

Who is Yitzchak?

Did you ever read a book and want to know more about a certain character? This person is crucial to the story, but the author hasn't given you a feel for who they are. Not every book is like *War and Peace* or *Les Miserables*, where you know more about every character than you ever wanted to know. For example, wouldn't you like to know more about Felix Leiter, James Bond's CIA sidekick? Or how about Gandolf the Grey, who guides both Bilbo and Frodo through their Middle Earth adventures? Or, for that matter, Aunt Lucy, who raised Paddington and taught him about England? I love that furry guy as much as he loves marmalade. These are important characters in whole series of books and we barely scratch the surface of their back story. I feel that way about our Patriarch, Yitzchak. He's the one in the middle, who gets lost in the shuffle. We know he's really important, but we're not sure exactly why.

Avraham is featured in 14 chapters of *Breishit* and Ya'akov appears in more than half the book, 26 out of 50 chapters. Even though in much of the latter portion of *Breishit* Yosef is the main character, Ya'akov con-

tinues to dominate much of the action. Then there's Yitzchak. He appears in six chapters, but is mostly a secondary character even in those six. He's even overshadowed in the long description of his shidduch, by Avraham's unnamed servant, no less. It's hard to get dominated by anonymity, but Yitzchak managed it. In the end, there's only one chapter in which Yitzchak is the main character, and, so we turn to that difficult episode to investigate our hero.

In chapter 26, there is a famine just as happened to his father, and is, sadly, a feature of living on the edge of the desert. Yitzchak assumes that he will go down to Egypt, just like dad. But God says, 'No!' This is the only time the Bible records direct communication between God and Yitzchak, and it counters the central tenet of his life: Emulate your father.

Instead he goes to Gerar, where the king, Avimelech abducts Rivka. After the difficult interaction with Avimelech, which was similar to his father's experience with this fellow, he surveys his scene. What he notices is that the wells Avraham had dug have been filled in. There are many interpretations of what these wells represent. Perhaps it hints at the Torah his father taught, maybe sustaining the world with spirituality or that his father made physical improvements to the land. As Freud said, 'Sometimes a well is

just a well.' In any case, Yitzchak desires to return the land to its appearance in the time of Avraham, but it doesn't go well (get the pun?). The first well digging brings a confrontation with the neighbors, and is called ESEK, which means 'involvement'. He was getting involved with the locals, but they undid his efforts. The second well is worse, true enmity is aroused, and is called SITNA or 'hatred'. Finally, he digs a well and he is left alone and he calls it RECHOVOT, or 'broad spaces'.

What did Yitzchak expect? He initially called the wells by the names his father used. I believe that he wanted to be a major force for good in the community, just like dad. In the end, the best he could hope for was peace and benign neglect from his neighbors. He was never going to be the dynamic, charismatic leader of men his father was.

There was one area in which he believed that he could improve upon his father's performance. Yitzchak regretted the alienation of Yishmael, for which he felt responsible. When he met Rivka falling off her camel, he was coming from Be'er Lechai Ro'i, which is apparently where Yishmael lived. And after he buried Avraham together with Yishmael, he went back to live there. He wanted a reconciliation, which never hap-

pened. He was adamant that this wouldn't happen to his family.

Fast forward to chapter 27 verse 33. Eisav has just come from the field with the delicacies which Yitzchak loved. But the blessing of wealth and power had already been granted to Ya'akov. The verse records that he 'trembled a great trembling'. What caused this violent reaction to the misappropriation of blessings? Rashi records the Midrash that he shuddered so, because the maws of Gehennom opened beneath him. I think that he realized that Ya'akov and Eisav were in a worse filial relationship that even he and Yishmael. There would be no area in which he could improve on Avraham.

So, what is the great accomplishment of Yitzchak? What earned him his place in the exclusive list of Patriarchs? In a word, continuity.

It wasn't a shortcoming to constantly strive to emulate Avraham. It is exactly what the nation needed at that moment in history. It's not easy to be an And Son. Many offspring throughout history ran away from the accomplishments and innovations of their famous parents. Yitzchak understood that for the Abrahamic revolution to endure there must be continuity. Without that, his father's legacy would have been a footnote, God forbid. About 500 years after Avraham, Pharaoh Achnaton attempted to bring a form

of monotheism (based on the sun god, Aton) to Egypt. It failed because the next generation didn't commit to the innovation. Revolutions often succeed or fail based on the behavior of the next in line.

Today, in our generation, we need more Yitzchak. Yitzchak represents the character trait of GEVURA (strength), because he held fast to his positions. After losing much of a generation to the Holocaust, we need the steadfast character of Yitzchak to carry on and keep the flame Avraham lit alive. Even here in Israel, more than we need innovation, we need preservation. So, in the final analysis who is Yitzchak? He is us. And may we be true to his courage, to be an And Son. 🗡️