



## Parashat Toldot – Stand Tall

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It's very natural for Jews to be interested in Avraham. He was, after all, the first Jew. God called upon Avraham to leave his home and family behind, and to be the father of a new people. We know a lot about Avraham.

But what's it like to be the first son? If Judaism were to continue, Avraham had to have children! There had to be a sequel to Avraham! As novelist Flannery O'Connor said, "Knowing who you are is good for one generation only."

So in this week's *parasha* (*Toldot*) we are re-introduced to Yitzhak. I say re-introduced because we already know Yitzhak. We know him from four chapters earlier when he was born, we know how Sarah wanted to protect Yitzhak from Yishmael's bad influence, we certainly know Yitzhak from the *Akeidah* – the binding of Yitzhak, where he was almost sacrificed, and finally, we know how his father sent a servant to find a wife for Yitzhak. We know who he is!

Which is why the opening words of this *parasha* seem so confusing:

וַאֲלֵה תוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן אַבְרָהָם This is the story of Yitzhak, son of Avraham  
אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת יִצְחָק: Avraham fathered Yitzhak.

Why is Yitzhak called *Yitzhak ben Avraham*? We know he is the son of Avraham! We also know that other major characters in Genesis aren't called by their father's name. Furthermore, why repeat, "Avraham fathered Yitzhak"? If he is "Yitzhak son of Avraham" why say that Avraham *fathered* him??

Both parts of the verse are unnecessary, and we know that the *Torah* doesn't waste words. So what's going on here?

Some commentators focus on the need to establish that Yitzhak was Avraham's son and not, say, the son of Avimelech (a local king).

Others focus on the promise in chapter 21. When God tells Avraham to send Hagar and Yishmael away, He comforts Avraham by saying, don't worry.... כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע  
"It is through *Yitzhak* that offspring shall be continued for you."

So labeling Yitzhak as "ben Avraham" reinforces the concept that Yitzhak is the next in line.

Another interesting comment in *Midrash Tanhuma* says that mentioning both of their names in the same verse indicates that they were both proud of one another.

But the most interesting *perush* (interpretation) I found was by the Netziv, Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in his book *Ha'amek Davar*: he says that the one thing that defined Yitzhak's life was the fact that he was Avraham's son.

Many commentators have noted that things *happened* to Yitzhak; that he did not show much initiative in his life. He was born, adults found him a wife, he was almost sacrificed, his wife and son trick him... things *happened* to him. His story, and his life, is sandwiched in between the great Avraham, and the more exiting Yaakov. And so we understand the comment that his life was defined by being the *son* of a great man.

I'd like to suggest that Yitzhak did have a great moment or two in his life. One in particular stands out: the *Akeidah* (Genesis 22). Using the genealogies in the *Torah* one could make a case that Yitzhak was 37 years old when God told Avraham to sacrifice his son Yitzhak. Yitzhak could have fought back, he could have run away. There's one *midrash*, in fact, that has Yitzhak telling his father to tie him down well because when he sees the knife he'll get startled which will cause Avraham to make a mistake, thus rendering the "sacrifice" *pasul*, or improper.

From this occasion we see a very mature, level-headed Yitzhak. One who was willing to give up his life for God.

Perhaps this *parasha*, which comes after his parents have died, identifies him as "ben Avraham" not to tell us that he's a minor player, a "number two" to Avraham, but to tell us that even though Yitzhak is on his own, he is still connected to his parents. He is taking on the challenge, the Covenant, which God made with his father.

After reviewing the various *perushim* about Yitzhak, it's clear that each of our ancestors stood at the nexus of past and future. Each of our ancestors was both the "son/daughter of" someone and the "father/mother of" someone else. We are in the same position. We hold the heritage of our parents in our hands, and we have to pass along that heritage to our children. We have to pay our dues as "someone's son or daughter" (or brother/sister) but then we have to stand up, on our own, before the world, and proclaim our identity.

In a partnership with parents, this is what day schools are all about: helping children to stand up as strongly identified Jewish adults who can and will have an impact on the world.

***Shabbat Shalom,***

***Rabbi Jim Rogozen***

#### **AS A FAMILY:**

- Discuss your family tree.
  - Talk about parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.
- Explain significant things that members of your family did, taught, left.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:**

1. How did each of the twins receive their name?
2. Why did Esav sell his birthright?
3. How did Yaakov trick Isaac?  
What was Rebecca's involvement?
4. Why did Esav have two wives?