

## PARASHAT TOLDOT

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Mr Paul Pollack  
in honor of Rabbi Reuven and Sherry Greenberg

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### **The Differences between Avraham and Yitzchak By Rav Amnon Bazak**

#### A. "ALL THAT HAPPENED TO AVRAHAM HAPPENED ALSO TO YITZCHAK"

Yitzchak is often portrayed as an exact parallel to Avraham. This idea seems to be reflected in the following excerpt from the Midrash ha-Gadol (Bereishit 26:1):

"Note that all that happened to Avraham, happened [also] to Yitzchak. Avraham had to leave his place, and [likewise] Yitzchak had to leave. The identity of Avraham's wife was questioned, and likewise the identity of Yitzchak's wife. The Philistines were jealous of Avraham, and likewise of Yitzchak. Avraham eventually had a son, and Yitzchak also eventually had children. Avraham had a righteous son and a wicked son, and likewise Yitzchak. In Avraham's time there was a famine, and likewise in the time of Yitzchak, as it is written: 'There was a famine in the land.'"

On the basis of these similarities, many have concluded that Yitzchak had nothing new to offer the world. His greatness lay chiefly in his ability to preserve and secure the way of his father, Avraham.

In this shiur, I shall posit quite the opposite: every point of comparison between Avraham and Yitzchak serves only to accentuate the differences between them. These differences demonstrate that Yitzchak repaired and completed the actions of his father, and as a result attained certain ends that Avraham himself had not merited to attain.

Let us examine all the corresponding texts one by one, following the order of our parasha.

#### B. BARRENNESS

Both Avraham and Yitzchak were faced with the reality of a wife who was barren for many years. But their respective responses to this phenomenon are different. Concerning Avraham, we are told:

"Avram said: 'Lord God, what shall You give me – for I go childless, and the steward of my household is Eliezer of Damesek.' And Avram said: 'Indeed, You have given me no seed, and behold – the one who is of my house will inherit me.' The word of God came to him, saying: 'It is not this one who will inherit you, but rather the one who will come forth from your bowels – he will inherit you.'" (15:2-4)

Avraham does not pray directly for a son. On the contrary, he states – as a matter of fact – "Indeed, You have given me no seed." Even if we understand this as a covert plea for a child, we note that he makes no mention of Sara in his words.

Radak questions whether Avraham did in fact pray for a son:

"Avraham did not pray for Sara as Yitzchak did for [Rivka] – or perhaps he did pray but was not answered, for God wanted to display His wonders through her, for the love of Avraham; that she would bear a child at the age of ninety." (Radak on Bereishit 16:2)

Rashi, on the other hand, explains Sara's anger at Avraham as arising from Avraham's disregard for her plight:

"'My wrong is upon you' – for the wrong done to me, I place the retribution upon you, for when you prayed to the Holy One [saying], 'What will You give me – for I go childless,' you prayed only for yourself. You should have prayed for both of us, and then I, too, would have been blessed with a child, like you.'" (Rashi on 16:5)

In any event, in the case of Yitzchak there is no doubt on either account: both his prayer and his inclusion of his wife are clear.

"Yitzchak PLEADED (va-ye'etar) to God for his wife, for she was barren..." (25:21)

Quite naturally, we find that God answers him, measure for measure:

"God accepted his plea (va-ye'ater), and Rivka, his wife, conceived." (ibid.)

## C. FAMINE

Avraham and Yitzchak both face a situation of famine, and the Torah links their respective experiences:

"There was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land." (12:10)

"There was a famine in the land, BESIDES THE FIRST FAMINE, WHICH HAD OCCURRED IN THE DAYS OF AVRAHAM, and Yitzchak went to Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, in Gerar." (26:1)

Here again there is an obvious difference between Avraham and Yitzchak: while Avraham leaves Eretz Yisrael, Yitzchak remains within the boundaries of the land. The commentators are divided in their attitude towards Avraham's abandonment of the land. Ramban regards it as a severe transgression, resulting in the decree of the Egyptian exile for his descendants. Radak, in contrast, regards this course of action as evidence of Avraham passing a Divine test:

"He did not question the Holy One, saying: Previously You told me, 'Through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed,' and now there is famine in the land in which I dwell, such that I am forced to leave it for a different place."

