

"The Story of Isaac"

The most important Torah reading of the year takes place on the 2nd day of Rosh Hashana. It is the climactic event of Abraham's life. G-d asks him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. The Akeydah. It is an unforgettable event and one of the most emotionally charged stories in the Torah. And it is a story I turn to every year and find something new to say to all of you.

Today, I want to approach it from a completely different angle. I want to explore what happened to Isaac after this entire event.

I want you to think about that for a moment. We always look at it from Abraham's perspective, but what about Isaac? We don't know what went on inside Isaac's head but we do know that it had to be a major event in his life. I mean, he almost died by the hand of his father and he almost died on an altar with the blessing of G-d. That's life changing. It had to affect him in some way ...and it did.

In fact, Isaac lived his life very differently from his father as a result. And his son. This man was forever changed because of this event.

You know, if there was ever a poll taken on which of the three patriarchs you most admire, I will bet you that Abraham would have a nice lead over Jacob. Jacob would have his own solid following but trailing farther back than Dennis Kucinich in the last Democratic Primary, would be Isaac.

Isaac is the forgotten patriarch, the man everything happens to and the man overshadowed by others. Isaac is famous for having an incredible father (Abraham), a strong-willed wife (Rebecca), a dominant mother (Sarah) and a deceitful son (Jacob). Everything happens to him: his mother decides who he can associate with (witness this morning's section); his father binds him on the altar as a sacrifice; his wife manipulates him with regards to their sons; his son deceives him to gain the birth rite and his business partners constantly cheats him.

Isaac is not the patriarch most people would choose to meet, let alone admire. Yet, if I could choose, there is

no question I would want to be in the company of Isaac. I think as a result of the Akeydah, Isaac learned how to really live life.

Your dad almost murders you, you have your first close encounter with death and with G-d on the same day. I don't know about you, but I think such a moment would change you forever. It would change your outlook, the way you see people and the way you respond to life. And it did in a profoundly beautiful way.

I want to share with you four things the Torah tells us about Isaac after the Akeykah. We are never told what Isaac's feelings were about this entire event; his memoir was never published. However, we can see how he lived life after the Akeydah, and all I can say is, I wish to live like Isaac.

Look with me now at how Isaac reacted to G-d, his family, his neighbors and life after the Akeydah. I think you'll see why I love this man so.

Let's go in the order of the Torah. The first time we meet Isaac after the Akeydah, the Torah tells us:

"He was walking in the fields towards evening" (B'reishit /Genesis 24:63). The rabbis notice by the text here and elsewhere that this is a classic expression used in the Torah to mean meditating, praying, or communing with G-d. However, you want to understand it, the rabbis tell us that every day, Isaac became lost in a world beyond this one, a few precious moments locked in a spiritual world. Every day, he walked in the fields toward evening.

Isaac did something his father Abraham didn't have time for and his son Jacob struggled with, and that was to be with G-d every day. Abraham was a man of the world. He was a busy man, so his encounters with G-d were at major events (Sodom and Gemora, the Akeydah, the divine command to circumcise, being asked by G-d leave his home in Ur, etc.). That was when Abraham was close to G-d.

Jacob also met G-d at major events (wrestling with G-d in the wilderness, turning to G-d when alone and scared after leaving his home, when trying to escape his brother

Esau's wrath , returning home for a dramatic reunion). For Jacob, it was also meeting G-d at events, discovering G-d in moments of need.

Not Isaac. Isaac felt G-d every day. He discovered Him on that makeshift altar on Mt. Moriah and spent the rest of his life "walking in the fields", connecting with his G-d every day.

It never ceases to amaze me how many people who get ill or have a brush with death, find G-d, even if only briefly. I disagree with those who say it is merely "foxhole religion". I think it is far more complex than that . I think when you are close to death, your encounter with mortality opens up the possibilities for spirituality. It is as if a portal opens and for the first time you understand the need to discover G-d. Near death experience gives people a chance to find that opening.

Isaac was one who found that doorway . He was near death; he experienced what it was like to almost die on that altar and it changed him forever. It made him a more spiritual person, a more deeply insightful person.

I want to be like Isaac, the patriarch who found the spiritual component to life. I will be very personal here. In the last few years, I think I have grown more spiritual. I don't know why it is, but the need to be close to G-d is very important to me, more than at any point in my life. I feel the need to be close to G-d.

And it couldn't have come at a better time.

For you see, this last month has been one of the most painful in my entire career. Because unless things change in the next few weeks, I am witnessing the end of our daily services, our minyan. Unless things change in the next few weeks, the evening minyan streak, now at close to 7000 in a row, is about to come to an end. Even more tragic, the entire 7:30AM and 5:45PM structure and framework that we have so carefully nurtured and maintained will cease.

I could go into detail, but the bottom line is people are not showing their support. I have appealed, gone to the board, but the truth of the matter is, with so many of the

past generations gone or ill, we are at the point where we can no longer guarantee a daily service at B'nai Jacob.

As a rabbi, that is absolutely killing me. The breakdown of the minyan is, as I said to the board, the breach in the levee that will wash away B'nai Jacob as a traditional shul. Without the minyan, we can no longer call ourselves "traditional". Even on Saturday mornings, we now have trouble reaching our quorum until late in the service. It has gotten that bad.

And the sad part is it would only take just one or two people every day to permanently shore up the breach. Somehow that is proving to be a herculean task. As I said, as a rabbi this amounts to a personal failure. I am unable to maintain this traditional synagogue that was given to me by my predecessors. Professionally, it hurts.

Emotionally, as I said, I am alright. My friend and fellow minyan goer Trig Salsbery helped me understand that this week. Because at 7:30 and at 5:45, I and a few others, will still be in the chapel every day. Though we may not have ten anymore, we can always be close to G-

d. I have discovered that need to be with Him more than ever. I am able to enter our beautiful chapel and still have my time to be near G-d. And I will always need that and get that now, minyan or not.

Maybe it is rationalization, but I am beginning to feel that if that is the way it must now be, it will okay to be in the presence of G-d with seven who want to be there than force nine others who don't. I want to pray in a minyan (it is so precious to me), but if I have to, I will do it for now without one, because like Isaac, I still need to be in the presence of G-d.

And being in the presence of G-d, helps me in ways I cannot describe. The words of King David: "One thing I ask of G-d, one thing I seek. It is to dwell in the house of G-d all my life." More and more, that is what I seek. And I hope and pray more will feel the same way. There is a peacefulness, a comfort to "walking in the fields" that I cannot live without now.

And I think that is what happened to Isaac. He became close to G-d and knew what it is like to be

comfortable in His arms. And when you reach that level, you lead a different life, a more passionate life.

How do I know that? Because of the second thing the Torah tells us about Isaac. He marries Rebecca and the Torah tells us another amazing thing about Isaac.. It says very simply:

"And he loved her" Breishit/Genesis 24:67).

There is only one other time in the Torah where a person is described as loving his spouse. Only one other time and that is because Rachel was the most beautiful woman Jacob had ever laid eyes on.

Isaac, however ,loved his wife not because of her beauty, her lineage, or her child bearing abilities. He just loved his wife. Do you know how odd it is to see that emotion in the Torah? Bible characters don't show that type of emotion. Love is never a consideration between husband and wife. For the Torah to express that feeling so openly, so out of the blue, and so unconnected to beauty

means not only was it important but that it was a deep and intense love.

"Isaac loved her". In a world of relationships formed of convenience, tribal politics and arranged by parents, Isaac loved his wife Rebecca. That is so beautiful. And it was because, after the Akeydah, Isaac realized relationships are what matter most

One thing I notice with terminal patients is they become far more emotional people; they embrace more, they touch more, they love more, they have stronger feelings for others. Once you feel mortality breathing down your neck, the need to reach out to others becomes more intense.

And Isaac unlike those before him and after shared a relationship with Rebecca that was the stuff of dreams. "He loved her" because that is how Isaac lived after the Akeydah. And I think to myself: this is my hero. What a joy it is to live with a love in your heart for relationships as Isaac did. I want to be like Isaac.

This was a great man. A man intoxicated by G-d, a man in deep love and a man that Playboy would give anything to interview!

The Torah relates that shortly after the birth of his children, Isaac and Rebecca have to leave their home because of a famine and travel to Gerar. Worried about the area and the tribal "welcome" he would receive there, Isaac asks Rebecca to tell everyone that she is his sister. Isaac is fearful that they would kill him if they discovered he was her husband. However, if he was known as her brother, they might leave him alone and allow him to live safely in Gerar. They might still rape her, but he would be safe. A great story..... for another time.

