



# יצחק: To Live a Jew

A שיחה given by Rav Blachman at ישיבת ראשית תשע"ט

Edited by Jordy Hirschfeld and Moishy Rothman

As we go through ספר בראשית, we are exposed to various personalities and approaches to life and the service of G-d. Just read פרשת ויחי and you'll see over 13 different and unique personalities, all emanating from a single family! But today I want to talk about two personae, a father and son. It's אברהם and יצחק. If we look at these two people, though biologically alike, a divergence is seen when it comes each person's approach to life. אברהם is seen to have proactive personality. He proselytes in חרן and in כנען. He gave out his ירושה to all his children. He was the one holding the knife during the עקידה. He even got a name change!

This was the father. But the son was completely different. יצחק, as the תורה recounts, was very passive. We don't see him going out and converting the masses. We don't see him really taking any active role. Even when giving over of the ברכות, it was רבקה who was in truth orchestrating the entire event. יצחק was just there to put his hands on the one in front of him and say the ברכה. He didn't even have a name change like his father or his son. Even during the עקידה, we don't see יצחק as the main character in the story. For יצחק it seems that it really wasn't such a demanding challenge. יצחק did what he was told to do. The prophet says that he must be killed and he does it. He did what so many Jews did in history. HaShem tells me to put on תפילין and I do it. HaShem says die and I'll die for Him. Like any Jew who gave up his life על קידוש ה' יצחק did what he was commanded to do.

For אברהם, however, it was a much more difficult test. As רמב"ם explains, אברהם had the option of interpreting the prophecy however he wanted. He could have "ed" it easily. He could have just raised יצחק on the alter. As a matter of fact, he was never explicitly told to slaughter his son. But אברהם knew and decided, through his intellectual honesty, that G-d wanted him to kill יצחק. Imagine the test. You know exactly what G-d wants you to do but He never told it to you explicitly. If you follow His demand, you would go against everything you preached for. Throughout all these years you thought that G-d was going to be nice to you. He promised you a future. Now He tells you to take that only son, the child whom you invested your future in and

hoped for, for all these many years, and kill him. That goes against everything! You are killing those dreams with your own two hands! This was the challenge. It demanded the courage to accept the truth, even though it was counterintuitive to everything he wanted and preached. So how did he do it? He said "I *know* what He meant. It has to be done." It's an unbelievable story of intellectual honesty. Yet this was all אברהם יצחק didn't go through this test. He was passive and bound up.

If we take for granted that which the רמב"ן tells us, namely מעשה אבות סימן לבנים, the stories of our forefathers in the Chumash are in there to make an imprint on the DNA of all future generations. The creativity of אברהם is what enables us to be creative at certain times. The balancing act of creativity and stability which we find in יעקב, raising a diverse nation, with all its different stripes and colors all under one cohesive unit, allows us to create a harmonious society. That aspect of development is a very specific challenge for יעקב. How to maintain a family-nation that is all Jewish and yet different from each other, allowing the development of diverse and unique personalities under one umbrella called כלל ישראל is hard, and that's saying about it mildly. The שבטים were individuals with different flags, different religious approaches (just take a look at the ברכות of יעקב). Each of them used their unique and specified qualities for serving G-d.

So, what's יצחק's contribution? The חומש is not a story book. What contribution does his story give us regarding our religious posture and identity? What does ה' want us to glean from the life of a יצחק?

This question was asked by my mentor, Rav Yitzchok Hutner. He explained it as such. What is the role of a יצחק in terms of the larger picture? In the development of any new nation-state there are several steps which must occur. The first step is revolution. The old order must be uprooted and undermined. After the table is cleared, new ideas and values can be introduced. Then enters the second step. Those ideas and concepts require consolidation. This step is critical for the survival of the country. Only after this second step can there be growth. You must first internalize the new ideas and make them a part of you. It must become part of your identity. Until you do this, it can easily be lost. After you have this, then you can go out and grow.

In life, any religious revolution is a stage in life. But you have to take it to the next stage. You must go through a stage of consolidation, internalizing those newly gained values until they

become part of you. The רמב"ם says that one may not learn philosophy until he has developed a comfortable, harmonious approach to religion, naturally seeing the world through those ideas and values. Only then he can expand his perspective with that of philosophy.

יצחק was not a revolutionary. He didn't expand אברהם's religious movement. He was, however, the first Jew. He was born Jewish. He died Jewish. He had his ברית on time. He didn't create because he's there to embody the life of a normal Jew. He is the ultimate son of his father. Though he didn't discover G-d like his father, he lived the discovery of his father. He continued the legacy; he didn't expand it. The second stage of development began with יצחק: the era of consolidation. יצחק is internalizing the ideas of אברהם, applying it in real life situations. He's taking that creativity and giving it body, normalizing it. His relationship with G-d was not based on his creativity; it was based on his inherent identity. It's for this reason he doesn't have a name change. He embodied the beauty of just being Jewish: "I am born right and just want to keep that."

It's not always correct to be a revolutionary, an innovator. You can't produce a יעקב until you have a יצחק, and you need a יצחק to have an effective אברהם. Without him, all that religious fervor will just peter out and be lost. In פרשת תולדות, you see this. אברהם dug pits. יצחק re-dug those pits. Why did he have to do that? What was wrong with those original pits? The answer is אברהם didn't dig deep enough. All he was able to collect was rain water, and because there was no natural water source there, the פלישתים were able to refill it with dirt. יצחק came and re-dug those same pits, but this with one difference. He dug deeper. He went deep enough to reach the waterbed and the well became a spring, giving forth a fountain. At this point, the פלישתים couldn't close the pit. The stream was too strong to stop.

