

Shabbat Toldot – Short teaching Nov. 2020

Based on teaching given by Rabbi Benny Law.

Parashat Toldot is the only Parasha that deals with Yitzhak. Yes, he had some presence in previous Parashot, but he is the main character only in this Parasha. Avraham's story spans over three Parashot – starting at the end of Parashat No-ah and through Lekh Lekha, VaYera and Hayey Sarah. Ya-akov, his son, also has three Parashot in which he is the main character: VeYetze, VaYishlah and Vay'hi. Even his grandson, Yosef, has three Parashot to tell his story: VaYeshev, Miketz and Vayigash. Only Yitzhak, our second patriarch, has a single Parasha to tell his story. And even in that Parasha, Ya-akov and Esahv take not an insignificant part of the plot...

Yitzhak is the patriarch that is caged between the two foundational pillars of Am Israel: Avraham and Ya'akov-Israel. The image of these pillars was drawn in the Bible and by its commentators with a fine brush to the smallest detail. Yitzhak may be seen only as the conduit for God's blessing from Avraham to Ya'akov (Genesis 26:3-5): "I will assign all these lands to you and to your seed, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Avraham. I will make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your seed all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your seed inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings."

Almost the same words used in the original blessing to Avraham: Genesis 12:7: "I will assign this land to your seed (Zar-ekha)." And Genesis 15:5: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them; So shall your seed be."

And indeed, at the end of the Parasha, Itzhak sends off Ya-akov to Haran with the following words (Ibid 28:4): "May He grant the blessing of Avraham to you and your seed, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Avraham." And only a few verses later – already in next week's Parasha, HaShem ratifies that very same blessing.

Yitzchak himself was not privileged to have God's explicit revelations as did Avraham and later Ya'akov. Even the blessing from God comes because of his father Avraham, and what he did and not because of Yitzhak's own merits. Itzhak is perceived as a passive character. He is protected by his mother, Sarah, who expels Hagar and Yishma'el for his sake. He is led by his father, without any pushback on his side, to be sacrificed. He is absent in the whole story of finding him a bride. Rivkah is asked for her consent to get married to Yitzhak, but nobody asked Yitzhak...

He is in the shadow of his dominant wife. He loves Esahv the hunter because of the immediate, material joy of the food that Esahv brings to the table. This love is interpreted as the here and now insignificant sight, while Rivkah foresees the future, the

intangible benefits of Ya-akov, the scholar and the “Tent Dweller” that will create and lead the People.

Avraham, his father, was wondering throughout the whole Middle East: coming from Aram Naharayim, going to Egypt, trading with all the habitants of the land, cutting treaties with kings and connected to the people. Avraham was wealthy, and highly respected.

And his sons – Esahv and Ya-akov – they are also worldly, influential, coming and going, moving around the whole Middle East (not so easy task in those days) becoming wealthy and with large subservient household that they command.

We find none of these with Yitzchak. And, in fact, this is his uniqueness. His paramount contribution to shaping the People, the Nation.

Unlike his father, and later his sons, he settles in the south of Israel, in the Negev, and becomes a farmer, digs wells and cultivates the land. He follows God’s commandment (ibid, ibid 2-3): “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you”. There are quite a few commentators that would claim that Itzḥak gave up most of his father’s assets so he can live simple life of a farmer, connected directly to the land, to the sweat, pain, and fruits it provides. Rabbi Ibn Ezra uses this argument to explain why Esahv forgone the firstborn rights so easily: in Esahv’s eyes, there wasn’t much to inherit, and probably he may die – because of his high-risk occupation as a hunter – before his father would.

This is the light that we should see Yitzchak in. A person that was brought up in a household that missed nothing, but the roots to a place, to a land. The Blessing of the land, that God Blessed Avraham was materialized by Yitzḥak. He made it his destiny, to fulfill that part of God’s Blessing: “I will assign all these lands to you and to your seed”. He worked the land not for the mere living and existence, but for the connectedness, the roots, the sense of belonging and ownership. No nation can exist without a strong connection to a Land. Without Land, there is no sovereignty. His role was not to be the conduit that passes on the blessing from Avraham to Ya’akov. His role was to be the root, the foundation, that connects the People of Israel to its land, Eretz Israel. He well understood that without the plow, the water wells, his seed will not hold the yearning to the Land. Yitzḥak’s life was anchored to the land through years of hard labor, without the magic and dramas of the life of the wonderer, without the reaches that could be attained by commerce. With his hard work and the blessing of God, he turned the baren Land into a land of honey and milk that is the desire of many generations to come, all the way to this day.

Shabbat Shalom!