

Parshat Toldot

Enough Blessings for Each of Us

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Genesis 26:18

Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham...

בראשית כו:יח

וַיִּשָׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחְפֹּר אֶת־בְּאֵרֵת הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ בְיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו...

The image of this verse sets the tone for not only Parashat Toldot but for the entire legacy of our Avot (forefathers). Yitzchak redigging the wells that his father Avraham had begun. While a new generation is holding the shovels, it is so striking that he is digging wells, vessels that hold water where we can see our own reflections. Haamek Davar emphasizes that when Yitzchak redigs these wells, he essentially has to start a new digging process, albeit on the same sites as Avraham's original wells. These fresh wells that Yitzchak is digging up may be filled with renewing waters, but they reveal to him a lesson as old as time itself: we all can see reflections of our elders, whether for better or for worse.

Yitzchak is no exception. He is a mirror of his own father Avraham in his parenting, passing down his obedience to parents and adoration of God to his kin. However, with Yitzchak's humble character traits come complex generational trauma. Just a few parshiyot ago he was on his father's altar, moments away from being sacrificed by his obedient father. He grieved the loss of his mother shortly after the Akeidah and never once came to terms with his own mortality with Avraham. It is almost impossible to dig up new water sources for oneself when the wells are inundated with images of our past traumas and behaviors of our parents.

Yitzchak cannot help but follow his own father's path of parenthood for his twin sons Yaakov and Esav which means that amidst his own *avodat Hashem* he lacks the language to communicate love to both of his children. As soon as they are born we encounter the disparity in these twins' treatment:

Genesis 25:28

"Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob."

בראשית כה:כח

וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת־עֵשָׂו כִּי־צִיד בָּפִיו וְרֵבֶקָה אֲהָבָת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב..

Yitzchak loved Esav because he could hunt. He could come back sun-stricken with animals on which to feast. Yitzchak loved his son Esav because of his ability to produce. And Rivka loved Yaakov. An introvert inside the tent, Yaakov could probably feel the palpable distance between him and his father--and he will spend the rest of parshat Toldot striving to feel loved by his father, someone who never received love. Yaakov will deceive his brother for lentil soup and a birthright, he will lather his arms with fleece, and work tirelessly to display and earn love.

Just as deafening silence lingered around Avraham as he obeyed a command to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak experienced a penetrating blindness physically and spiritually. First Yitzchak could not find an outward reason to love Yaakov, and then he isolated Esav after he returned from hunting.

Genesis 27:33-35

Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. "Who was it then," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!" When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing, and said to his father, "Bless me too, Father!" But he answered, "Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing."

בראשית כז: לג-לה

וַיִּחַדַּד יִצְחָק חֲרָדָה גְדֹלָה עַד-מָאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר מִי-אֵלּוּא הוּא הֶצֵד-צִיד וַיָּבֵא לִי וְאֶכֶל מִכֹּל בְּטָרִם תָּבוֹא וְאֶבְרַכְהוּ גַם-בְּרוּךְ יְהִי. כִּשְׁמַע עֵשָׂו אֶת-דְּבָרַי אָבִיו וַיִּצְעַק צַעֲקָה גְדֹלָה וַמָּרָה עַד-מָאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר לְאָבִיו בְּרַכְנִי גַם-אַנִּי אָבִי. וַיֹּאמֶר בָּא אַחִיךָ בְּמַרְמָה וַיִּקַּח בְּרַכְתְּךָ.

This heartbreaking dialogue reveals Yitzchak's blindness as clearly as the very well of water he dug. In a moment of vulnerability and brokenness, all he could do was tremble with *yirah*, a similar fear that his own father felt while standing on Har HaMoriah with a shechting knife in his hand. Trauma can be all-consuming. It can leave even our *Avot* speechless and helpless. For Yaakov, his father's blindness prevented a loving father-son connection, because he could not see Yaakov for who he was. For Esav, his father's blindness lost him a life of blessings and prosperity, even as he begged: הֲלֹא-אֶצְלַתְ לִי בְרַכָּה, "have you not reserved a blessing for me?"

