

## The Digger of Wells -- A Different Kind of Hero

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There was trauma in his life, perhaps as in most lives, only differing in degree. He saw the lessons in what he experienced, and sought to live accordingly. That is the teaching for us in the telling of his life. Perhaps his life lessons were not so much learned as a conscious effort on his part, but were the response of a gentle soul to the harsher ways around him. How could he visit upon others what he had known? His time, though long ago, was not so different from ours. They are in fact strikingly similar, then and now, frightening in that we have changed so little, that we still have so far to go. There was no bullying legislation then, to the degree it might help even now without fundamental change in the nature of social values and the perceptions of others that we convey to our children. He knew about bullying and abuse, had felt it as a child. We can imagine what they did with his name, perhaps laughing in his face, for his name means "he will laugh." His mother had said upon his birth, "everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6). And so it was and is meant to be, to laugh with, not at.

יצחק בן אברהם ושרה / Yitzchak, Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, a survivor, a little boy torn from his brother, become adult seeking reunion and reconciliation, a man whose way of being was not limited by the imposed boundaries of so called masculine or feminine traits, a spiritual seeker, a lover. Perhaps most of all, and least considered, he was a digger of wells, drawing to the surface the waters of life from the deep places within, and on their flow all came to be one and there was peace. Isaac lived in the shadow of his father Abraham, he of resolute and fierce faith, and in the blinding (brilliant) light of his son Jacob, God-wrestler and deceiver, direct progenitor of the tribes and people of Israel. Mocked, maligned, and misunderstood, as so often are those who would walk in his way, Isaac has been seen as a *nebbish*, Yiddish for one who is timid, meek, ineffectual, the passive one among the three fathers of our people. Some describing this view, some representing it, we encounter portrayals of Isaac such as these: "traditionally considered the least heroic of all biblical figures," "a figure set in low relief, lacking the energy proper to a hero," "the least significant of the Patriarchs," "does not strike one as an intellectual giant." By whose standards do we judge Isaac, by whose criteria? Why should we judge him at all, rather than consider his life and what we might learn from him? We would do well to approach all people in such manner, not to judge, but to learn. Who our heroes are is a reflection of who we are. The negative assessment of Isaac as non-heroic because he doesn't fit the narrow mold of how we

expect our heroes to be, says more about us and the context from which such judgement comes, than about him.

The digger of wells -- a different kind of hero, Isaac offers a mirror in which to see ourselves and our society. That is the nature of these Days of Awe, Days of Turning, to look within and around and see where change is needed and toward what and how to get there. The Torah readings for both days of Rosh Hashannah offer a context in which to ask difficult questions, to consider alternate ways of responding to conflict. On the first day we witness the casting out of Hagar and Yishma'el, Hajar and Ismail in Arabic. On the second day, we are there on the mountain when Isaac is bound on the altar to be slaughtered and offered through the flames to God. Rising unbidden from the dramatic tensions in the text is the opportunity to hear "what if?" in the subtext of our own lives when we think there is no other way. As the narrative unfolds over these two days, it gives much to point to for those who would emphasize Isaac's passivity. In so pointing, though, we miss the point. It is the same failure to understand that passive resistance, that pacifism itself, is not passive. Isaac is the quiet presence that makes us think, begs us to think, to wonder, to question. Is this the only way? How else to resolve conflict, to assuage jealousy and fear, how to love two children so different, to share the land they walk upon, to give to each from a common inheritance? How to live a life of passion that does not preclude the presence of others in the inner orb of light? How to nurture faith that affirms life in the presence of both God and people, that does not give fodder to the fanatic within ourselves or others?

We enter the book and engage life. That is the purpose of a living Torah, a living Teaching, it is a Teaching about life, *Torat Chayyim* / תורת חיים. It is about us. Our feelings in response to the stories are part of the stories themselves. That is why we read them, they are meant to elicit feelings that impel us then to act as the stories unfold today. God forbid, that we just stand there as Hagar and Yishma'el are sent away. Do we at least offer them our tears to help replenish their spent water skins? How do we see them in the dim light and shadows of that fateful early morning? Do we remember if Isaac was awake yet and if he said anything to these two he was so close to? Wide-eyed and still, like the desert air, did he wonder in the loneliness of his heart how his mother could tell his father to "cast out this handmaid and her son," the words still echoing within him as he tries to make sense of them? Flesh and bone of his own father, of himself, how could his father accede to his mother's demand. He had heard the argument on that dark night, angry words added for good measure, "the son of this handmaid shall not inherit together with my son Yitzchak." He felt his mother's pain, too, she who cried over him each night with joy and fear, having waited so long, she couldn't bear the thought, lest anything happen to him. But why couldn't she say their names, Hagar/Hajar, Yishma'el/Ismail? How ironic the pretext, for his mother had seen his half-brother *m'tzachek*/מצחק, making mockery, making sport. How confused and twisted words become, and the feelings of which they speak, in the jealous, fearful

heart. *M'tzachek*/ מצחק, it simply means he was laughing! Yishma'el also laughed. The two brothers were joined by a bond beyond words, laughing until they cried. What if his mother had asked him, the one who would bear the burden of the past into the future? What if he had run at that moment and hugged his brother Yishma'el? What if Hagar had put her arms around his mother and said, "I understand?" The two mothers embracing, weeping for all that had been and would be, and in that moment, what if his mother had also said, "I too understand, there must be another way."

The words are still waiting to be said. What if we could speak them through all the yearning and pain of the two mothers, of the two sons, of our own pain, in this time and in this season? What if we could say, "I understand, I understand that you can't wait any longer for a state of your own?" What if we could say from our own place of strength, so easily abused, "we will stop building on the land of your desire, come, let's talk directly, there must be a way?" And what if Hagar's children and children's children, so long down the winds of time could say, "like you, we wish to announce before the nations our presence among them, and then we too shall come and sit alone with you to talk until the rising of tomorrow?" There we would sit, perhaps, by the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me, *B'er Lachai Ro'i*/ באר לחי רא'י, near where the Negev and Sinai deserts meet, where God opened Hagar's eyes to see the well that had been there all along, that her son might drink of its living waters and be revived, an oasis in the sands and in the arid reaches of our hearts.

Isaac too, drew life from the same well of the Living One Who Sees Me, children saved from trauma visited upon them by adults for some great purpose. In the tradition of his people, it is Ismail who is placed upon the altar. That we read the story differently in Torah and Quran is not a problem, but a source of connection. It is all the same, a child to be sacrificed, Yitzchak and Yishma'el both knowing the same terror. Only in regard to Isaac among the fathers, did God come to be called *Pachad Yitzchak*/ פחד יצחק, the Fear, the Dread, the Terror of Isaac. Or is it to the experience itself that at times the Torah seems to refer, to the terror of that moment of the Akeda/ עקידה, the binding, when the knife held in his father's hand was poised above him, bound there hand and foot upon the altar?

This too is our story, Isaac's Dread calling us to respond, whether as the dread of a terrified child or a terrified God, in Whose name such was done. Speaking to the urgency of Torah as life, the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, challenges from a different context the way of our reading and hearing the narratives of Torah. In "Fear and Trembling," his own wrestling with the binding of Isaac, he asks the question that we need to ask, "There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless?" For all of Abraham's greatness at other moments of God's calling, and even now in our effort to understand

and feel his torment, it is the story of Isaac that we need to lose sleep over, the abused child, abused and suffering humanity, the one who is bound, waiting to be free, the one whose throat is bared to the knife, the one who stands at the other end of the gun sights. And if we do not lose sleep for Isaac, then what about for all of those whose images stare out from page after page of the morning newspaper, and of the news that gleams from glass screens of light that tell of those for whom there is no light? Though bound, Isaac is not passive. Strength rising from a well deep within, he doesn't need to say anything. The survivor as witness, he gently stands his ground and faces down through the generations all who would raise a hand to kill in God's name.

How could there not have been a chasm now between father and son? On that sun-lit morning they journeyed to the mountain together, but only Abraham is mentioned as having returned. Sarah's death follows upon that moment of her husband's return alone. Some say she died then of shock for the son who didn't come home, her tears shed all those nights unable to protect him from his father's zeal. We learn later that Isaac had gone to the land of the south, specifically to the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me, B'er Lachai Ro'i/באר לחי ראוי, whose waters had earlier revived Hagar and Yishma'el. There too would Isaac's body and soul be renewed, going to live for a time where exiled mother and son had made their home in the vicinity of the well. In a way that was of dignity and purpose, Isaac was not fleeing from his father but taking steps toward his own healing. That journey to the south was not a turning away, but a turning toward. More than passive victim, Isaac is an actor in a different way than we can often see or allow for, a hero of the spirit who sought repair through reconciliation. As the wind danced at the edges of Hagar's tent flap, we can imagine the conversations that might have taken place in the cool of the desert night among these three, inextricably linked through love and loss with Abraham and with each other.

Yearning for wholeness, Isaac went to the south alone. According to the musings of midrash, he returned home with Hagar. Some say that is why he went to the south, to bring Hagar back with him (Midrash Rabbah, 60:14). Perhaps through the unfolding layers of those night conversations, it came clear that for his own healing and for hers they needed to return to Abraham together. Soon after, Abraham remarried, the Torah says to a woman named Ketura. The rabbis say that Ketura is Hagar. Seeking to make the circle whole, in a way it had never been, the rabbis drew on the transformative power they saw in Isaac's soul. Weaving of his own pain a tapestry of connection, Isaac brought healing for himself and for others. Encouraging us, that we might write ourselves more fully into the book of life during these days of turning, Isaac speaks from page and parchment, to heal from trauma is heroic.

As we actively engage with the details of livelihood and sustenance in the physical world, so too the needs of the soul require active engagement. The spiritual life does not

simply happen. God is always present, waiting to enter our lives, but unless we pause to open a door, to create a moment of invitation and welcome, even to plead, there is no place for God to enter. It was Isaac's custom, toward the turning of day to night, to go out into the fields to meditate, away from the city and from passersby along the thoroughfares (Radak, S'forno to Gen. 24:63). The absence of his mother keenly felt in the days following his return from the south, she was the one who would not be part of the healing. Having gone out among the trees and grasses one day, Isaac looked up and saw a caravan approaching. In the glow of that day's sunset, Rivka arrived, his *bashert*, his intended one, a marriage arranged by his father while he was in the south. Abraham had lived with the hope of his son's return, father and son, each as matchmaker, each hoping the other would know love's healing for all that had been. That he could yet love was part of Isaac's triumph, the only one of the ancestors whose love of his spouse is specifically noted in the Torah: "And Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah. He married Rivka, she became his wife, and he loved her, and only then was Isaac comforted for his mother" (Gen. 24:67). Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Rothenberg, founder of the Gerer Chassidic dynasty, wrote of the one whose name he bore, "It is impossible to describe through human reason how a person is able to carry such fear as that which always remained within Isaac.... And how was it possible for him to marry and to bear children" (Chidushey Ha'rim, Parashat Toldot)?

