

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT TOLDOT

“Avraham begot Yitzchak” Rav Shimon Klein

Introduction

And these are the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham; Avraham begot Yitzchak. (*Bereishit* 25:19)

This verse introduces the *parasha*, focusing us on the “generations” of Yitzchak – his activity and role as Avraham’s successor. He is referred to as “Yitzchak, son of Avraham,” but the text then goes on to note, “Avraham begot Yitzchak.” The reader is perplexed: is this statement of lineage not a reformulation of what has just been said? Indeed, on the level of objective fact, it says exactly the same thing. In terms of inner essence, however, the focus is quite different. In the phrase, “Yitzchak, son of Avraham,” the subject is Yitzchak, and these words serve as an introduction to the description of his life and works. The fact that he is referred to as “son of Avraham” points to his direction, his source of inspiration. However, the text does not suffice with this statement of lineage, but invites us, as it were, to view the matter from a different perspective, where the subject is Avraham. It is Avraham who is dominant; it is he who bore Yitzchak and molded his character.¹ A powerful paternal presence emerges from this description. In this *shiur*, we will embark on a journey through the text to locate the roots and essence of this presence.

We will first examine the units that present the son as following in his father’s footsteps.

¹ For the purposes of comparison, a few verses previously we read: “And these are the generations of Yishmael, son of Avraham, who Hagar the Egyptian, handmaid of Sara, bore to Avraham” (25:12). As in the case of Yitzchak, it seems that Yishmael’s lineage is being restated. But here again, the additional information is highly informative, and it tells a different story: it is not Avraham who begot Yishmael, but rather Hagar the Egyptian who bore him to Avraham. Avraham’s heritage is conveyed to Yishmael through the mediation and molding of Hagar.

The Father's Impression on the Son

The first unit that we will examine, a most central and formative event, is the birth of Yitzchak:

And the Lord remembered Sara as He had said, and the Lord did to Sara as He had spoken. For Sara conceived and bore **Avraham a son in his old age**, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Avraham called the name of **his son who was born to him, whom Sara bore to him**, Yitzchak. And Avraham circumcised **his son** Yitzchak, being eight days old, **as God had commanded him**. And Avraham was a hundred years old when **his son Yitzchak was born to him**. And Sara said, "God has made laughter for me, so that all who hear will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would have said **to Avraham**, that Sara should give children suck? **For I have born him a son in his old age**." And the child grew, and was weaned, and **Avraham made** a great feast on the same day that Yitzchak was weaned. (21:1-8)

Over and over again, the text emphasizes Yitzchak's connection to Avraham. Sara is described as having born Avraham this son in his old age; Avraham is described as naming his son, whom Sara bore him. The circumcision, too, is performed by Avraham, in accordance with the divine command to him, and so on. These descriptions would appear to be the first signal of the dominance of the father in the son's life.²

The second event in which Yitzchak is mentioned is the *akeda*. The story of the *akeda* is recounted from the perspective of Avraham, not of Yitzchak. The very fact that the text is silent as to Yitzchak's thoughts and emotions is tantamount to stating that the more significant moment is happening in the

2 The reader might question the way in which the text seems to marginalize Sara, who "bore the son to Avraham," rather than awarding her a status in her own right. Indeed, on the one hand, she is marginalized, but at the same time, she is present in other aspects of the account. In the verse that opens the *parasha*, it is she who is at the center, and not Avraham: "And the Lord remembered Sara as He has said, and the Lord did to Sara as He had spoken" (21:1). This introduction describes the divine "remembering" of Sara, in the innermost meaning of the term, as preceding the conception and birth that follow. It is this "*pekida*" ("visiting", "recalling to mind") that brings Yitzchak into existence. Then, the Torah records, "And Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Avraham, mocking. So she said to Avraham, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of this bondwoman shall not heir with my son, with Yitzchak'" (21:9-10). Sara has a clear and unequivocal view of the status of Yishmael, whom she refers to as "the son of the bondwoman," as opposed to Avraham, who treats him as his son. Ultimately, it is Sara's perspective that prevails, and it is through Yitzchak, not through Yishmael, that Avraham's seed will be called: "And God said to Avraham, 'Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad and because of your bondwoman; in all that Sara has said to you, listen to her, for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called'" (12). We see a distinction between two realms: Sara's presence is the focus of the divine "visiting" or "recalling" and in the clear discernment of who it is that will continue Avraham's path. Avraham's presence is the focus of the actual unfolding of events, from the naming of Yitzchak onwards.