Whichever interpretation we adopt, it seems that Yitzchak – who never considered leaving the land, but rather went off to the region ruled by Avimelekh "to sojourn in his land until the famine would be over" (Radak, 26:1) - behaved in a more praiseworthy manner. Indeed, in the wake of this act, Yitzchak receives a special blessing from God:

"God appeared to him and said: Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I will tell you. Sojourn in this land and I WILL BE WITH YOU, and I will bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all of these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Avraham your father, and I will increase your seed like the stars of the heavens, and I will give your descendants all of these lands, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through your seed." (26:2-4)

As a result of Yitzchak's devotion to Eretz Yisrael, he receives a command that was not transmitted to Avraham: to remain always in the land. This command carries great reward. Most of the blessings were admittedly already given to Avraham; there is particular resemblance between the blessings listed here and those that Avraham received after the Akeda:

"I shall surely bless you, and I shall surely increase your seed like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is upon the sea shore, and your descendants will inherit the gate of their enemies. And all the nations of the world will be blessed through your seed." (22:16-18)

But one blessing is unique to Yitzchak: "And I will be with you." This blessing is given in the Torah only in connection with Eretz Yisrael, as we are told:

"God said to Yaakov: Return to the LAND OF YOUR FATHERS, to your birthplace, AND I WILL BE WITH YOU." (Bereishit 31:3)

"He commanded Yehoshua ben Nun, saying: Be strong and courageous, for you will bring Bnei Yisrael to THE LAND THAT I PROMISED THEM, and I WILL BE WITH YOU." (Devarim 31:23)

Because Yitzchak is so devoted to Eretz Yisrael, he merits an eternal connection with the land and the promise that God will be with him.

#### D. "SHE IS MY SISTER"

On three different occasions we read of one of the patriarchs fearing for his life and deciding to pass off his wife as his sister. This scenario occurs twice involving Avraham, in Egypt (chapter 12) and in Gerar (chapter 20), and once involving Yitzchak – in Gerar (chapter 26). A study of the three instances reveals a development: the first time the wife is taken altogether; the second time she is taken, but the king does not approach her; and the third time she is not taken at all. What is the meaning of these differences?

Concerning the first instance we find – once again – a dispute among the commentators as to how Avraham's act should be viewed. Here again, Ramban (12:10) is unhappy with Avraham's behavior:

"Know that Avraham our father mistakenly committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife before a stumbling block of such iniquity because of his fear that he would be put to death. He should have trusted in God that He would save him and his wife and all that was theirs, for God has the power to help and to save."

The Radak (12:12), once again, defends Avraham:

"He did not rely on God's promise that He made to him, for he thought that perhaps he would be unworthy because of sin. Similarly, Yaakov still feared after God's promise [to him]. It is proper for any righteous person not to rely, in a dangerous situation, upon miracles. He should protect himself by means of any possible strategy. Concerning this Shlomo said: 'Happy is the man who is always fearful,' and the Sages taught that it is not proper to rely on miracles...."

Even if we follow Radak's opinion, the parasha confronts us with a somewhat jarring expression:

"Please say that you are my sister, in order that it will be good for me on your account, and my life will be spared because of you." (12:12)

If there is really no alternative and it is a question of life and death, then the words "my life will be spared because of you" are quite in order. But what is the meaning of the previous phrase – "in order that it will be good for me on your account"? Rashi explains: "They will give me gifts," and it seems that his interpretation is correct, for we are told later on:

"HE WAS GOOD TO AVRAHAM ON HER ACCOUNT, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys, servants and maidservants, and she-asses and camels." (12:16)

At a later stage in his life, Avraham expresses reservations about accepting money from evil people:

"Avraham said to the king of Sedom: I have raised my hand to the Most High God, Possessor of the heavens and the earth, that I will take nothing – from a thread to a shoelace – of all that is yours, that you shall not say, 'I made Avram rich.'" (14:22-23)

Indeed, the second time Avraham encounters the same situation, he expresses no expectation of receiving any material profit:

"Avraham traveled from there to the land of the Negev, and he dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar. And Avraham said of Sara, his wife: 'She is my sister.'" (20:1-2)

It may be for this very reason that the Holy One intercedes here:

"...Therefore I have not allowed you to touch her." (20:6)

Here, too, Avraham receives gifts from the king who took his wife, but this time the reward is not for the actual taking of the wife, but rather as compensation for the anguish caused to Avraham and Sara:

"Avimelekh took sheep and cattle and servants and maidservants, and gave them to Avraham, and he returned him Sara, his wife... And to Sara he said: 'Behold, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother; let it be for you a covering of the eyes, to all who are with you....'" (29:14-16)

Yitzchak appears to achieve a complete repair of this scenario, for ultimately his wife is not taken at all:

"And it was, when he had spent a long time there, that Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, looked out of the window and saw, and behold – Yitzchak was intimate with Rivka his wife. Avimelekh called Yitzchak and said... 'What is this that you have done to us? One of the people could easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us!'" (26:8-10)

There seems to be one glaring difference between these three instances. In both of the stories about Avraham, the declaration that the woman is his sister is made immediately upon arrival in the new area:

"When he came near to come to Egypt, he said to Sarai, his wife: 'Look, now – I know that you are a beautiful woman... Please say that you are my sister...'" (12:11-12)

"And he sojourned in Gerar. And Avraham said of Sara, his wife: 'She is my sister...'" (20:1-2)

Yitzchak, on the other hand, waits until he is asked:

"The local people asked about his wife, and he said: 'She is my sister,' for he feared to say, 'my wife'...." (26:7)

It seems, then, that Yitzchak and Rivka lived together there as a regular husband and wife, and only when asked did he respond, "She is my sister." This dedication to the truth allowed Yitzchak to depart from it only at the last moment, under clear compulsion. Obviously, his response sounded suspicious, and it is reasonable to assume that this is what caused the king to look through the window specifically at this point, before taking the woman.

Avraham ascended from Egypt the first time with great wealth that he had received from Pharaoh in return for Sara: "Avram was very wealthy, in cattle, in silver and in gold" (13:2). In contrast, the Torah describes how Yitzchak, following the episode of Avimelekh, achieves his wealth by merit of his own labors:

"Yitzchak sowed in that land and he received the same year a hundredfold, and God blessed him. The man grew great, and he continued to grow until he became very great." (26:12)

## E. DISPUTE AMONG THE SHEPHERDS

Not much time passes, and again Yitzchak is beset with problems – this time from the direction of the Philistine shepherds:

"The servants of Yitzchak dug in the valley, and they found there a well flowing with fresh water. AND THE SHEPHERDS OF GERAR STROVE WITH YITZCHAK'S SHEPHERDS, saying: 'The water is ours,' and he called the name of the well 'Esek' (striving), for they strove with him." (26:19-20)

Again we are reminded of Avraham, who also had to deal with a dispute among shepherds:

"There was a dispute between the shepherds of Avraham's flocks and the shepherds of Lot's flocks" (13:7).

