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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Toldot

Isaac is, perhaps, the least understood of our three patriarchs. He allowed himself to be sacrificed by his father – although God, in His mercy, stopped it. He had to have his father's servant find a wife for him. Who needs someone to find a wife for him at age 40? And Isaac lived his life avoiding conflict and confrontation. Whereas Abraham stood up to the four kings that captured his nephew Lot, and Jacob wrestled with the angel, Isaac – whenever there was a confrontation – just picked himself up and left.

The Torah (Gen. 26:13) tells us, *Vayigdal ha-ish*, “and the man (Isaac) grew great.” He became very wealthy with flocks and cattle and wells. One day, Avimelech, King of the Philistines, said to him: *Leych mey-imanu ki atzamta mimenu m'od*, “Jew, go away. You are more successful, stronger than we can stand.”

So what does Isaac do? He leaves...he moves on. He settles somewhere else, digs a well and finds water. The people come and say: “Get out of here; that's our well”...and Isaac moves again and again. Why?

Because Isaac looked death in the face when his father was about to sacrifice him, he didn't let the small stuff (or even the great stuff) get to him. He would rather let others take what is his than risk facing death again. “Life is too precious,” he reasoned, and so, when threatened, he gave others what they wanted.

Isaac goes back to one of his father's old homes in the valley of Gerar, where he finds that the Philistines have stopped up the wells that his father Abraham had dug. He opens the well of his father and digs a new well and finds a *b'eyr mayim chayim*, “A well of living water.”

But the herdsmen of Gerar protest and threaten Isaac saying, “The water is ours.” But Isaac is not discouraged. He digs another well and another. He had to dig seven wells until they left him alone to live in peace. So he called that last well, *B'eyr Sheva*, “the seventh well,” for it was the seventh that he had dug (Sforno).

What accounted for his great persistence? I think that, after two or three times of people taking what I worked hard for, I might have given up. But God had made Isaac a promise and he held on to that promise that God put in his heart (Gen. 26:3): “I will be with you and bless you and to your children I will give all of these lands.” And later God repeats

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the message and prefaces it with: (Gen. 26:24): “Fear not for I am with you.” If God put that promise in his heart, God will certainly make it come true.

Here’s the master lesson in all this: If we are able to intuit what is our proper path in life, what we should be doing with our lives, we should not fear, we should go for it, no matter how many obstacles are thrown in our face.

From this story of Isaac, the number seven became a symbol of perseverance, and Beer Sheva, a well of inspiration, courage and determination not to give up on our *shlichut*, on our path in life.

I counted the obstacles that Jacob, Isaac’s son, encountered in finding his path and they also came to seven: the purchasing of the birthright; the stealing of his father’s blessings; fleeing to Mesopotamia alone; working seven years to marry Rachel; fleeing back to Canaan with his 12 children and four wives; wrestling with the angel where his name was changed to Israel; and confronting his brother Esau as he returns. You might make an even longer list if you follow his life carefully. But neither Isaac nor his son Jacob gave in to despair. They persisted until they were able to fulfill their holy mission in life.

When we are faced with obstacle upon obstacle in life, we can call upon their strength to persevere, for we are the children of Isaac and Jacob. And just as God gave Isaac and Jacob the strength to persevere, He’ll give it to us as well, if we ask for it.

It took Winston Churchill three years to get through the 8th grade because he couldn’t pass English – of all things! Ironically, he was asked many years later to give the commencement address at Oxford University. His now famous speech consisted of only 3 words: “Never give up!”

Calvin Coolidge once wrote:

Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan “press on” has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.

Look deeply inward to try to find your path, what it is that you need to do with your life. When confronted by obstacles, call upon God to give you the strength of Isaac and Jacob to persevere and you will – even if you’ll need to try over and over again seven times. As King Solomon teaches (Proverbs 24:16): “For a righteous man falls seven times and rises up again.”

Shabbat Shalom!

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