

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Toldot)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Sometimes, if you aren't willing to take a stand, the decision to avoid or even actively flee the conflicts in life can come back to haunt you. At the very least, procrastinating and delaying the inevitable can often be a costly mistake. This perception was particularly important whenever we found ourselves doing reserve duty during the Arab violence that became known as the Intifada.

It was not difficult for the local Arabs to figure out that a new unit was starting reserve duty; more often than not, the processions of jeeps and trucks transporting men and supplies, along with a variety of civilian Israeli cars rarely seen in Arab villages, made it a fairly obvious deduction.

Because of this, the beginning of a reserve duty stint was often very challenging, as the local terrorist factions, sensing a new unit as yet unfamiliar with the routes and the routine, took advantage of our local inexperience for a variety of activities.

One year, at the height of the Intifada, we were drafted for a month's reserve duty in Hebron (Chevron), and the first couple of days were a disaster, filled with Molotov cocktails and stone throwing, everywhere we went.

There was one particular hot-spot, an observation post overlooking the town square (Kikar Gross), which would regularly come under attack from stones and even bricks, every afternoon. We finally figured out why this was happening: there was an elementary school nearby, and every day at 1pm when the kids would get out of school, they would literally stone the soldiers on their way home. We tried surprising them with jeeps arriving at just around this time, but they could both see and hear the jeeps coming, and were always long gone by the time we arrived.

On the third or fourth night of our reserve duty we finally decided we would be in for a very long month unless we did something fast. We needed to send a message to the locals that enough was enough.

Having noticed on a jeep patrol that afternoon that the village above this observation post bordered a valley full of vineyards, the battalion commander accepted my suggestion to try a different tack. So the next morning we drove all the way around the outskirts of Hebron, arriving at the other end of this long valley. Then, at about 10am, long after the local kids were in school, we hiked up through the vineyards arriving at the top of the village, situated on a hillside overlooking this observation post.

The theory was that the kids would not know we were there, and when the rock (and brick) throwing started again, the men on the rooftop observation post could direct us by radio, allowing us to catch some of the perpetrators and restore calm and order in the

area. We did not know whether these kids were acting on their own, or were being directed by adult members of a local terrorist cell, which of course was a much more dangerous prospect.

We settled down to wait behind the vineyard wall, and sure enough the rock throwing began again a little after 1 o' clock. Moving down the side of the hill, on a path that led in between the houses, the soldier directing us by radio from the rooftop suddenly got excited and described a ra'ul panim, a masked terrorist, literally just down the alley from where he could see us proceeding.

Now, these masked men, often gunmen, were a high priority to the IDF; they were usually in the assassination squads that were targeting Arabs open to cooperation and negotiation with Israel, often terrorizing both the local Arab populace as well as Jewish civilians in the area. The rules of engagement for such potentially dangerous encounters were clear, and authorized opening fire in stages in the event such an individual disobeyed a direct command to halt and be identified. In fact, the act of wearing such a mask (really more like the hoods of the Klu Klux Klan) in public was already illegal, so when we heard that one of these fellows was literally around the corner we leapt into action and started running down the hill.

A moment later, rounding a corner, I was confronted with a scene out of a movie: not thirty feet away, though down a steep incline, was a masked man, with a Palestinian flag in one hand and swinging a spiked ball on a chain much like a Medieval mace (which he was readying to throw up at the soldiers on the rooftop) in the other. Our eyes met, and his seemed to register shock for the briefest moment, and then he let go of the both the flag and the mace and took off down the alley.

We gave chase, but as I was in front and considerably younger than my men at the time, I very quickly found myself alone running through the pathways of this village after this man who seemed to possess the speed of an Olympic runner.

I was running parallel to his path further up the hill and couldn't really get much closer, when I realized he was about to pass through a gate where I would obviously lose him. So I screamed out "Wakef!" ("Stop!"), slowing down to take aim at his legs with my rifle. The last thing I wanted to do was to let one of these fellows get away to kill again, and I guess he looked back and realized I was actually going to shoot, at which point he threw up his arms in surrender. It took me a minute to get down below to the alley he was in, at which point I uncovered his face, and his full body came into view, and I realized the 'masked man' I had been chasing was a boy of no more than seven or eight years old. I will always remain thankful that I did not end up shooting that boy. Eventually we got him back to base and his father had to pay a steep fine in military court for his son's activities.

