



Our
Ushpizin



YITZCHAK

The Loyal and Joyful Optimist

Rabbi Dr. Richard Hidary

Yitzchak's name means "he who will laugh" and actually precedes his birth, deriving from the incredulous laugh by both Avraham and Sarah upon hearing the news that they would bear a child in old age (Bereishit 17:17 and 18:13). Yitzchak thus symbolizes hope and continuity even when all prospects seem bleak. His legacy inspires optimism beyond logic and trust in an occurrence so unlikely that the absurdity of it coming true makes it laughable.

Yitzchak's name also foretells the story of Yitzchak and Rivka caught in a moment of playfulness (קִיץ) while Avimelech spies them out from his palace window (Bereishit 26:8). This rare moment of marital intimacy in the Torah follows the scene of Yitzchak praying alongside and on behalf of his barren wife, displaying his care and devotion to her. Yitzchak is unique among the patriarchs in that he married only one woman, although that did not prevent rivalry between his twin sons.

His monogamous relationship with his wife parallels his absolute commitment to the Land of Israel, which he never left even when there was a famine in Canaan. This contrasts with his father, Avraham who left to Egypt when famine struck and turned to an Egyptian woman, Hagar, to bear him a child when his wife, Sarah, was barren. Instead, Yitzchak remained uncompromising in his loyalty to the promised land, his wife, and his family's future even in the face of enormous doubt.

However, the uniqueness of his single-minded commitment may be just one symptom of his generally passive

nature. Unlike Avraham, who journeys to a new land, fights wars and argues with G-d's justice, Yitzchak submissively follows the way of his father and mimics his actions. Father and son both pass off their wives as their sisters during their stay in Gerar (20:2 and 26:7) and become wealthy while living there (20:14 and 26:14). Yitzchak re-digs the wells that Avraham had first dug but that the Philistines stopped up (26:18).

Even Yitzchak's courtship highlights his absence. Yaakov and Moshe meet their brides at a well where they each save the maidens in distress. Compare this with Yitzchak, whose father arranges for a servant to go seek a suitable bride. While Rivka heroically serves the thirsty servant and his camels at a well, Yitzchak remains at home, patiently awaiting the delegation's return.

Yitzchak's passive role begins already as a child, when his father binds him to an altar as a sacrifice to G-d. Deservedly, Avraham emerges in future liturgy as the hero of the story for his willingness to sacrifice his son. Nevertheless, Yitzchak's innocent inquiry, "Where is the lamb for slaughter?" and his willingness to trust his father, "G-d will see to the lamb, my son" (Bereishit 22:7-8), certainly becomes a paradigm of fortitude, bravery, and selfless devotion. Yitzchak was miraculously saved at the last moment with the knife about to slit his throat; future generations of martyrs and victims of pogroms who took strength from Yitzchak's example would not be so lucky.

Nobody should mistake Yitzchak's passivity as weakness. Quite the opposite.

Anyone holding a plank position for two minutes would tell you they would much rather do jumping jacks. A successful movement cannot begin without a pioneering and charismatic visionary. But after that comes the real hard work of sustaining the momentum, thwarting threats to continuity, and ensuring future growth. This was Yitzchak's greatness.

Benjamin Franklin was one of the world's greatest inventors, inventing swimming fins, bifocal glasses, the odometer and electricity. Interestingly, most of Franklin's innovations preceded the great inventor in some form. Franklin's genius was in perfecting these earlier inventions and applying them to practical use. Someone before him had already held out a rod in a lightning storm. But Franklin was the first to direct electrical energy from clouds into a Leyden bottle, an early battery. In science, the person who repeats, verifies and perfects an experiment may be just as crucial as the first inventor of an idea. The same is true for the origins of a movement or nation. There can only be one founder, one Avraham. But all future generations who continue and build upon the chain of tradition before them will find a role model in Yitzchak.

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