consciousness of Avraham. Yitzchak does not represent or create any new position. Only once does he initiate: he speaks, thereby revealing all that the Torah tells us concerning his state of mind:

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

Yitzchak understands that they are on the way to offer a sacrifice, and he wonders: where is the animal that will be offered? His formulation of the question reflects an enveloping trust. We know that Avraham is his father, but the text nevertheless repeats this twice. It appears once in the narration, thereby framing the question as one posed by a son to “his father.” Then the text continues, “And he said, ‘My father...,’” reflecting the psychological position from which he speaks. Correspondingly, Avraham answers him: “And Avraham said, ‘God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’” Avraham points to God as the proper and ultimate address for the question, and once again emphasizes that Yitzchak is his son. Indeed, the attribution of Yitzchak as his son represents the entire basis for the mission on which he has embarked: “And He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak...’” (22:2). Now Yitzchak is with him, and “they went both of them together.” They walk together, alongside one another, ready and willing to fulfill Avraham’s mission. From this point onwards, the text returns its focus to Avraham.

The third event that we encounter is Avraham’s dispatching of his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak (chapter 24). The Torah records in detail the conversation between Avraham and his servant concerning the woman, but there is no involvement on the part of Yitzchak at all. He has complete faith in the decisions that his father makes and executes. He takes no active role in the entire process,³ but rather sits by and waits for its results.

In our *parasha*, there is a series of events in which the son continues his father’s path: there is a famine in the land and Yitzchak goes to Avimelekh, king of Gerar (26:1), whom he knows thanks to Avimelekh’s contacts with Avraham, his father (26:20). In Gerar he fears that he will be killed for his wife:

And the men of the place asked of his wife, and he said, “She is my sister,” for he feared to say, “She is my wife,” lest the men of the place kill me on account of Rivka, for she was of good appearance. (26:7)

³ When the servant returns, accompanied by Rivka, she sees Yitzchak and asks who he is. The servant answers her, “He is my master”: “And Rivka lifted her eyes, and when she saw Yitzchak she descended from the camel. And she said to the servant, ‘Which man is this that walks in the field to meet us?’ And the servant said, ‘It is my master.’ Therefore she took her veil and covered herself” (24:64-65).

In so doing, Yitzchak adopts the same response that his father had implemented in the same situation, in the same place:

“And Avraham journeyed from there towards the Negev, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar. And Avraham said of Sara, his wife, “She is my sister.” And Avimelekh, king of Gerar, sent and took Sara. (20:1-2)

Yitzchak then leaves Gerar and dwells in Nachal Gerar, where Avraham had previously dug wells, and he digs them over again since they have been filled by the Pelishtim:

And Yitzchak went from there and pitched his tent in Nachal Gerar, and he dwelled there. And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Avraham his father, for the Pelishtim had stopped them up after the death of Avraham, and he called their names like the names by which his father had called them. (26:17)

Here, Yitzchak’s task and destiny to continue his father’s work is clear. He reconfirms the names that his father had given to the wells, thereby giving new life to his father’s endeavors. Over and over, the text refers to Avraham as “his father,” in a reflection of Yitzchak’s psychological and spiritual perception of his own strength and potential as resting on the foundation of his connection to his father.

Differences Between Yitzchak and Avraham

Thus far, we have reviewed illustrations of the similarity between the son and the father, indicating Yitzchak’s path and self-perception as the continuer of his father, his work, and his world-view. However, if we consider inner workings of the consciousness of each of these two characters, we encounter a paradox. How is it possible to continue the path of someone who is altogether an original, ground-breaking, one-of-a-kind non-conformist who forges new paths? For this is what Avraham was – an individual who initiated something new in the world, who severed himself from his homeland and his father’s house, who initiated and revolutionized. If Yitzchak were to imitate this inner movement of Avraham, then it would logically seem that he must sever himself from Avraham and his way, just as Avraham had previously severed himself from Terach. Thus, his actions will be very different from those of Avraham. If, on the other hand, he chooses to perform the same outward actions that Avraham had instituted, then they will have to proceed from a very different inner consciousness.

