

Dear Chavraya,

Many years ago, as a young rabbinical student, I sought out teachers and teachings to help me express through Torah my own commitment to nonviolent conflict resolution. I was introduced to an elder rabbi, Isidore Hoffman, a founder of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, along with Rabbi Abraham Cronbach and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rabbi Hoffman helped me to open up wellsprings of Torah whose living waters offer a way of response that is often blocked by the sand and sediment of narrow vision and preconceived notions.

Through the desert of human strife in which peoples and nations so often find themselves, I came with Rabbi Hoffman to the story of Isaac and the wells that is found in this week's Torah portion, *parashat Toldot*. Isaac is a person of uniquely sensitive spirit and insight. In search of water, always of critical need in the arid Middle East, Isaac dug a well. In the scenario that now unfolds, Isaac models a way of response that highlights the nature of his character and challenges our own. The herdsmen of *Gerar* claimed the well to be theirs. Isaac named the well *Essek/Contention* and moved on. He dug another well and over that one too there was strife. He named that one *Sitnah/Obstruction* and again moved on. Persevering, he dug yet another well. Over the third one there was no quarrel, and he named it *Rechovot/Spaciousness*.

The more usual response in such a situation would be to fight. Having been bound on the altar of zealotry, Isaac had seen the knife above him. Out of his own trauma, he was not prepared to sacrifice his young men to the sword, as his father had been prepared to sacrifice him. He found another way to resolve conflict, making room for the other until there is room for both. Isaac is not passive and his response is not the path of retreat. He steps back purposefully and with determination, disarming the aggressor in the process. It is what comes to be called in Gandhian terms *moral jiu-jitsu*.

In a fascinating and strikingly modern insight into the nature of Isaac's soul, the Chassidic master, Rebbe Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, says that Isaac was of both the "feminine aspect," *sitra d'nukvah*, and of the "masculine aspect," *sitra d'dechura*. Then Reb Levi Yitzchok says, *v'az hayah lo chayim, and so he had life*. Regardless of gender, we need both to be whole, that quality of gentle strength through which Isaac resolved conflict without resort to arms. May we all be diggers of wells, helping to transform the desert of contention into a spacious oasis of peace.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor