YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Toledot**

**The Path of Yitzchak**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

Adapted by Chananel Shapira with Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

The path of Yitzchak differs from the path of Avraham and Yaakov. Whereas the relationship between Avraham and Sara and that between Yaakov and his wives constitute a relatively small part of their respective stories, in the case of Yitzchak, Rivka is the initiator and the active partner in his house; most of what we are told about Yitzchak relates to her.

In the stories that relate to Yitzchak himself, we see a clear repetition of Avraham's actions:

And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham. (*Bereishit* 26:1)

Yitzchak wanders in the footsteps of his father, and were it not for the explicit instruction, "Go not down to Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of" (*Bereishit* 26:2), Yitzchak too would probably have gone down to Egypt on account of the famine. His stay in Gerar is accompanied by the story that Rivka "is my sister," which is strikingly similar to Avraham's story about Sara. Yitzchak also digs the wells that his father had once dug and calls them by the names that his father had given them, and he even calls Be'er-Sheva by that name after taking an oath there to Avimelekh. All of these things bring to mind the story of Avraham.

Similarly, Yitzchak's marriage in the previous *parasha* is arranged on Avraham's initiative and under his close supervision. The servant seeks a wife for "the son of his master," and the criteria by which he chooses Rivka are better suited to Avraham than to Yitzchak: She performs acts of kindness and fulfills with her own person *lekh-lekha*,"go you forth" – things which we do not find with regard to Yitzchak.

On the verse, "And Yaakov went out from Be'er-Sheva" (*Bereishit* 28:10) at the beginning of *Parashat Vayeitzei*, Rashi cites the *midrash*: "It intends to tell us that the departure of a righteous person from his city makes an impression. So long as a righteous man is in his city, he is its glory and splendor and beauty; when he leaves it there depart also its glory, its splendor and its beauty." Many raise the question: But surely Yitzchak remained in Be'er-Sheva! The dream involving the ladder which is described in the continuation of that section leads us to the simple answer: The *Shekhina* went out into exile together with Yaakov, despite the fact that Yitzchak remained in *Eretz Yisrael*. It would have been possible to understand that the leadership passed on to the next generation, that Yitzchak was "abandoned" in favor of Yaakov. But even in the previous *parasha* it is evident that the *Shekhina* rested on Yitzchak only after the death of Avraham:

And it came pass after the death of Avraham, that God blessed Yitzchak his son. (*Bereishit* 25:11)

It seems that there is a consistent policy on the part of God, as a matter of principle, to refrain as long as possible from resting his *Shekhina* on Yitzchak.

This can be understood in light of the *Akeida* story. At the end of that story, Avraham goes down alone from the mountain: "So Avraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to Be'er-Sheva; and Avraham dwelt in Be'er-Sheva" (*Bereishit* 22:19). Where was Yitzchak? *Chazal* answer that he went and settled in the Garden of Eden for three years. Who is found in the Garden of Eden? In general, dead people. This intimates that while Yitzchak was not actually slaughtered, and a ram was killed in his stead, "his soul left him" at the *Akeida*, as the *midrash* teaches (*Midrash Sekhel Tov*, *Bereishit* 22:9), and "we see the ashes of Yitzchak as if they were heaped on the altar" (*Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 2:1 and elsewhere),as is mentioned in the High Holiday prayers. For this reason, it is appropriate that the blessing that was instituted to correspond to Yitzchak in the first three blessings of the *Amida* prayer is the blessing of resurrection ("*Mechayeh Ha-Metim*").[[1]](#footnote-1)

The prophet Yeshayahu (29:22) speaks of "Yaakov who redeemed Avraham."[[2]](#footnote-2) In all contexts,[[3]](#footnote-3) Israel is called by the name of Avraham or by the name of Yaakov: "the house of Israel," "the people of the God of Avraham," and the like. God's words to Avraham, "For in Yitzchak, shall seed be called to you" (*Bereishit* 21:12), may be understood to mean that Avraham's seed shall be called in Yitzchak, but Yitzchak himself is not seed. Yitzchak came down from the mountain only to allow Avraham and Sara to have seed, so that Yaakov might later be born.

