

Weekly Teaching

November 9, 2018

Which of the Patriarchs is your favorite: Abraham, Isaac or Jacob?

Abraham and Jacob get a lot of “screen time”, and poor Isaac is rarely heard from within the text of our Torah.

The first Torah “scene” doesn’t have a lot to say about Isaac other than noting that his birth is the catalyst for Hagar, and his half-brother Ishmael, to be cast out from the family home of Abraham and Sarah.

The next big “scene” is the Akedah; the story of the Binding of Isaac.

But, Isaac is almost like a “human prop” in the Akedah story.

The absolute focus is on Abraham, not Isaac, who doesn’t even get to say one word within this narrative.

His next “scene” is the arranged marriage narrative between Isaac and Rebecca.

Here, Isaac receives a few lines by which he is allowed to articulate his own voice; six whole verses out of the narrative of 67 verses.

Finally, we arrive to the Torah Portion of Toldot, and it looks like Isaac might finally play a real patriarchal role for our People.

Instead, the Torah opens “Isaac’s story” by playing up that he is merely the “son of Abraham.”

The verse reading: “This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham; Abraham fathered Isaac.”

Poor Isaac, he’s only really important because of his father, further proven because Isaac only receives one chapter of Torah before the full focus is turned to his twin sons, Jacob and Esau, and their subsequent “battles”.

So, Isaac doesn’t even reach “co-star” status; he’s just the biblical character that seemingly helps keep the story of Abraham and Jacob strong.

Isaac is “just there”; a presence without any apparent great individual importance.

And, yet, I fully proclaim that for me, Isaac is the best of the patriarchs, and my personal favorite.

I am strengthened in this personal conviction because of the “canonized” rabbinic literature that is part of our Midrash.

Ancient Midrash teaches that Isaac was always destined for greatness; that when Isaac was born all of God’s universe celebrated his birth.

Isaac’s birth was a miracle; a mother who should have been too old to bear her first child.

The Midrash further asserts that Isaac would grow up to be the paradigm of real faith and courage.

When the Akedah occurs, the Torah teaches that Isaac was 37 years old; not a mere child, but a fully grown adult who understood that he was to die as a sacrifice, and yet he voices not an utterance of protest to his father or to God.

The Midrash describes Isaac as the first person to pray every day; a person who was content with simply being a good God-fearing Jew.

Unlike his father, Abraham, or his son, Jacob, Isaac never departs from the “Promised Land” for any reason.

He is content to be where God wants him to be.

I like Isaac the most because he is the patriarch that the religious person really wants to be.

A practicing Jew who cares not for grand attentions, merely satisfied to have a quiet, pious relationship with God.

One may almost consider Isaac to be a biblical foil, or straight-man for all the more charismatic, interesting biblical personages around him.

Yet, I view this reticence as Isaac’s “Everyman” quality.

While some people really identify with the courage and advocacy of Abraham...or the struggling with self and God of Jacob...or the passion and art of David...or the humility and forbearance of Moses...most of us can truly step into the shoes of Isaac: one who tries to be simply a good Jew, reverent to God, raising our families, caring for others, developing our spiritual relationship, sustaining our losses, mindful of our place in the world, keeping tradition, and finally, although his humor is not highlighted, his name, meaning laughter, reminds us to keep that in our lives as well.

May the Isaac in all of us keep our lives feeling real, connected to God, and enjoying the laughter!

Shabbat Shalom,

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