The following verse from Kohelet (12:2) illuminates the meaning of blindness:

"Before sun and light and moon and stars grow dark, and the clouds come back again after the rain."

עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תִחַשֵׁה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהָאוֹר וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְהַכּוֹכָבִים וְשָׁבוּ הָעָבִים אַחַר הַגֶּשֶׁם:

The Talmud in Masechet Shabbat further unpacks this pasuk:

Tractate Shabbat 151b

"This is the light of a person's eyes, which goes and dwindles after one cries as if it were covered by clouds. Shmuel said: With regard to the tear that a person cries, until one reaches the age of forty years, one's vision returns. From here on, once a person reaches the age of forty, it does not return, and every time a person cries his vision is weakened."

מסכת שבת קנ"א:

"וְשָׁבוּ הָעָבִים אַחַר הַגֶּשֶׁם" — זוּ מְאוּר עֵינָיו שֶׁל אָדָם, שְׁהוֹלָךְ אַחַר הַבְּכִי. אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל: הָאִי דִמְעָתָא — עַד אַרְבַּעַיִן שָׁנִין הִדְרָא, מִכָּאֵן וְאִילָךְ לֹא הִדְרָא.

Perhaps we must see Yitzchak's dimmed vision as eyes that have been blurred by flowing tears and sighs deeper than words. The sparks of light in his eyes faded over a life of unresolved conflict and distance from his family--past and present. Life for Yitzchak--and for each and every one of us--can feel complex and ever so fragile, and it invites our souls to have a good cry. For Yitzchak, his childhood and childrearing provided ample moments to look upward at rain and clouds and shed tears of loss and trauma. Some of those tears, however, create meaning and beauty. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov explains that crying is not only necessary but also a means of renewal:

Likutei Moharan 262:3

"Therefore, someone who wants to originate Torah insights of value must first cry... a person therefore has to cry first, so that rivers are formed from the crying."

ליקוטי מוהרן רס"ב: ג

עַל כֵּן מִי שְׂרוּצָה לְחַדֵּשׁ חֲדוּשֵׁין דְּאוּרִיתָא שְׂיִישׁ בְּהֵן מִמֶּשׁ, הוּא צָרִיךְ לְבַכּוֹת מִקֵּדָם ... עַל-כֵּן צָרִיךְ לְבַכּוֹת מִקֵּדָם, וְאִזִּי עוֹשֶׂה עַל-יְדֵי הַבְּכִי נְהָרוֹת

That very water fills our wells, nourishes our bodies, and rejuvenates our souls. I see this in our communities today. Sometimes, our work parallels that of Avraham and we must do the initial shoveling into dry ground. Other times, we are called to follow Yitzchak and continuously dig and redig the wells that our elders had begun for us. In that task of digging, we might recognize faces and behaviors in the water's reflection, or add our own tears into it. But the work of digging up wells for our *toldot* (generations) that follow Yitzchak and Yaakov is apparent on our calloused hands and the overflowing blessings we find in the thirst-quenching, tear-soaked water.



Emily Goldberg Winer was born and raised in South Florida, but moved to New York City in high school. She loves community building and sharing Torah with people from all walks of life and across generations. She currently works as the intern at Congregation Beth Shalom in Potomac, Maryland. Her most recent positions include rabbinic intern at the Columbia/Barnard Hillel, visiting chaplain at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, community educator at Brandeis, and teen coordinator at the Hebrew Home of Riverdale. She completed the Jewish Innovation Fellowship at the 92nd Street Y, the Join for Justice Fellowship, and the rabbinic student fellowship at Shalom Hartman Institute. A Wexner Graduate Fellow and Master's student at Yeshiva University, Emily loves pluralism and interfaith dialogue. She has engaged in programs rooted in religious diversity, first among fellow Jews at the Bronfman Youth Fellowship and Drisha, and later across faiths at the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding, Tanenbaum, and Auburn Seminary. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA with degrees in Religion and Jewish Studies. She lives in Riverdale with her husband Jonah, a student at YCT, and together they can be found petting dogs, adding puns into regular conversations, and facetimeing their friends' grandparents.