Yitzchak chooses the second option. Indeed, a review of his life shows the great disparity between himself and Avraham. Paradoxically, the more meticulously he follows his father’s path, the greater the disparity between them,

between the revolution and innovation of the father and the continuity of the son, between the creative and the conservative.

“Get yourself from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you” (12:1), says God to Avraham, and at these words Avraham uproots himself from the life circles in which he is ensconced, responding to God’s outstretched hand, as it were, inviting him into a sort of partnership and destining him for greatness. Again and again, God speaks to him, and his life is full of movement, shifting from place to place, encounters, and covenants.⁴ Avraham is elevated above the level of ordinary people. He is a “mighty prince,” a “prince of God,” in the words of the *Bnei Chet*. Malki-Tzedek exclaims, “Blessed is Avram of the Most High God, Possessor of heaven and earth.”

Yitzchak’s life, from beginning to end, is very different. He is born to a father who is a hundred years old and a mother aged ninety. There is almost no evidence of God ever speaking to him (a revelation is described in the wake of the famine, when Yitzchak goes down to Gerar, in chapter 26). Yitzchak is born into an existing reality; his movement within that reality is limited, and he is not called upon to revolutionize or innovate anything.

To illustrate the discrepancy between Avraham and Yitzchak, let us consider one of Avraham’s most prominent traits – his ability to contain, to include. This is reflected within his family circle; he is prepared to view Yishmael as his successor, despite the fact that his mother is Hagar, the Egyptian bondswoman.⁵ The same trend continues throughout, with Avraham regarding

⁴ Upon reaching *Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham adopts a life of wandering (see our *shiur* on [Parashat Lekh-lekha](#)). There is a famine and he goes down to Egypt, where he is forced to contend with Pharaoh (chapter 12). Then he is challenged by Lot’s attachment to him (chapter 13). He journeys throughout the length and breadth of the land and goes off to wage a courageous battle against the four kings, resulting in his freeing of Lot and the property taken into captivity (chapter 14). He experiences the divine revelation at the Covenant Between the Parts (chapter 15), and is informed of the miraculous impending birth of a son, Yitzchak (chapter 18). He mounts a defense of Sodom (chapter 18), goes down to Gerar (chapter 20), encounters Avimelekh anew and forges a covenant with him (chapter 22), and more.

⁵ There is ample textual evidence of this attitude on his part: “And God said to Avraham: ‘Sarai, your wife – you shall not longer call her Sarai, for her name is Sara. And I have blessed her, and I will give you a son from her, and I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall issue from her.’ And Avraham fell upon his face and he laughed, and he said in his heart, ‘Shall a child be born to him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sara, who is ninety hears old, give birth?’ And Avraham said to God, ‘O that Yishmael might live before You!’” (17:15). God informs him of the son who will be born to Sara, while Avraham himself expresses his satisfaction with Yishmael. Later on, God draws a clear distinction between them: “And God said, ‘Sara your wife shall indeed bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yitzchak, and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Yishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes he shall beget, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara shall bear to you at this time next year’” (17:19-21). Avraham does not respond, and later on we see how deeply this rejection of Yishmael hurts him in his response to Sara’s demand that Yishmael be banished because he will not inherit

Yishmael as his son, expressing opposition to Yishmael's rejection – in contrast to God and Sara, both of whom refer to him as “the son of the bondwoman” (21:10; 21:13).

Yitzchak has two sons, and he loves one of them: “And Yitzchak loved Esav, for he relished his venison, but Rivka loved Yaakov” (25:28). In time, this love is consolidated as a blessing that he intends for Esav, while Yaakov is seemingly not destined to receive a blessing. “Bless me, me also, my father!” (27:34) pleads Esav, and Yitzchak answers, “Your brother came with cunning and has taken away your blessing” (v. 35). Esav does not give up; he asks, “Have you but one blessing, my father?” (38) – and a look at the blessing that remains is enough to show that indeed, this is the case. How far removed this favoritism is from Avraham's approach towards his sons!