Over the course of that day, we caught a number of individuals, as well as raiding homes and discovering a number of stashes of illegal weapons, all of which sent out a very clear message to the locals that this was not a unit that would be trifled with, which of course was the point of the entire exercise. The rest of that month passed by uneventfully; sometimes, if you send a message that you mean business, the enemy wisely decides to wait for a more hesitant unit to come along next month....

All of which leaves us wondering about the wisdom of Yitzchak's behavior in one of the more challenging series of events in his life, found in this week's portion of *Toldot*.

There is, once again, a famine in the land of Canaan (Israel), and Yitzchak journeys to the coastal region of *Gerar* (most probably today's Gaza strip area), to the king *Avimelech*. (*Avimelech* is probably a Philistine title much like *Pharaoh* in Egypt and was not the actual name of this ruler.)

Although the natural thing to do during a severe famine was to follow in his father Avraham's footsteps and head south towards Egypt, G-d tells him not to go to Egypt (*Bereishit* 26:2-3) and remain in Israel, so he stays in Gerar.

Yitzchak, as it turns out, despite the famine, was very successful, with crops yielding one hundred fold the normal yield, and he becomes a very wealthy man. (26:13-14). This of course, makes the local Philistines very jealous.

So the king (*Avimelech*) tells Yitzchak he has become too wealthy and powerful, and essentially demands that he leave town (26:16). It is not clear why the Philistines want Yitzchak to leave (the fact that he is now wealthy would normally cause them to want him to stay...), but the Ramban and other commentaries suggest that it was an embarrassment to have a Jew in the area who was even wealthier than the King.

Surprisingly, Yitzchak offers no argument and promptly moves out of town to Nachal Gerar, in the valley below town (26:17).

Now, all of the wells his father Avraham had dug in this area had been stopped up and filled with earth by the local Philistines (in an attempt, perhaps, to later 'discover' and thus lay claim to them) as soon as Avraham died (26:15).

Yitzchak, his son, now re-claims these wells as his property by digging them up anew:

"And Yitzchak dug anew the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped up after Avraham's death, and he called them by the same names his father had called them." (26:18)

It is not clear when and where this re-digging of wells takes place, but a close look at the text suggests that this may well have been in Gerar, which would explain why the Torah tells us that the Philistines had blocked up the wells, before it describes Avimelech's expulsion of Yitzchak from Gerar. If this is so, the description of Yitzchak's re-digging of the wells *after* the Torah's description of his expulsion from Gerar, may come to accent the injustice involved here. Only after Yitzchak has re-dug all of his father's wells, is he expelled from Gerar, because the Philistines have no intention of allowing him to lay claim to these important wells.

And it makes sense that Yitzchak re-dug these wells in Gerar; because the Torah describes the fact that he had acquired many flocks and herds (26:14), for which he would obviously need to dig many wells.

This would help explain why now, in the valley below Gerar, Yitzchak's servants are once again digging for water. And indeed they find a fresh water wellspring (26:19) in

the valley below town, and once again, the Philistine shepherds of Gerar argue with Yitzchak's shepherds over this well (26:20), saying that the water is theirs.

By this time, one begins to wonder whether the argument here is really over water, as the people of Gerar had clearly been managing without any of these new wells previous to Yitzchak's arrival. If anything, one might have expected the Philistines to recognize that Yitzchak was making an important contribution to the area, with an influx of wealth and new wells, something that could clearly be of benefit to the entire community.

But hatred and enmity need not make a whole lot of sense; they never have, and they never will. Sometimes it is important to recognize when our enemies are not arguing in order to get something, but rather are much more interested in getting *rid* of something: us.

Now remember that Yitzchak, asked summarily to leave Gerar, puts up no argument, and summarily moves out of town, so by this time one would expect Yitzchak to put up a fight, or at least argue the point. But there does not seem to be even an attempt at an equitable solution, and instead they simply dig another well (26:21), and again, the Philistines argue with them over this well, and again, incredibly, Yitzchak simply moves on, relocating to a new area, and digging another new well!

And finally this time, there is no argument over it, now that he has traveled far north of Gerar, and they call the well *Rechovot*, from the root *Rachav*, or broad, because:

“Now, G-d has made broad space for us, and we can be fruitful in the land.” (26:22)

What is going on here? What happened to the power and greatness of the family of Abraham? Is Yitzchak afraid? Did not his father, who fought and defeated no less than five kings and the mightiest army the world had ever seen up to that point succeed in teaching his son that you have to be willing to fight for what is right? What sort of a message does this send to the future generations of the Jewish people?

One also wonders why finally, the fighting stops? If the Philistines of Gerar have figured out that Yitzchak has the magic touch, and finds water wherever he digs, and if they have further discovered that he will not oppose their unscrupulous designs upon the wells that he finds, why do they not contest the well at Rechovot?

Even stranger is what happens next: after having found water at Rechovot, and with no one contesting their rights to that water, one would have expected Yitzchak to settle with his family right there with his family in Rechovot. And yet, the very next verse (26:23) tells us that he goes from there up to Be'er Sheva! Why? Why does he not stay in Rechovot?

This puzzling story continues with, finally, G-d's appearance on the scene:

“And G-d appeared to him on that night and said: I am the G-d of Abraham your father, do not fear for I am with you, and I will bless you, and I will increase your offspring.” (26:24)

What is the significance of this sudden appearance of G-d? And why, if G-d wants Yitzchak to know that He is with him, does he wait until now? Where was He when the Philistines were blocking up the wells and kicking Yitzchak out of town? Why does Hashem only appear to Yitzchak *after* the successful digging of the well in Rechovot, without conflict?

And what exactly is Hashem telling Yitzchak here, by saying: “*I am the G-d of Abraham your father...*”? Doesn’t Yitzchak know who G-d is by now? And why the need to bring Abraham into the picture? Wouldn’t it be enough to say, “I am G-d”? Or: “I am *your*G-d”? Why does Yitzchak need to be reminded, and specifically here (note that verse 24 says: “*on that night*”) and now, that G-d is the G-d of Abraham his father?

And after this (and Yitzchak’s digging of yet another well), the story continues, and gets even stranger!

Avimelech, the Philistine King, along with an entourage which includes Phichol, his General, travels from Gerar to see Yitzchak, but this time, finally, the passive, unresponsive Yitzchak seems, at last, to ‘wake up’:

“*Why have you come to (visit) me, seeing as you hate me and even banished me (from your city)?*” (26:27)

Finally, Yitzchak reacts to the antagonism and he has experienced at the Philistines’ hands. And the Philistines explain: Having seen that G-d is with Yitzchak in all of his endeavors, they wish to enter into a treaty (covenant) with Yitzchak, perhaps to promote peace in the region.

Incredibly, not only is there no apology made for their previous behavior, (*sound familiar?*), but they warn Yitzchak against doing evil with *them*, declaring that they (the Philistines) have done only good with Yitzchak, even sending him away in peace! This attitude is particularly outrageous considering that this occurs only a few verses after we read of how these very Philistines flagrantly violated the treaty they had made with Abraham (21:27). So one wonders whether and why Yitzchak would even consider entering into any sort of pact with such an obviously unscrupulous group of individuals!

And yet, without any debate or demands (26:30-31) Yitzchak actually proceeds to make them a party (*in Oslo?*) and, acquiescing, essentially seems to repeat the same mistake his father Abraham made, signing a treaty with the Philistines, and sending them off in peace.

Why would Yitzchak sign a treaty with the Philistines, when it had just been made abundantly clear to him that the treaty wasn’t even worth the paper it was signed on? After all, these were the same Philistines who just blocked up all of the wells guaranteed Abraham in the treaty *he* signed with them a generation earlier?

Why, during the entire series of events described herein, does Yitzchak never fight back? Is the Torah suggesting that conflict must be avoided at all costs? Clearly Avraham did not follow such a philosophy, going to war as he did to redeem Lot from the five kings. So why does Yitzchak remain so passive in all of his encounters, and what causes him, for one brief instant, to respond to Avimelech, only to once again ‘let it go’?

And finally, the conclusion of this entire odd series of episodes ends with another new well the servants of Yitzchak have dug, and they come to tell Yitzchak they have found water. And the verse (26:32) tells us that Yitzchak calls it *Sheva*, for which **Be'er Sheva** is named "*until this day*". (26:33). All of which is very strange, considering the fact that the verse (26:23) tells us Yitzchak arrived in Be'er Sheva, long before this new well was ever dug!

In fact, the Torah tells us that it was really Avraham, an entire generation earlier, who named the city Be'er Sheva (21:31) over his *own* treaty (of seven ewes) with Avimelech, so why is this now ascribed to Yitzchak?

In short, what is going on here?

Perhaps, in order to understand this story, and the deeper message hidden in between the lines, we need to understand who Yitzchak really was, and what differentiated his purpose and mission, from that of his father, Avraham.

The difference between Yitzchak and Abraham may be very simple: Avraham was the first; the beginning; Yitzchak was the one who had to follow up; he was the continuation. These are two entirely different roles, each with their challenges and difficulties, and each represent different parts of the process, which can best be described as the creation of the nation that will become the Jewish people.

Avraham arrives on the world scene as a lone voice in a very lonely desert; the world is a morass of pagan idolatry, which believes in many gods, and worships the world of nature. Avraham's mission is to introduce to the world the idea that there is One G-d who created the world and that there is therefore one objective ethic, which can guide the world to peace and coexistence.

Yitzchak does not have the privilege of being the founder of this new idea, and the creator of a new world order. But he is the one to whom falls the challenging task of ensuring that this idea, indeed this mission, does not die. He is not the creator of a new idea, but he is nonetheless its bearer.

In fact, this concept lies at the heart of the human experience. **Rav Dessler** suggests that every human endeavor and experience contains, essentially, three parts, represented by the three forefathers of the Jewish people: Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Every experience will always have a beginning, middle, and an end.

The beginning is always a powerful moment. Imagine you are struggling with the challenge of writing a Doctoral thesis. One night, as you are walking home, you suddenly have a brilliant inspiration; a magnificent idea pops into your head and you suddenly realize you have found the topic for your thesis.

You literally run home, afraid to lose the moment and practically jump in front of your computer to get this idea written down before you lose it. Perhaps you stay up all night forming the outline of this great idea as the inspiration flows in and out of you onto your computer keyboard. You do not sleep all night because you can't; you are too caught up in the excitement of this magnificent thought, and finally, as dawn breaks, you look with

satisfaction at the pages of outline, ready now to begin working on the book that will become the doctoral thesis you have been longing to write.

And that is the second stage, because now, you have to translate this brilliant outline into a book. You have to transform one night of unremitting energy and ten pages of notes, into a three hundred- page book, and that is a lot of work. Over the coming months and maybe even years you will research and explore, plodding perhaps, through vast mounds of research until the material is all gathered for the final copy that will be the book. This second stage of a project is very different from the beginning. Where the beginning is all a burst of energy, over in a moment or a night of non-stop typing, the middle is the long hard work of translating that idea into a reality.

And finally, as the end approaches, you have to take all the notes along with that initial idea and synthesize them into an edited, final manuscript that is the book. You have to combine the energy of beginning, with the long hard journey of continuation, into an ending and an arrival that can be published.

And every experience of life is made up of these three components.

In fact, this is how life itself is created. A man and a woman come together, and in an enormous burst of energy, full of passion and excitement, the man enters the woman and impregnates her with seed. But life is far from being born; now the woman, through a long period of gestation, must carry that seed to term, allowing it to grow and develop, until one day, it is ready to be born. At that point, the original seed, born of that moment of intense union, so full of passion, combined with the long hard months of pregnancy, come together in an intense experience of labor, which allows the baby to be born.

It is interesting to note that most often, just before the final end is near, things seem often to get worse, and sometimes seem even ready to fall apart. But just when it looks like it is all over, when the woman is screaming in agony, and you cannot imagine anything good could possibly come out of this entire ordeal, the baby, in one last push, is born, and darkness and pain are transformed into joy and light.

Avraham represents this idea of beginning. His life experience is seen as a burst of energy, a new idea that captures the world. Indeed, all of Abraham's experiences are about this intense outward energy. He is constantly being tested, always journeying. He arrives in Israel and travels the land, only to have to go down to Egypt as the result of a famine. He fights wars, and climbs mountains, and ultimately brings into the world the first Jewish child.

But the Jewish people is not yet ready to be born, because with the death of Avraham, begins the long hard journey of Yitzchak. And where Avraham is all about outwardly directed energy, full of battles and journeys, Yitzchak is all about the challenge of the long hard journey to develop the dream of Avraham into something that will be ready to be born.

Indeed, this is why Abraham's life is so active, and Yitzchak's is so passive. Avraham journeys far from home to a new land and a new time; Yitzchak never leaves the land of Israel.

Abraham has to offer his son up on the altar, but Yitzchak is the passive sacrifice.

Avraham digs wells and signs treaties, but Yitzchak simply (for the most part) re-digs the wells his father has already dug, because that is the entire point: Yitzchak's mission is essentially to continue to cultivate the fields his father has planted. And this is perhaps the most difficult part of the journey; it is neither the departure, which holds with it the excitement of embarking on a new path for points unknown, nor is it the fulfillment of arrival, with the knowledge that the long hard journey has been worthwhile.

Yitzchak carries the weight of writing the book. He neither experiences the excitement of that first spark of an idea, nor witnesses the fulfillment of the book's publishing. He has simply to plod through the long nights and difficult days, secluded in the library, writing endlessly to see the initial vision through to fruition.

And only when both Abraham and Yitzchak have fulfilled their missions, are we ready for Yaakov to enter the picture. Yaakov is the synthesis of the beginning of Avraham, and the long hard journey, the months of pregnancy of Yitzchak. Yaakov is the birth of the Jewish people. Which is why Yaakov's life is like labor, full of struggles and challenges, with one disaster following the next. Born a twin, our first encounter is his struggle to wrest the birthright away from his undeserving brother, Esav. No sooner has he succeeded than he has to flee his own home one step ahead of his brother who wishes to kill him. He finds Rachel whom he loves, but must work seven years to marry her, and just when it seems he will succeed, his cunning father-in-law Lavan switches the brides and he must work yet another seven years. He finally returns to the land of his youth, only to have the tragedy of Joseph spring upon him.

He is even born struggling to be born first and his very name is taken from the *Akev*, the heel of Esav he was born holding. And yet, at the end of this long struggle of labor, the baby is finally born, and the sons of Yaakov reunite, and the family of Israel is born.

And every experience in life carries these three components. In fact, if one of them is missing, then most often that means something is wrong. If you write a book, and you know you experienced an 'Avraham', and feel you arrived at a 'Yaakov', with a book ready to be published, you have to ask whether you really experienced a 'Yitzchak'; did you really put in the work? Sometimes a book may be written, but without the long work necessary to create a book worthy of being read, it is just words on a page.

And the same is true of our relationships. If you meet someone and experience the excitement of Avraham, before you are ready to allow a marriage to be born (Yaakov), ask yourself whether indeed you have experienced Yitzchak; have you put in the work necessary to ensure that this will be a healthy relationship?

Which brings us back to our story. Perhaps Yitzchak is not naming this place Be'er Sheva; perhaps he is *re-naming* it. And it is precisely because Yitzchak, in the second generation, re-names it Be'er Sheva, that it continues to be called Be'er Sheva until this very day. The long hard work of Yitzchak is the important component necessary for the dream to become a reality.

And perhaps this is why Yitzchak is not fighting Avimelech, because that is not what Yitzchak is about. His job is to perpetuate the dream of Avraham, by demonstrating that

he is not there by virtue of his mighty army, but by virtue of the fact that his father dug the wells. His goal is not to have the wells in this generation; his goal is to perpetuate the claim of the Jewish people to those wells, in the land of Israel forever.

Which may also be why Hashem does not want Yitzchak to ever leave the land of Israel; he represents the fact that we will always be connected to the land. And this too, is why Hashem appears to Yitzchak after he successfully digs the well in Rechovot. Because this is the well in which he succeeds; here he has laid his own claim to the land. So Hashem, perhaps, reminds him that his real success will be in his continuing the path his father Avraham began.

This may be why Hashem's message to Yitzchak is that He is the G-d of Avraham. Because the entire essence of Yitzchak's mission is that he is meant to carry on the vision of his father Avraham.

Perhaps Yitzchak's point, in finally asking Avimelech how he could come to visit him after expelling him and stopping up his wells, is to communicate that his interest is in laying claim to those 'wells' of Avraham, but that it does not concern him whether in his lifetime he actually benefits from the water, because that is not the point.

We would do well in our challenging times, to learn carefully the messages of the life of Yitzchak.

We live in a generation that wants everything NOW. We want peace now and we want Mashiach now, and all our technology allows us to have everything at our fingertips: our mail and our telephone calls, the news and even our food, via microwave, right NOW. But life, and certainly peace, doesn't always work that way, and that has been our challenge.

In 1993, the State of Israel may have been ready for Yaakov, but perhaps we had not yet toiled enough with the long journey of Yitzchak; may Hashem bless us all with the perseverance and patience needed to do this hard and difficult work, with our Arab neighbors, with our fellow Jews, and especially with ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom,

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