

מכון הדר

MECHON HADAR

The Cry of the Bound: From Isaac to Esau

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Parashat Toldot 5777

Yitzhak is a complex figure: at times motivated by inter-personal ties and connected, and at times both an isolated and an isolating personality. I would like to explore the expression of both these aspects of Yitzhak in our *parashah*.

Parashat Toldot opens with a touching description of Yitzhak and Rivkah:

בראשית כ"ה, כ-כא

וַיְהִי יִצְחָק, בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה, בְּקִרְיָתוֹ אֶת רִבְקָה בִּתְ-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדָן אֶרֶם אֵחָיו לְבֶן
הָאֲרָמִי לֹוּ לְאִשָּׁה: וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לָהּ לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הָיָה וַיַּעֲתֵר לֹוּ ה' וַתֵּהָרַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Bereishit 25:20-21

Yitzhak was forty when he took as his wife Rivkah daughter of Betuel the Aramean, from Padan Aram, the sister of Lavan the Aramean. Yitzhak prayed to God for/facing (*le-nokhah*) his wife because she was barren. God acquiesced to him and his wife Rivkah became pregnant.

Yitzhak himself is not described as longing for a child. What compels him to pray according to the verses is “his wife” and his standing *le-nokhah*, facing her.

The description of this scene in a *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah amplifies what is occurring between Rivkah and Yitzhak in two ways. In the biblical text, only Yitzhak prays, but in the

midrash, Rivkah is also described as praying:

בראשית רבה (תיאדור-אלבק), פרשת תולדות פרשה סג:ה
"לנוכח אשתו" – מלמד שהיה יצחק שטוח כאן והיא שטוחה כאן.

Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) 63:5

“Opposite his wife”—This comes to teach that Yitzhak was prostrate (in prayer) in one place and she was prostrate in another.

Second, the *midrash* supplies the content of the prayer, which focuses not only on the request for a child, but also on the relationship between Yitzhak and Rivkah. And so the *midrash* elaborates Yitzhak’s prayer:

אמר לפני הקב"ה: רבוננו של עולם, כל בנים שאתה עתיד ליתן לי יהיו מן הצדקת הזו, אף היא אמרה כן.

He said before the Holy Blessed One: “Master of the Universe! Any future children that You will give me should be from this righteous woman,” and she said the same.

Yitzhak’s behavior is quite different from that of his father, Avraham. When Avraham was in a similar set of circumstances and his wife Sarah was barren, he followed his wife’s suggestion that he try to have children with another woman. He abandons, to a certain degree, his wife in favor of his wife’s servant. Yitzhak, on the other hand, is described as standing alongside his wife, with her.

Looking closely at the way that Rivkah is described by the verses provides some background for understanding the unique bond that exists between her and Yitzhak. Rivkah has one salient quality, she is a figure that is bound to other people. “Yitzhak was forty when he took as his wife Rivkah daughter of Betuel the Aramean, from Padan Aram, the sister of Lavan

the Aramean.” She isn’t just connected to Yitzḥak, her husband who prays for her, but she is generally described by the people to whom she is related, someone’s daughter, someone’s sister, and now someone’s wife. She is a relational person who is connected to a number of different people, and these individual bonds don’t impinge on one another—they are all described equivalently. This is the background we are given about Rivkah before we find out about Yitzḥak’s praying for her. This description of Rivkah suggests the possibility that maybe it is because she is a connected person, attached in many ways, that Yitzḥak himself is motivated to connect to her, and his feeling connected to her enables him to truly see her and her desires.

Yitzḥak doesn’t only pray in our *parashah*, he also bestows blessings. The prayer that Yitzḥak offers on behalf of his wife is described in light of connections, but the blessings that he offers to his children, the children that he prayed for, are described in the shadows of disconnect.

When Yitzḥak grants the blessings to his children, he is described in a way that makes him seem like an opposite character to Rivkah. He is a figure characterized by distance and disconnect, alone and blind. He either barks at those he loves, “Go out!” or doesn’t invite them in at all. An isolated person who also creates isolation and alienation.

Chapter 27 of Bereishit opens with a description of Yitzḥak’s blindness:

בראשית כ"ז, א-ד

וַיְהִי כִּי זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתְּכַהֵן עֵינָיו מִרְאֵת... וַיִּקְרָא אֶת עֲשׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲנִנִי: וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא זָקֵנְתִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי: ... וַעֲשֵׂה לִּי מִטְעָמִים כָּאֲשֶׁר אָהַבְתִּי בַעֲבוּר תְּבָרְכָהּ נַפְשִׁי בְטָרֶם אָמוּת.

Bereishit 27:1-4

And it was when Yitzḥak became old, his eyes were too clouded to see. He called to

his eldest son, Esav, and said to him, “My son (*beni*).” And he said, “Here I am (*hineini*).”¹ He said: “Behold I am old and I do not know when I will die... prepare the delicacies that I love in order that my soul should bless you before I die.”²

Yitzḥak’s request from Esav is: “Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and *go out* into the open and hunt me some game” (v. 3). This verse is surprising. Instead of saying, “Sit alongside me before I die,” Yitzḥak, blind and uncertain, says to his son, “Go out!” On its own, the connection to his son Esav does not satisfy Yitzḥak: He is in need of beloved foods “in order that [his] soul will bless [him].” The connection to his son Esav is not sufficient to move him to bless. The language of “Go out” that accompanies Yitzḥak’s instructions to his son is in stark juxtaposition with the image of Yitzḥak praying “facing” his wife.

The chapter continues to describe Rivkah, “Rivkah is listening/hearing” (v. 5). This is a loaded phrase. Seemingly, Rivkah is listening because Yitzḥak didn’t include her in his plans, he didn’t consult with her or tell her who was going to give the blessing to. In some sense, he not only says “Go out” to Esav, but to Rivkah as well. Yitzḥak’s blindness is thus characterized by separation and isolation from the people he loves.³

¹ This dialogue between Yitzḥak and his son is reminiscent of the short conversation that Yitzḥak had with his own father when they were walking to the mountain in preparation for the *Akeidah*. But note, in the dialogue on the way to the *Akeidah*, it is the opposite: It is the son who calls to the father, and the father who answers “*Hineini*”—“Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, “My father”; and he said “Here I am, my son” (Bereishit 22:7-8). We shall return to this other conversation shortly.

² One element we will not discuss in this context is the fact that Yitzḥak, as he is described by the biblical narrator, is presented like someone who possesses a fairly hierarchical view of the world—there is great and small (“his eldest son, Esav”), blessed and unblessed (“that my soul should bless you”), a master and a slave (as the language of the blessing itself indicates—“Be a master to your brothers and the children of your mother will bow to you”, v. 29). This dichotomous worldview sometimes produces the illusion of certainty, and thus stands in opposition to the manner in which Yitzḥak describes himself: “I don’t know the day of my death.” This short format prevents the inclusion of the wide debate about this view and the image of Yitzḥak.

³ Yitzḥak is described on the one hand as one who loves Rivkah, and on the other, Esav: “He married Rivkah and she became his wife, and he loved her” (Bereishit 24:67); “Yitzḥak loved Esav” (25:28).

This deliberate separation becomes even more stark when seen in the larger context of the use of language in this chapter. This story is characterized by speech which is direct and extensive. Specifically, terms that refer to family bonds, “my father (*avi*), and “my son (*beni*),” which appear five times as frequently here than they do anywhere else in Bereishit.⁴ Esav calls, “My father” when bringing the fresh meat that his father requested, and again when he realizes that Ya’akov received the blessing intended for him. This second time, it’s a broken-hearted cry: “He said to his father, ‘Bless me too, **my father!**’” Esav’s request that he also be blessed, is met with the stark view of his father: “But I have made *him* master over you: I have given *him* all his brothers for servants, and sustained *him* with grain and wine. What, then, can I still do for you, **my son?**” (v. 37).

Esav has difficulty accepting this reality: “When Esav heard his father’s words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing”; and in a devastated response and a quivering voice presents the most challenging question to his father: “Do you only have one blessing, my father?!” How could it be that a father has two sons, but only one blessing?! “Bless me too, my father!” But Esav has no real recourse, all he can do is cry: “And Esav wept aloud” (vv. 34-8).

Yitzḥak is a divided person: So attached to his wife, and so disconnected from his children. Why is it that Yitzḥak can’t bless his sons? What is the context for this inability?

In order to understand this, we again have to turn our attention to the language used when Yitzḥak and Esav do speak directly to one another. “He called his older son Esav and said to him, “My son (*beni*).” He answered, “Here I am (*hineini*).” This exchange is eerily familiar: It is difficult not to hear the distinct echo of the conversation that Yitzḥak had with his father Avraham on the way to Mount Moriah during the *Akeidah*, “Then Yitzḥak said to his

⁴ The words “my father” and “my son” appear almost twenty times altogether in direct speech, and only four times over the rest of Bereishit—when Yitzhak and Avraham speak at the *Akeidah* and when Yosef is speaking with Ya’akov.

father Avraham, ‘My father (*avi*)!’ And he answered, “Here I am, my son (*bineini beni*)” (22:27).

Maybe what we have in front of us is a variation on the original *Akeidah* story: Esav has a father who has two children, and who has, according to Yitzḥak’s understanding of the divine will, just one blessing. One son will be left behind, sacrificed. Yitzḥak is a father who believes that he has to choose between his oldest and youngest sons, and maybe even between his God and his children, a father who is afraid when he is called to respond and protect by means of the saying, “My father.” He is startled at the exact moment when, as a father, he is expected to supply a solution or response, a father who can’t hear his son’s cry for order, for an arrangement that is both complex and connected. Esav cries “My father!” four times and in the end he realizes, just as his father did, that there is no answer beyond silence. He gives up and he cries.

The order that Esav is crying out for is one in which fathers don’t eliminate or sacrifice their children. He wants a world in which a father blesses his children, all of his children, a world that is complex and connected—of people who love each other “facing” each other. Maybe, the connection and unconditional acceptance that Esav wants from Yitzḥak is something that he can’t give because Yitzḥak never received it from Avraham. Yitzḥak inherits his father’s stubborn, distant obedience and acts that way with his son.

Yitzḥak is able to love, able to connect, can see the other and notice someone else’s needs, as we see when he stands *le-nokḥah* Rivkah. But when it comes to his sons he is distant and distancing. The echo of the *Akeidah* suggests that Yitzḥak learns about relationships from Rivkah and about disconnect from Avraham.

May we learn from Yitzḥak about the multiple possibilities of relationship and with open eyes choose between them.