A great chasm separates the relationships that Avraham maintained with those around him, the inhabitants of the land of Cana'an, and Yitzchak's contacts with them. Let us start by comparing their respective dealings with Avimelekh, king of Gerar. God reveals Himself to Avimelekh and warns him:

“Now, therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live; and if you do not restore her, now that you shall surely die – you and all who are yours.” (20:7)

Avimelekh informs his men, and their response is one of great fear. Thereafter,

Avimelekh took sheep and oxen and menservants and maidservants, and gave them to Avraham, and restored him Sara his wife. And Avimelekh said, “Behold, my land is before you; dwell wherever it pleases you.” And to Sara he said, “Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is to you a covering of the eyes, to all who are with you, and to all others” – and thus she was reproved. So Avraham prayed to God, and God healed Avimelekh and his wife and his maidservants, and they bore children. (20:14-18)

Avimelekh restores Sara to Avraham, invites Avraham to dwell in his land, and even makes monetary restitution to Sara. Avraham, for his part, offers a prayer for the recovery of Avimelekh and his entourage.⁶

with Yitzchak: “And the matter was very grievous in Avraham's eyes on account of his son...” (21:11).

⁶ There is further evidence of the tolerant and inclusive position that Avraham maintained with regard to other nations: “And there came one who had escaped, and he told Avram the Hebrew, for he dwelled by the terebinths of Mamre the Emori, brother of Eshkol, and brother of Aner; and these were allies of Avram” (*Bereishit* 14:13). Avraham forges a covenant with Eshkol and Mamrei, and they help him in his battle against the four kings. Following his victory, he is greeted by the king of Sodom and Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, and they bless him (14:17-20). God later changes his name to Avraham, with the explanation, “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. Your name shall no longer be called Avram, but your

When Yitzchak finds himself in a similar situation, God does not appear to Avimelekh, and the discovery of Rivka's true identity comes about differently:

Avimelekh, king of Pelishtim, looked through a window and saw and saw, and behold, Yitzchak was sporting with Rivka, his wife. (26:8)

After confronting Yitzchak he issues an instruction:

And Avimelekh charged all his people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (26:11)

This suggests that in the absence of such a warning, Yitzchak would indeed be in mortal danger. In contrast to Avimelekh's friendly relations with Avraham, a conflict develops between him and Yitzchak:

And Yitzchak sowed in that land and received in the same year a hundredfold, for the Lord blessed him. And the man grew great, and went forwards, and grew until he became very great, for he had possessions of flocks, and possessions of herds, and a great store of servants, and the Pelishtim envied him. For all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Pelishtim had stopped them up, and filled them with earth. And Avimelekh said to Yitzchak, "Go from us, for you are much mightier than we" (26:12-16).

Yitzchak's relations with the Pelishtim and with Avimelekh go sour owing to their jealousy of him, and they ask him to move away.

Yitzchak's next station is Nachal Gerar, and here too he encounters hostility (*sitna*) and hatred. The text offers an interesting description:

And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Avraham his father, for the Pelishtim had stopped them up after the death of Avraham, and he called their names as the names by which his father had called them. (26:18)

As long as Avraham lived, the Pelishtim did not touch his wells. Only after his death did they stop them up – offering further proof not only of Avraham's status in his life, but also of the fact that Yitzchak fails to fill the void left by his father.⁷

name shall be Avraham, for a father of many nations have I made you. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall emerge from you" (17:4-6). Avraham welcomes foreign guests (v. 17), and even pleads with God on behalf of the sinful Sedom.

⁷ Later on, Yitzchak forges a covenant with Avimelekh, but it is not based on friendship: "And he built an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there, and there Yitzchak's servants dug a well. Then Avimelekh went to him from Gerar, and Achuzzat his friend, and Pikhol the captain of his army. And Yitzchak said to them, "Why do you come to me, seeing you hate me, and have sent me away from you?" And they said, "We have truly seen that the

Yitzchak's Destiny

What, then, is Yitzchak's own, independent destiny? The answer to this question would seem to lie in God's words to him. The context is introduced as follows:

And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham. And Yitzchak went to Avimelekh, king of the Pelishtim, to Gerar. (26:1)

The verse notes a famine, and then relates it to the first famine, which had been in the days of Avraham. This explicit connection seems to invite a comparison: how did Avraham cope with the famine, and how does Yitzchak, his son, cope with a similar situation? Avraham goes down to Egypt: "And there was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt, to sojourn there, for the famine was acute in the land." Yitzchak moves, as a first stage, to Avimelekh, king of Gerar – his father's ally. But then he receives a prophecy: "And the Lord appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt'" (26:2). This instruction indicates that Yitzchak had indeed intended to proceed to Egypt – like his father before him. God stops him and tells him:

