Isaac, the Ignored Patriarch

Parashat Toledot

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The thing that seems to define Isaac, as opposed to many of the other figures in the early history of the Israelite nation, is that he is defined primarily not by his own actions but by the actions of others. In the best-known stories in which Isaac appears, he appears as a subordinate character; the stories are primarily about someone else. The *Akeidah* is a case in point: the story is called "the binding of Isaac", but Isaac's role in the story is minor compared to Abraham's role. Isaac gets one exchange of dialogue with his father—"here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?" (Gen. 22:7)—but other than this single verse, Isaac does not speak. In his elderly years,he is deceived by his son Jacob into bestowing upon him the blessing that had been meant for his brother Esau; the way the story is told, the Torah places the narrative attention on the sibling rivalry and the succession to the covenant are at the forefront here, rather than the man Isaac as a character.

Toledot is the single *parashah* in which Isaac gets the spotlight as the main character. And even within this *parashah*, Isaac really gets only a single chapter (Gen. 26) as the main character. And yet, many of the things he does in this *parashah* are repeats of things that other people did, particularly his father Abraham. As soon as the Torah's narrative spotlight is upon him, Isaac has to escape a famine in the land of Canaan. He lies to Abimelech, the king of Gerar, practicing the same wife-sister deception that Abraham did twice in his own life. Isaac enters into a formal non-aggression treaty with Abimelech at Beer-sheba, re-digs the same wells that his father Abraham dug, experiences his barren wife miraculously giving birth, and then—setting the stage for the future narrative of the Israelite nation—is faced with the familial rivalry of his offspring.

A midrash, related in the Gemara (*Bava Metzia* 87a) and in *Midrash Tanḥuma* (*Toledot* 1), picks up on this point of continuity: it asks, regarding the first line of our *parashah*, which says "These are the generations of Isaac, son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac" (Gen. 25:19): why does the Torah add a seemingly repetitive tag to the verse? The midrash says that God specifically made Isaac's appearance so similar to Abraham's that anyone who doubted that Abraham, at the age of one hundred, could have fathered a child—and therefore claimed Isaac's father was really Abimelech—would have to admit that "Abraham begot Isaac".

Abraham and Sarah are the first people the Torah explicitly describes as "old" (Gen. 18:11

and Gen. 24:1) despite many other mentioned characters having lived far longer lifespans. The rabbis made another midrash (*Bava Metzia* 87a and *Sanhedrin* 107b) out of this, and connected it with the midrash about Abraham's and Isaac's appearances being similar: that until Abraham and Sarah there was no aging, and people would mix up Abraham and Isaac because they looked so similar. So Abraham prayed for aging, so that he would look different from his son.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that there is a "deeper point at stake":

> The close physical resemblance between Abraham and Isaac created unexpected difficulties. Both father and son suffered a loss of individuality. Nor is this pure speculation. Examine Genesis carefully, and we see that Isaac is the least individuated of the patriarchs. … Isaac seems to do little that is distinctively his own.
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> Sensitive to this, the rabbis told a profound psychological story. Parents are not their children. Children are not replicas of their parents. We are each unique and have a unique purpose. That is why Abraham prayed to God that there be some clear and recognizable difference between father and son.

Many commentators identify the repetition of the themes of Abraham's life with Isaac's as precisely the whole point of the story. But Rabbi Amnon Bazak astutely identifies that by framing their stories with so much similarity, the Torah is actually inviting us to notice the ways that Isaac differs from his father—and, in fact, improves on him. For example, Abraham comes in for a bit of disapproval from the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 54:4) and some of the commentators (e.g. Rashbam to Gen. 22:1) for being too generous in his treaty-making with Abimelech. Isaac, by contrast, improves upon Abraham's treaty-making, in the view of the commentators, by giving away less land and sticking closer to what God promised.

And one of the biggest differences between Abraham and Isaac is lurking in plain sight: Isaac re-digs Abraham's wells, and gives them "the same names his father had given them" (Gen. 26:18), which is repetition in its purest form. But then Isaac digs *new* wells and gives them new names (Gen. 26:19–22), and only *after* this does he reach Beer-sheba to close the loop, as it were, on the parallel with his father's life. Even though the Torah has already told us that Abraham concluded his treaty with Abimelech at Beer-sheba, *Isaac* is the one who gets credited with naming the site (Gen. 26:32–33, Revised JPS translation):

> וַיְהִי | בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיָּבֹאוּ עַבְדֵי יִצְחָק וַיַּגִּדוּ לוֹ עַל־אֹדוֹת הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר חָפָרוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ מָצָאנוּ מָיִם׃
> וַיִּקְרָא אֹתָהּ שִׁבְעָה עַל־כֵּן שֵׁם־הָעִיר בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה׃
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> That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water!" He named it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

Shibah, of course, means both "oath" and "seven", referring to the treaties that both Isaac and Abraham concluded with Abimelech, as well as to the seven ewes that Abraham sets apart during his treaty (Gen. 21:31). There, as here, the place is called by a name, but only here, in Isaac's story, does it include the tag telling us that it is *Isaac's* naming that sticks: the name he gives has remained "to this day". The sense of permanence of place that Isaac

creates is also reflected in the fact that he is the only one of the three patriarchs never to leave the Land of Israel. This is another thing he does differently from his father (and his offspring): Abraham and Jacob go down to Egypt to escape a famine, but God explicitly tells Isaac not to do so, and that by remaining in Canaan he will be blessed (Gen. 26:2–3).

Rabbi Sacks quotes the philosopher Hilary Putnam: "Every child has the right to be a complete surprise to its parents." Rabbi Sacks quotes this in the context of talking about the ethics of human cloning and applies it to Abraham and Isaac's putatively identical faces. But there are many ways other than appearance in which children can—and should!—surprise their parents.

Isaac is, of course, not a clone of Abraham; even though he does many of the same things Abraham did during his life, he does them differently. But he is very familiar, and the Torah spends comparatively little time on him. We are tempted to ignore him because he seems recognizable, transitional, and ultimately perhaps just a little less important to the grand narrative arc of the patriarchs. But the quiet differences between him and his father are, in the end, what define him. It is Abraham who, in the rabbis' reading, steps back to make room for his son to find his own path, his own face, thus fulfilling the job of the parent—to trust their child to grow into their own person.