

Parashat Vayigash 5772, 2011:

Yitzhak's Ultimate Task

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our *parasha* contains many powerful and dramatic moments. One of them ensues immediately following Yaakov's decision to travel to Egypt and thereby meet with his beloved son, Yosef, with whom he had been forcibly separated for 22 years:

And Israel and all that was his set out and came to Beer Sheba, and he slaughtered sacrifices to the G-d of his father Isaac. And G-d said to Israel in visions of the night, and He said, "Jacob, Jacob!" And he said, "Here I am." (*Sefer Bereishit* 46: 1-2, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The words "Jacob, Jacob" are quite notable since their direct parallel appears in reference to Yaakov's grandfather, Avraham, as stated toward the end of the *Akedat Yitzhak* (The Binding of Isaac) narrative:

And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife, to slaughter his son. And an angel of G-d called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham! Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." (*Ibid.*, 22:11)

The repetition of a protagonist's name is found in one other instance in *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (The Five Books of the Torah), namely, in the story of *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe) at the Burning Bush:

So Moses said, "Let me turn now and see this great spectacle why does the thorn bush not burn up?" The L-rd saw that he had turned to see, and G-d called to him from within the thorn bush, and He said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am!"

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon several classical Rabbinic sources, explains the significance of G-d's repetitions of Avraham's, Yaakov's, and Moshe's names in the following fashion: "'Abraham! Abraham!' This is an expression of affection, that He

repeated his [Avraham's] name.” (*Commentary to Sefer Bereishit 22:11*) Given that this is the case, i.e. that name repetition may be viewed as an act of demonstrable affection, we are completely stymied as to why Avraham, Yaakov, and Moshe merit this honor, while Hashem never speaks to Yitzhak in this manner. Fascinatingly, Yitzhak is simply ignored – just as he is in the prophet Michah's famous final recorded statement: “You [G-d] shall give the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from days of yore.” (7:20) After all, just as Avraham is famous for his loving-kindness, and Yaakov for his unrelenting pursuit of the truth, Yitzhak is famous for the quality of “*gevurah*” (“spiritual strength”) that he so powerfully manifested at the *Akedah*. If so, why does Michah purposely disregard Yitzhak's unique contribution to the patriarchal triumvirate?

I believe that both of my questions can be answered in the following manner. Avraham, Yaakov, and Moshe each created new spiritual paradigms for serving Hashem. Avraham rediscovered Hashem after He had been lost from the thoughts of men for multiple generations. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) conceptualized this notion in *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Hamada, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim I: 2-3*:

The wise men among them would think that there is no G-d other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a [few] individuals: for example, Chanoch, Metushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world - the Patriarch Abraham - was born. After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one G-d who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other G-d among all the

other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth. Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path. (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Yaakov's new spiritual paradigm was the *masorah* (broad and deep body of knowledge) of how to live and thrive in *galut* (the Diaspora). The Haggadah teaches us that, in no uncertain terms, Lavan wanted to destroy Yaakov, his entire family, and everything for which they stood:

Go forth and learn what Lavan the Aramean wanted to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh had issued a decree against the male children only, but Lavan wanted to uproot everyone - as it is said: "The Aramean wished to destroy my father..." (http://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/1737/jewish/Maggid.htm)

Yaakov prevailed over Lavan, however, when he left his father-in-law's home with his beloved family and fortune fully intact:

And Lavan arose early in the morning and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them, and Lavan went and returned to his place. And Jacob went on his way, and angels of G-d met him. (32:1-2)

It must be noted that this was not merely a physical victory – it was, instead, a triumph of the spirit: “And Jacob went on his way.” In my estimation, this means that Yaakov's faith-structure, religious world-view, and commitment to G-d's word remained fully intact – even after years of downtrodden misery in Lavan's household. Beyond a doubt, Yaakov taught us how to live, survive, and ultimately thrive in *galut* (outside the Land of Israel).

Moshe Rabbeinu's new spiritual paradigm is crystal clear and needs little amplification: Our revered teacher taught us how to live for all time as the people dedicated to Hashem

and His Torah: “*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morasha kehilat Yaakov*” (“Moshe commanded us the Torah, it is the inheritance of the entire Congregation of Yaakov,” *Sefer Devarim* 33:4). Thus, Moshe in his dual roles of G-d’s emissary, and the rebbe of the entire Jewish people, continues to guide us during our own historical moment.

In summary, Avraham’s paradigm was belief in G-d, Yaakov’s was the secret of Jewish survival under often hostile and foreboding conditions, and Moshe’s was knowledge of, and loyalty to, the Torah. In stark contrast, while we certainly learn a great deal from Yitzhak’s volitional and nearly physically complete self-sacrifice at the *Akedah*, his task was different in kind and degree from those of Avraham, Yaakov, and Moshe. His religious assignment was to maintain *Torat Avraham* (Avraham’s Torah). While this was a tremendous achievement, and possibly obliquely referred to in the expression “*Pachad Yitzhak*” (“the Fear of Yitzhak”), it was not the creation of a groundbreaking spiritual paradigm. Therefore, although he was beloved of Hashem, he did not merit the repetition of his name any more than Aharon or Pinchas.

We now can understand why “Yitzhak Yitzhak” is never found in *Sefer Bereishit*, and why Michah did not include him in his final words. Yitzhak had a crucial but different role to play than Avraham, Yaakov, and Moshe: His task was to transmit and maintain *Torat Avraham* for all time, rather than to create a new religious and spiritual paradigm. Beyond a doubt, he fulfilled his agency with all of his *gevurah*, as we are here today to recount his story.

Shabbat Shalom

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