Here again there is a difference. Avraham's way of dealing with the dispute of the shepherds is to propose a compromise:

"Is not ALL THE LAND before you? Please separate yourself from me - if you take the left side then I will take the right; if the right – I will take the left." (13:9)

Lot accepts his suggestion, and chooses the portion of land that pleases him:

"LOT LIFTED HIS EYES and saw all of the Jordan plain, for all of it is well watered... and Lot chose all of the Jordan plain...." (13:10-11)

At first glance, Avraham's suggestion seems to represent a worthy, peaceful solution. However, close inspection of God's reaction points to a certain reservation regarding Avraham's readiness to relinquish parts of the land, which were meant for him, to Lot:

"God said to Avram, after Lot had separated from him: LIFT UP YOUR EYES and see, from the place where you are – northwards and southwards, eastwards and westwards. For ALL THE LAND that you see – I shall give it to you and to your seed forever. I shall make your seed like the dust of the earth, that if a person could count the dust of the earth, so could your seed be counted. Arise, walk about in the land, its length and its breadth, for I shall give it to you...." (13:14-16)

When God repeats Avraham's phrase "all the land," He is hinting that the land Avraham offers Lot is not meant for Lot at all; it is meant exclusively for Avraham and his descendants. It is not Lot who should "lift his eyes" and choose whichever portion he desires, but rather Avraham who should "lift his eyes" and know that the entire land has been given to him, for all eternity. The land is not supposed to be divided between "left" and "right," but should rather remain, in its entirety, the land of Avraham: from the north to the south, from the east to the west, its length and breadth. A completely different land is destined for the descendants of Lot:

"God said to me: Do not harass Moav nor challenge them to war, for it is not to you that I give of their land as an inheritance, but rather to the children of Lot that I have given Ar for an inheritance... And when you come near, facing the children of Ammon, you shall not harass them nor challenge them, for I shall not give of the land of the children of Ammon to you as an inheritance, but rather to the children of Lot that I have given it as an inheritance." (Devarim 2:9-19)

From this perspective, Yitzchak's determination to remain in the land and to fight for it is especially praiseworthy:

"They dug another well, and they strove also over that, and he called its name Sitna. He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not strive over it, and he called it Rechovot ('broad places'), saying: Now God has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." (26:21-22)

Yitzchak does not offer the Philistines any portion of the land. His determination eventually prevails, and they cease to argue with him.

## F. PACT WITH AVIMELEKH

Although Avimelekh abducted Sara, and almost seized Rivka as well, he ultimately approached both Avraham and Yitzchak, requesting that they enter into a peace pact with him. There are many similarities between the two stories. In both instances, it is Avimelekh who initiates the covenant, after recognizing the Divine assistance rendered to the patriarchs:

"God is with you in all that you do." (21:22)

"I have seen clearly that God was with you." (26:28)

In both cases, the patriarchs respond with a complaint concerning the injustice done to them by Avimelekh's servants:

"Avraham rebuked Avimelekh on account of the well of water which the servants of Avimelekh had stolen." (21:25)

"Why have you come to me, when you hate me and banished me from among you?" (26:27)

At the same time, the encounter eventually concludes with a mutual promise between the patriarchs and Avimelekh, which pertains also to the name of the city – Be'er Sheva:

"Therefore he called the name of that place 'Be'er Sheva,' for there the two of them swore (nishbe'u)." (21:31)

"They swore (va-yishav'u) each to the other... therefore the name of the city was Be'er Sheva." (26:31-33)

A closer look at the relevant chapters once again reveals fundamental differences between Avraham's way and that of Yitzchak. Avraham immediately agrees to Avimelekh's request, and only afterwards mentions the injustice done to him:

"Avraham said: 'I swear.' And Avraham rebuked Avimelekh on account of the well of water which the servants of Avimelekh had stolen." (21:24-25)

Further on, it turns out that although Avimelekh asked Avraham only for a promise, Avraham is prepared to go even further – to forge a covenant:

"And now, swear to me by God...' And Avraham took sheep and cattle and gave them to Avimelekh, and the two of them forged a covenant." (21:23-27)



This point is of great significance. A promise is merely an undertaking, while the forging of a covenant expresses partnership and a qualitative connection between the two parties. Avraham's readiness to make a covenant with Avimelekh, after the latter had previously taken his wife (even though his intention had not been to take a married woman), and after hearing Avimelekh's questionable apology for the episode of the well ("I do not know who did this thing, nor did you tell me, nor had I heard of it until today") is most surprising. The covenant is executed through an act of expressing good faith, and an attempt to sort out the issue of the well on the basis of mutual undertaking:

"Take the seven sheep from me, that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well." (21:30)

Chazal criticize sharply this act by Avraham:

"Avraham took sheep and cattle, and gave them to Avimelekh. Avimelekh said to Avraham: What are these here seven sheep?' –

The Holy One said to him, 'You gave seven sheep without My desiring it; by your life, I shall postpone the rejoicing of your children for seven generations.

You gave him seven sheep without My desiring it; by your life, corresponding to this they will kill seven righteous men of your children, and these are they: Chofni, Pinchas, Shimshon, and Shaul and his three sons.

You gave him seven sheep without My desiring it; correspondingly, his sons will destroy seven of your children's Sanctuaries, and these are they: the Ohel Mo'ed and Gilgal, Nov, Giv'on, Shilo, and the two Temples.

You gave him seven sheep without My desiring it; correspondingly, My holy Ark will remain in the field of the Philistines for seven months." (Bereishit Rabba 54:4)

Yitzchak, interestingly, acts in exactly the opposite manner. First he presents his complaints to Avimelekh, and only after the latter is forced to admit that his approach is motivated by personal interests, does Yitzchak agree to negotiate with him.

"Yitzchak said to them: Why have you come to me, since you hate me and banished me from among you?" (26:27)

Avimelekh then asks of him what he never asked of Avraham: "Let me make a covenant with you," but Yitzchak will agree only to a mutual promise; he will not enter into a covenant with a man such as Avimelekh. Although Yitzchak offers the proper hospitality to Avimelekh and his men, he actually gives them nothing.

This different approach is reflected in the different results. The pact made with Avraham is violated after Avraham's death:

"All the wells that the servants of his father had dug in the days of Avraham were blocked up by the Philistines and filled with dust." (26:15)

The agreement reached with Yitzchak, on the other hand, concludes with the Torah reporting that "they departed from him in peace," and we hear no more of any disturbances. It is specifically through highlighting the moral distance separating Yitzchak from Avimelekh – leaving no possibility of a covenant – that Yitzchak achieves a "cold peace" with him, which turns out to be more effective than the covenant made by his father.

The story of the encounter between Yitzchak and Avimelekh occurs within a clear literary framework. At the outset we are told:

"The servants of Yitzchak dug a well there. And Avimelekh came to him from Gerar..." (26:25-26)

Throughout the story, we are in suspense as to whether any water will be found in the well. Symbolically, it is only after the encounter has ended, with Avimelekh and his cohorts returning home without a covenant, that the water bursts forth:

"They departed from him in peace. It was on that day that the servants of Yitzchak came to him and told him about the well which they had dug, and they said to him: We have found water!" (26:31-32)

This difference between the two stories also emphasizes the difference in the description of how the city came to be called "Be'er Sheva." This name was given to the city in the wake of the covenant that Avraham made with Avimelekh:

"Therefore the name of that place was called Be'er Sheva, for there the two of them swore." (21:31)

However, is it proper that a city be named after an unwanted covenant, given in place of a promise? This explanation for the name of the city was only temporary. The explanation that will remain forever valid is actually the oath by Yitzchak:

"They swore each to the other... Therefore the name of the city is Be'er Sheva TO THIS DAY." (26:31-33)

Yitzchak's oath, representing the avoidance of a covenant with a person such as Avimelekh, is what will be memorialized eternally in the name of the city. (Thanks to my student Raphael Yanniger for pointing this out to me.)

## G. ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE SINFUL SON

The final point that I shall address concerns a comparison noted by the Midrash: "Avraham had a righteous son and a wicked son, and likewise Yitzchak." What was the difference between Avraham's attitude towards Yishma'el and Yitzchak's attitude towards Esav?