I bring it only because of how the King of Gerar discovers that Isaac and Rebecca are more than brother and sister. It is quite "R" rated! The King looked out his window one day and sees Isaac and Rebecca....and I hesitate to tell you this because of the graphic language of the Torah, but if the Torah writes it this way , I can say it in synagogue.....It says:

"He sees Isaac fondling his wife Rebecca."
Breysheit/Genesis 26:8"

Now, I know you are in shul. But conjure up that image. These are not teens in heat; they are "adults", they are parents, and these are our patriarch and matriarch. And they are "canoodling" in the public square. I don't know of a single time anyone in the Torah is ever caught "canoodling" in public!

Biblical figures are not supposed to be doing those kind of things. Isaac did. He was playful, youthful, and passionate. He never lost this lust for life. Think about this scene I just mentioned. This is "Desperate Housewives" material, this is "O.C" stuff! These are kids on the couch when mom and dad walk in, the lovers in a parked car overlooking the city limits. Isaac is fondling his wife in public. Who acts like that? People who are young, alive and unafraid of what the future may bring. And that was also Isaac. I want to be like him.

Do you see why I think we have ourselves one of the most amazing and underappreciated characters in the Torah? He loves G-d, he loves his wife, he loves life. If indeed the Akeydah was the great test for Abraham, it was the greatest moment for Isaac. At that moment, he realizes on Mt. Moriah that G-d is his strength, relationship are critical to happiness, life is too short and every moment must be grabbed....literally!

And finally, because of the Akeydah, Isaac learned to harness the greatest power on earth, the ability to control his anger. It is funny. Usually the more passionate one is about life, the more engaged one is in the world and the more confrontational you become because of that passion and intensity.

Every moment in Isaac's life is intense. But you know, when it came to his business affairs, he never loses his temper. Not once. Isaac was a very wealthy man. He took over his father's well business and actually does quite nice for himself. But on three occasions , Isaac digs water wells and three times his wells are attacked by Philistine tribal leaders who claim the well for themselves. His dad had that problem all the time, but Abraham's response was to fight back and threaten war.

Isaac never does that. Isaac just says "Okay, I'll move on. I don't want war and I don't want my family and workers involved in a blood battle over a stinking well. I'll move on." And each time he does, G-d blesses him with even greater blessings and gifts in return.

The point of the Torah is not "turn the other cheek" or allow people to run all over you. I think it is far more therapeutic. It is that Isaac stared at death a long time ago when his dad almost sacrificed him. And he realized life is too short. He wasn't going to live his life worried about a few more wells.

His passion never rose to anger. And his love of life never was swallowed up by the pursuit of wealth. The chase to accumulate more didn't mean anything to him. He had enough wells to bring a good quality of life for his family. If he could drill one more, great, as long as he didn't have to sacrifice his soul to do it. And to confront the Philistines, like his father did, was to him a waste of time. He was too busy communing with G-d in the field, loving his family, and getting his wife into bed early. That was more important to him.

Sounds good to me.

Isn't it funny? Every year we read the story of the Akeydah, the binding of Isaac and we think it is here to remind us to be like Abraham, with a commitment to G-d and faith.

Maybe. But this year, I see it as the story of an event changing the life of one person forever, but that person was Isaac. Tied up on that altar and the knife about to take his life, Isaac far from dying learned the lesson about living.

My dear congregants and friends, Rosh Hashanah and the prayers we say this day, tomorrow and next week reminds us that we are all under that knife. We are all at death's door. We just don't feel it as intensely as Isaac did.

But maybe on this day, we can really concentrate on the words of our Chazan and make this year the first of many years that truly count and are meaningful.

Abraham started a faith and became a world figure in his time and for all times. Jacob started the nation of Israel and became world famous in his time and for all times.

Isaac doesn't do a darn thing. He is the patriarch that things happen to, not the other way around. And you know, may G-d allow me to be like Isaac this year and every year. May I be one with G-d, "walking in the fields" of life, meditating every day in the glory of our Creator. May my family connections and my friendships be filled with love, passion and intensity. May I live with an excitement for life that anyone looking out the window and seeing me will say "hey, this guy is having too much fun. He is in love with life." And may I control my anger and be upset about nothing material, nothing ephemeral.

To live life as Isaac did: loving life, building relationships, loving man and loving G-d. I can't imagine a better way to live!

AMEN