The gentle strength and quiet courage of an Isaac type sings of wellsprings unblocked deep within, diverse waters flowing as one from all the caverns of the soul. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir saw Isaac's greatness in his ability to live an ordinary life, to love and to procreate after the terror he had known. Looking to the source of Isaac's being, of what made him who he is, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev draws on Kabbalistic teaching to look beyond the bounds of gender. Levi Yitzchak describes Isaac as being both *mi'sitra d'nukvah* / מסטרא דנוקבא, of the feminine aspect and *mi'sitra di'dechora* / מסטרא דדכורא, of the masculine aspect. He then says so straightforwardly, *וואז היה לו חיים*, "and then he had life" (Kedushas Levi, Parashat Toldot). The varied facets of himself joined, Isaac was whole. It is a wholeness that comes with a price, bringing both peace and torment to the one with an Isaac type of soul. Gathered around the learning table last year with parents and children of the Mishpacha Family Hebrew School, we were engaged in an impromptu discussion of gender. Impassioned, one parent urged that we not think of qualities as feminine or masculine, strong-gentle, determined-deliberative, competitive-cooperative, but simply as human qualities. Qualities and ways of being commingling as waters to the well, and in whatever measure, unbound, each one free to be and become. The story of Isaac offers a lens through which to consider matters of gender and violence. Facing down the bully, but not giving in to his or her way, Isaac offers strength and hope, and even the possibility of change to the one who can't yet see the true hero's way.

Isaac is the only one of the fathers of our people never to wield the sword. If those who

see Isaac as passive and non-heroic point to the child Isaac at the time of the Akedah, they point to the adult Isaac at the incident of the wells. A moment in which the archetypal hero would stand and fight, Isaac responds very differently. His quiet determination and perseverance and the ability to look ahead toward what will make for lasting change, is confused with passivity. Through Isaac, we see the dynamics of violence and nonviolence as they play out in our lives and in the world around us. Whether from his experience of grief and trauma, or the inherent nature of his soul, Isaac is a man of peace, striving to bring the other along with him to a new place, calm and determined, neither timid nor retreating, seeking to repair and make whole in accord with the "vision and the way." He is unwilling to sacrifice the lives of the young on the altar of honor or conviction, as his blood had so nearly been spilled.

Seeking water in the desert, Isaac's herdsmen dug a well. The herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen over the well. Naming that well *Essek*/עשק, "Contention," Isaac told his herdsmen to move on and to dig another well. The herdsmen of Gerar also quarreled over that well, which Isaac named *Sitnah*/שטנה, "Obstruction." Moving on yet again, his opponent likely perplexed, wondering by now how long this would go on, still waiting for the expected fight, Isaac dug another well, and there was no quarreling. He named that well *Rehovot*/רחובות, "Spaciousness." Seeking to disarm the other of prior assumptions and make room for both, Isaac, once again, is not turning away, but turning toward. Soon after, Avimelech, the king of Gerar, came to visit Isaac, concerned that he might still try to do his people harm. Isaac asks, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hated me and sent me away from you?" Referred to by Avimelech as "one blessed by God," having gained the respect of the one who hated, Isaac then made a feast for his visitors. The next morning, they swore an oath not to harm each other, and Isaac sent them on their way, "and they departed from him in peace," *va'yelchu mey'ito b'shalom*/וילכו מאתו בשלום. A commentary on these words says that "the well was not secure in Isaac's possession until he made peace with Avimelech" (Torah Sh'laimah, note to Gen. 26:19); and in time to come, the rabbis would ask, *eyzeh hu gibor she'b'giborim*/איזהו גבור שבגבורים, "who is a hero of heroes? -- one who makes of an enemy, a friend" (Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 23).

The digger of wells, a different kind of hero, tragically misunderstood, desperately needed, Isaac is the hero in each of us waiting to be freed. In a world riven by violence and strife, of people torn from each other, Isaac's is the way of reconciliation, of reaching out to make room for the other, in the same land, in the same neighborhood, in all the neighborhoods of the world and of our lives. Nonviolent conflict resolution, neither taking up the sword nor sharpening the tongue, turning from belligerent word and deed, making a friend of an enemy, is Isaac's way in our own lives as well as among peoples and nations. Nurturing our souls in all manner of fields that we come upon and create in the day to day, we nourish and renew, and find solace. The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me is within each of us. With voice quavering at first, Isaac

sings a song of gentle triumph, transcending pain and hurt to create a legacy of hope. As year turns to year, we take up Isaac's song and tell his story that we might do the same.