Actually, the Torah does not record a single conversation between Avraham and Yishma'el. The father's feelings for the son are discernable only at the end, after Yishma'el's sin has brought about – with God expressing agreement with Sara – the need to banish him from his home:

"Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian woman, whom she had borne to Avraham, making sport. She said to Avraham: 'Banish this maidservant and her son, for the son of this maidservant will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak.' THE THING WAS VERY BAD in Avraham's eyes, on account of his son.

God said to Avraham: 'Let it not be bad in your eyes over the boy and over your maidservant; all that Sara tells you – listen to her voice, for your seed will be called through Yitzchak.'" (21:9-12)

In contrast, Yitzchak reveals his feelings for his son Esav from the very outset:

"Yitzchak loved Esav, for the hunt was in his mouth." (25:28)

Yitzchak is well aware of Esav's character:

"Esav was forty years old, and he took as a wife Yehudit, daughter of Be'eri the Hittite, and Basmat, daughter of Elon the Hittite. They [the women] were a source of bitterness to Yitzchak and to Rivka." (26:34-35)

Still, Yitzchak does not change course regarding his son:

"It was, when Yitzchak grew old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called Esav, his elder son, and said to him: 'My son!' And he said to him, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'See here, I am old, and I do not know the day of my death. Now, please take up your weapons – your quiver and your bow – and go out to the field, and hunt me some venison. Prepare me tasty dishes, such as I love, and bring it to me and I shall eat, in order that my soul may bless you before I die.'" (27:1-4)

How beautifully the Midrash explains this relationship of Yitzchak towards Esav:

"'And Yitzchak loved Esav' – did Yitzchak then not know that Esav's actions were bad? Yet we are told, 'Shall I not hate those who hate you, God?' (Tehillim 139:21). Why, then, did he love him?

In truth, he showed love for him only to his face, in order to draw him closer. For if, when he loved him, Esav's actions were evil, how much more evil would they be if he hated him and distanced him! Our Sages taught: The right hand should always draw near and the left hand push away. Therefore the Torah says that Yitzchak loved Esav." (Midrash ha-Gadol, Bereishit 25:28)

Yitzchak's plan - to bless Esav with blessings of material success while granting Yaakov the blessing of Avraham – was not successful, because of Rivka's

intervention. The scope of this shiur does not allow for a discussion of whether Rivka was correct in intervening, and what would have happened if she had left Yitzchak to act in the way that he intended to. But even after Rivka brings about a turnabout in the plan, and a "great terror" on the part of Yitzchak, the positive influence of Yitzchak's educational philosophy is still felt:

"Esav saw that the daughters of Canaan were bad in the eyes of Yitzchak, his father. And Esav went to Yishma'el, and took Machalat, daughter of Yishma'el, son of Avraham, sister of Nevayot, in addition to his other wives, as a wife."  
(28:8-9)

Esav is not concerned by the fact that the daughters of Canaan are bad also in the eyes of Rivka, his mother, who estranged herself to him. He is disturbed only by the fact that they are bad "in the eyes of Yitzchak his father," who openly showed his love for him. Moreover, even in his terrible rage at the deceitful act of Yaakov, Esav manages – at least for the meantime – to hold back his desire to execute judgment for himself and to kill his brother:

"Esav said to himself: When the days of mourning for my father are at hand, then I will kill Yaakov, my brother." (27:41)

Yitzchak teaches us a most important educational lesson. One's dealings with a son who has deviated from the path of his father must come from love. Only through love are we able to repair – even just a little – the way of the son.

## H. SUMMARY

Avraham our forefather paved the way. His ceaseless moving – from the first "Lekh lekha," sending him to Israel, to the last, sending him to Moriah - created a completely new path in the world. But – as in any new road – there is room for repair and completion of deficiencies, without which no new beginning could ever exist. This is the job of the continuer of the way – Yitzchak. With determination and conscientiousness, Yitzchak strengthens the connection with the promised land and deals with the corrupt inhabitants of the land. With great faith he addresses his wife's barrenness and also manages to influence even the evil ways of his son, Esav.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)