

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Toldot)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Sometimes, you have to be willing to take a stand. And sometimes your goal may just be to keep standing. I don't remember what exactly it was that Barak had done that had so angered our sadistic first sergeant, but I have a vivid memory of the dressing down he was receiving, in front of the whole company. It was Friday afternoon, we were stuck on base for Shabbat in the middle of advanced tank crew training (Tzamad) and Barak was enduring a dressing down the likes of which would have caused most men to wilt. But, incredibly, he just stood there taking it all in, with a smile on his face.

Realizing his screaming was not having the desired effect, the sergeant ordered Barak to run and get the O5 machine gun off of his tank. Moments later, he made Barak lift it over his head and begin to run. Now, the O5 is an enormously heavy gun, and running with it is extremely difficult; running with it held high over your head is next to impossible. But Barak would not break

Shabbat was coming and I guess he realized they could not run him past sunset and he was determined to hang on. Most incredibly, as they ran him around the tanks again and again, he never let the smile leave his face. Many of us watching were starting to get upset; this was beyond fair treatment and Barak was not a huge guy; I was afraid he would collapse, and it was all most of us could do to keep from throwing caution to the wind and letting this sergeant have it while taking the machine gun.... But Barak's smile kept us all watching. Eventually, the sergeant realized he had lost the gambit and a different commander came out, maybe twenty minutes before Shabbat and dismissed all of us, including Barak.

We all made it back to our barracks where Barak collapsed on his bunk; he spent the rest of Shabbat recovering. (In the IDF there are no army maneuvers on Shabbat).

But he had taken a stand, by not making a stand.....

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 would have been 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) which, 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 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).

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

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.

And again, there does not seem to be any attempt at an equitable solution; 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?

And finally, the conclusion of this entire odd series of episodes ends with another new well the servants of Yitzchak have dug. And 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.

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 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, 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 its bearer.

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 Avraham'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.

Avraham 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 making the idea real.

Which brings us back to our story: Yitzchak is not *naming* this place Be'er Sheva; 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 till 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.

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 was 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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