"Dwell in the land which I shall tell you of; sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and I will bless you, for to you and to your seed I will give all these countries, and I will fulfill the oath which I swore to Avraham your father, and I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these countries, and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because Avraham obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." (26:3-5)

Unlike Avraham, who wanders from place to place throughout the land – and, where necessary, even outside of its boundaries – Yitzchak is commanded to dwell "in the land which I will tell you of." He must not venture elsewhere,⁸ and even within the land he wanders little.⁹ Unlike Avraham, to whom the land was promised "to your seed," God speaks of Yitzchak's permanent dwelling in the land as a stage in its being given to him personally and to his descendants.¹⁰ No

Lord was with you, and we said, Let there be now an oath between us, between us and you, and let us make a covenant with you" (26:25-28).

⁸ The *Midrash Pesikta Zutreta* comments: "'Dwell in this land' – R. Hoshaya said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You are an unblemished burnt offering. Just as a burnt offering that is removed from the Temple is invalidated, so likewise you are forbidden from leaving the land" (*Bereishit, Toledot* 26:3).

⁹ Yitzchak basically dwells as Be'er Lechai Ro'i (24:62; 25:11). Now, he leaves his place and goes to Gerar; from there he moves to Nachal Gerar, and from there to Be'er Sheva (26:23).

¹⁰ With regard to Avraham, the text records: "God appeared to Avram and He said, 'To your seed shall I give this land.' And he built an altar there unto the Lord Who had appeared to him" (12:7). The simple meaning of this promise is, "to your seed" – yet not to you. This reflects the understanding of *Chazal* in the *midrash*, where they attribute to Lot the idea that the land had

new, revolutionary vision is at stake here; no new actions are required. The vision has already been established by Avraham, and what is needed now is that it be maintained and inculcated in the recesses of human consciousness as well as in reality.

It is with these words that God appears to Yitzchak and gives him his life's mission. He invites him to join and continue the great endeavor that has been set in motion – this time, from a different angle. His task will be to approach the great vision from an inner state of permanence, continuity, and internalization. This, now, is the service that is required. Yitzchak will adhere and devote himself to his task, and God promises him, “I shall be with you and I shall bless you.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

already been given, and go on to depict God as rejecting this idea: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them [the shepherds of Lot]: This is what I said to him – ‘To your seed shall I give it.’ When? When the seven nations are uprooted from it. [But as for the present time,] ‘the Cana’ani and the Perizzi dwelled then in the land.’ For the meantime, they still have rights to the land.” (*Bereishit Rabba, Lekh-Lekha*, 41, 5). Admittedly, in another source, God promises the land to Avraham himself: “And the Lord said to Avram, after Lot had separated from him: ‘Lift up now your eyes, and look from the place where you are – northward and southward and westward and westward, for all the land which you see – **to you will I give it**, and to your seed forever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth, so that if a man can count the dust of the earth, then shall your seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land, through its length and breadth, for **I will give it to you**” (13:14-17). Twice God specifies that the land is given to Avraham, and the obvious question is, what has changed? Seemingly, the expression “to you” is not meant here in the personal sense. God is not saying to Avraham, “I am giving the land to you personally” (as opposed to ‘to your seed’). Rather, God is saying that land is being given more generally to the nation of which Avraham is the representative. The context is enlightening: “after Lot had separated from him.” Previously, Lot had been destined to inherit the land together with him; now, Lot is rejected from this inheritance, and the entire land is promised to Avraham. Our proposed interpretation draws a distinction between two levels, or two stages: “For all the land which you see – to you will I give it” – to you as a nation. “... and to your seed, forever” – here the reference is concrete; God promises the land literally, concretely, to the descendants of Avraham, and a new element of the promise is introduced: “forever”. And then God commands Avraham to walk about in the land, through its length and breadth, “for I will give it to you” – once again, “you” in the sense of the nation of which Avraham is the representative. In the words of *Chazal* in the *gemara*: “R. Elazar said: ... [What is the reasoning of] the Sages, [who maintain that walking the length and breadth of the land is not sufficient to take possession of it]? There God said this to him [Avraham] [i.e., commanded him to walk the length and breadth of the land] only out of love for him, that his children might easily conquer it [entering as heirs, and not as thieves]” (*Bava Batra* 100a).