You remember *Akeidas Yitzchak* for **his** offspring this day with mercy.”

Now, as mentioned, *Akeidas Yitzchak* entailed great sacrifice on the part of both Avraham and Yitzchak. It thus behooves us to understand why Yitzchak’s role in the affair is highlighted in such a prominent way; how exactly did his *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice) differ from Avraham’s? As we shall see, this week’s *parshah* may offer us some pertinent insight.

Reduced Exposure

Indeed, the *parshah* does shed much light on Yitzchak’s overall character, as well as the nature of his primary focus in *avodas Hashem* (Divine service). This was actually the theme of our discussion on this *parshah* a number of years ago (Toldos 5769). It was pointed out that the record of Yitzchak’s exploits, in comparison to the other *Avos* (patriarchs), is something of an anomaly. That is, we find extensive treatment in the Torah regarding the events of Avraham’s life; three full *parshiyos* (Lech Lecha, Vayeira, Chayei Sarah) feature Avraham most prominently. The narrative of Ya’akov is likewise quite substantial, as he plays a major role in such *parshiyos* as Toldos, Vayeitzei, Vayishlach, and appears with much consequence in virtually the entire remainder of Sefer Bereishis.

Yet Yitzchak stands in stark contrast to his predecessor and successor. There is really no single full *parshah* where Yitzchak is the principal focus. Even in Toldos, the beginning and end center mostly around Ya’akov and Esav. Only in the middle section of the *parshah*, during his sojourn in the land of Gerar, does the main focus turn to Yitzchak himself. And even here the matter is something of a wonder. The Torah features the other *Avos* in major episodes of supreme consequence. But the sole episode that centers exclusively on Yitzchak is one which – at first appearance – does not seem to rise to the same level of significance as receiving the command of circumcision or wrestling with the angel. The main theme of Yitzchak’s personal episode, by contrast, almost seems to be a little mundane – involving mostly the digging of wells. As the *passuk* states: וַיָּשָׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחְפֹּר אֶת־בְּאֵרֵת הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ – בְּיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אֲבִיו וַיִּסְתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶן שְׁמוֹת כְּשֵׁמֹת אֲשֶׁר־קָרָא לָהֶן אָבִיו – “And Yitzchak went back, and he dug the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Avraham, and the Pelishtim filled them up after the death of Avraham. And he called them names according to the names that his father had called them” (*Bereishis 26:18*).

Guardian of the *Mesorah*

As with all aspects of the Torah, this section as well, in truth, is laden with profound meaning; the reference to Yitzchak's well-digging activities, as related by Chazal and the commentators, alludes to wondrous secrets of boundless depth. But even on more of a surface level, the significance of the Torah's message here may be discerned. R' Nosson Wachtfogel, Mashgiach Ruchani (Spiritual Advisor) of Beis Medrash Govoha, explains that the apparent lack of coverage of Yitzchak in the Torah is itself most revealing of the greatness of his character – as is this episode of digging and naming wells. What we see of Yitzchak is an individual who saw as his life's mission the preservation of his father's ways and legacy. Thus it is that, for all intents and purposes, he doesn't "appear" in the Torah in his "own" episodes; he had completely nullified himself to his sagacious father, keeping steadfastly to the exact path charted for him by the leader of the previous generation. And so, when he does appear in the Torah, we find him engaged in this very life-mission of preserving the *mesorah* (transmitted teaching) he received from his father: re-digging his wells and conferring on them the names originated by his father.

In this respect, it may be said that Yitzchak epitomized the following trait delineated in the Mishnah (*Avos 6:6*) as one of the essential prerequisites for Torah acquisition:

הַתּוֹרָה נִקְנִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וְשְׁמוֹנֶה דְּבָרִים, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן, בְּתַלְמוּד, בְּשִׁמְיעַת הָאָזְן... בְּלֵב טוֹב, בְּאַמוּנַת הַכְּמִים...

"Torah is acquired through 48 items, and these are they: (diligent) study, attentive listening... a good heart, **faith in the sages**..."

We can now better appreciate the emphasis on Yitzchak specifically, when it comes to the matter of the *Akeidah*. We wondered why Yitzchak was singled out in this regard, as if his participation was distinct from Avraham's. In his volume of responsa, the *Chasam Sofer* (*Orach Chayim*, § 218) clarifies the issue in the same vein as the above. That is, he points out a significant difference between the approach of Avraham and Yitzchak to this event. True, both displayed supreme loyalty and self-sacrifice in fulfilling Hashem's directive, but it was the *source* of the command that varied between them. Avraham had been told directly by Hashem Himself; but Yitzchak received no such Divine communication regarding the *Akeidah*. Rather, he heard of it only from the mouth of his father, Avraham.

This is why, the Chasam Sofer explains, it was Yitzchak who merited for the event to be attributed mainly to him, for his trial took place on a different and more difficult level than it did for Avraham. As stated, Avraham heard the command directly from Hashem; but it was only Yitzchak who was tested, as well, in the area of *emunas chachamim*. And by enduring this trial and revealing his allegiance to this important principle, he thereby implanted the same power and dedication within his offspring, for all of posterity.

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