As opposed to אברהם who only found מי גשמים, accumulated water, יצחק digs deeper to find the source of it all. As a revolutionary, אברהם didn't have the time to dig deep enough. He was on the move to make his revolution grow. Though effective in spreading the ideas to more people, there is one catch. There is a likelihood for shallowness. It's like a person who is not comfortable with his גמרא, feeling like he needs to make up for lost time, and try to finish the whole מסכתא. It's a lost cause. All he's going to get out of his "Bikeus Blitz" is a superficial understanding of the sources. Total שטחיות. The second stage is learning one page at a time *well*,

getting a handle of the various topics and ideas. Only after a thorough, in depth analysis of the ideas does he then have the ability to move on.

In this idea can be described the following. אברהם, in his revolutionary fervor, found a way of accumulating "heavenly waters." אברהם began the discovery of the values and ideas which are that of רצון ה'. But he couldn't bring them deep enough. His water was only from above. It was external. It didn't integrate as part of his identity yet, and therefore, the פלישתים got him.

External culture, with all its trappings, is a powerful force for one who is not grounded in his beliefs. If you merely have a shallow accumulation of experiences, lacking personalization and internalization, it's easy to be taken down. The פלישתים embody the cynic. "Sure you flipped out," they tell you. If your religious identity is something external and superficial, you will lose it fast, to the extent that you won't know what hit you. As Victor Frankel said, "People can take away all your possessions, but they can't take away that which is you." They can't take away your identity. They can only take that which is external of you; that which you acquire. The only way to win the *kulturkampf*, you have to normalize religion. This is יצחק. He is Mr. Religious, but in a normal way. His beauty is his ability to consolidate those lofty and abstract ideals and internalize them into his identity in a real way.

The Gemara in (פ:ט) describes what Judgment Day will be like. It says:

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: מאי דכתיב כי אתה אבינו כי אברהם לא ידענו וישראל לא יכירנו אתה ה' אבינו גואלנו מעולם שמך. לעתיד לבא יאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם: בניך חטאו לי. אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם - ימחו על קדושת שמך. אמר: אימר ליה ליעקב דהוה ליה צער גידול בנים, אפשר דבעי רחמי עליהו. אמר ליה: בניך חטאו. - אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, ימחו על קדושת שמך. - אמר: לא בסבי טעמא, ולא בדרדקי עצה. אמר לו ליצחק: בניך חטאו לי. - אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, בני ולא בניך?

In the future, הקב"ה will tell אברהם your children sinned. What will you do to save them? He responds, "ימותו על קידוש שמך." I don't even want to explain this. הקב"ה moves to יעקב. He had יעקב responds in the negative as well. The Gemara then says that הקב"ה will say, "I'll go back and ask יצחק." It's interesting that initially G-d skipped over יצחק. אברהם was the ultimate חסד איש, he'll find a loophole. יעקב, a multi-colored individual, who had so much pain over his children because he loved them, might save them.

יצחק, what do we know about him? He's not that creative at all. What new can he say to defend his children? The Gemara continues. יצחק responds to הקב"ה rhetorically, "רבוננו של עולם, they're *my* children and not *Your* children! Save *Your* children."

Why couldn't אברהם say that? What about יעקב? Let's understand what יצחק was saying to הקב"ה. He's arguing that כלל ישראל are not *my* children. What's "me?" I am a vehicle of fulfilling רצון ה'. I don't have a specific way of achieving that goal. I am nothing more than a receptacle of Your will. I don't need a name change. אברהם is the first person who *became* Jewish. יעקב is the first one who made us all Jewish. After יעקב we were all born Jewish. יצחק is the first person to be born Jewish and die Jewish. Just be a Jew. You don't always have to create. Just be with Him. As the saying goes, "The sounds of silence ring the loudest." You don't always have to talk. You have such a profound relationship that you don't even want to talk. You just want to be.

That's יצחק. *My* children? They're Yours. *I'm* Yours. The פסוק comments on the תורת כהנים that there is no mention of זכירה in reference to יצחק. It's because יצחק didn't need to be remembered. יצחק is here. The עקידה of יצחק says, "G-d, do what you want to me. I just want to be with you." I see my core identity as no more than Your will and whim. I, myself, am nothing. In mathematic terms, יצחק is like a point. He has no length, no width. He takes up no space. He's almost not there. Our relationship is such that I don't need to express it. יצחק tells G-d, "Who am I? I'm מתבטל myself to You. All I want is to be with You. I don't exist. My kids are really *Your* kids. I've integrated Your values and Your רצון to the point that it's just You here."

Like יצחק, the Jewish nation has this intrinsic Jewish identity. It doesn't matter what they do. They are not making revolutions and they are not building Judaism. In fact, they can actually be ruining it. But, in the end of the day, they are, in essence, Your kids. It doesn't matter what they are doing. The passive, consolidated identity is what saved the Jewish nation throughout history. It's now our job to follow in the footsteps of our incredible grandfather, living a life of passivity, but through that inaction, developing an incredibly deep relationship with הקב"ה.