The *Zohar* (*Tosefta*, vol. 1, *Parashat Noach*, pp. 59b-60a) notes that the names of all the righteous men are doubled: "Avraham, Avraham," "Yaakov, Yaakov," "Moshe, Moshe." Even with regard to Noach, the *Zohar* finds a place where the name is doubled: "These are the generations of Noach. Noach was in his generations a man righteous and whole-hearted" (*Bereishit* 6:9; and so too regarding Shem in *Bereishit* 11:10). As for Yitzchak, on the other hand, we find no such doubling. The *Zohar* explains that the double call is because of the two souls that these righteous men had: "One spirit in this world, and one spirit in the World-to-Come." But Yitzchak, "when he was offered on the altar," was left with only his heavenly soul – "he was left with the soul of the World-to-Come," and therefore his name is not doubled. Thus, Yitzchak came down from the mountain with his heavenly soul in his earthly body in order to establish descendants for Avraham.

What, then, can we learn from Yitzchak?

In the spirit of the upcoming *Shabbat Irgun* of the Bnei Akiva movement, let us mention the values we grew up on, which are very reminiscent of the way that Avraham conducted himself: Calling upon the name of God wherever he went and perfecting the world under the reign of God, as is described at the beginning of the Rambam's *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*:

He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city… he would explain [them] to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are the men of the house of Avraham. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:3)

We were brought up on the values of doing, of taking the initiative, and of being active in such a way that brings us closer to the goal of causing the *Shekhina* to rest upon us. In this respect, it is difficult for us to identify with Yitzchak, who seems to be oblivious to the world around him, drawing his inspiration from the heavenly worlds in which he lives.

We must, however, keep in mind the important movement in Judaism that developed about three hundred years ago in Czarist Russia, against the backdrop of the disappointment with the messianic expectations of Shabbetai Zvi and the crisis that developed in his wake. The war fought by the common man at that time was the war for his daily existence, a war that he fought alone while surrounded by a cruel and alien environment. It is difficult to talk to such a person about activity and repairing the world. If he was a person with a great soul, his world would be heavenly, he would live among the angels, detached to a great degree from the daily problems of survival in this world. His eyes would focus on the distant redemption; he would be like Yitzchak. This is what the Rebbe, the leader of the Chasidic community, looks like. If he was a person who did not merit to have a great soul, he would fight the petty problems of existence, and his ability to grab hold of the world of holiness would be through the clothing or the crumbs of the Admor, through touching him or hearing his voice, even if he did not understand the depth of his words. He would contemplate Yitzchak and taste the crumbs of the royal feast that he ate when he blessed his sons. The teachings of Chassidut provided an answer also to the needs of such people.

\* \*

There is also another way to understand the path of Yitzchak, one that does not contradict what we have said thus far: According to the kabbalistic masters, the defining trait of Avraham was lovingkindness, whereas the defining trait of Yitzchak was justice. But it is inconceivable to say that just as Avraham practiced lovingkindness all his life, so too Yitzchak executed justice all his days. Rather, Avraham practiced lovingkindness, while Yitzchak accepted the execution of justice, without raising objections and without wavering in his faith and his standing before God. When the Pelishtim took the wells that they had already sealed in the past, he finds another place to dig wells and does not complain. When Esav comes and Yitzchak realizes that he gave the blessing to the wrong son, he says: "And he shall be blessed" (*Bereishit* 27:33). Whereas Avraham receives a Divine command to offer his son, Yitzchak is prepared to sacrifice his life without having been commanded to do so. Yitzchak accepts the course of events, without asking why is God doing this to him.

This too is a great thing that we can learn from Yitzchak, to fortify us in times of need.

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat, *Parashat Toledot*, 5772. The summary was reviewed by R. Medan.)

1. See *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Parashat Vayera*, sec. 101, s.v. *va-yiven sham Avraham mizbe'ach ein ketiv.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is also common in the *midrash*; see, for example, *Bereishit Rabba* 63:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Apart from one prophecy in *Amos* (7:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)