

Sandwiched between his revolutionary father Abraham and his son Jacob, progenitor of the 12 tribes, Isaac seems to play a minor role in our Torah. Even in our parashah, the only one devoted to telling his story, his primary function is as a bridge between these two towering figures. At first glance Isaac appears to be nothing more than Abraham's son and Jakob's father. Like Abraham, he goes from being an economic migrant with a beautiful wife whom he identifies as his sister in order to protect himself, to amassing great wealth. Like her mother-in-law Sarah, Rebecca has fertility issues. And she, like Jakob's wife Rachel, is discovered at a well. But these ancient tropes are mere props in the drama of Isaac's life, a life with its own groundbreaking trajectory. It is noteworthy that of the three patriarchs, Isaac is the only one who never leaves the Promised Land, and he is also the only one whose name is not changed. This is the clue to his paramount importance. Despite – or perhaps because of the trauma of his near sacrifice and his position as a sort of nexus between his father and his son, he emerges as a symbol of straightforward tenacity and stability. The first indication of his unique status is found in a seemingly redundant phrase in the first verse of our parashah: "And these are the generations of Isaac, the son of Abraham; *Abraham begot Isaac.*" (25:19) Rashi, citing Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 1, explains, "Since Scripture wrote 'Isaac the son of Abraham,' it had to say, 'Abraham begot Isaac;' because the scorners of the generation were saying that Sarah had conceived from Avimelech, for she had lived with Abraham for many years and had not conceived from him. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He shaped the features of Isaac's face to resemble Abraham's, and everyone attested that Abraham had begotten Isaac." Others explain that this is to clarify that Isaac is Abraham's sole successor, and still others declare that Isaac was conceived only after Abram had become Abraham. However we view this phrase, as his successor, Isaac follows closely in Abraham's footsteps, but with differences that have enormous impact. Unlike his father, who spent the famine years in Egypt, Isaac is ordered by HaShem to remain in Canaan. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Toldot 6 tells us why: "... The Holy One said to Isaac, 'Because your father came to the land from abroad, he went down to Egypt; but since you were born in the land of Israel and represent a pure burnt offering, how could you be going down?'" Once again, it appears he is being blessed only because of his father. And blessed he is, with a huge harvest in the middle of a famine. But whereas Abraham planted a few trees, Isaac dares to plant a field – a powerful statement. Like his father, he prospers in the land of Avimelech, but unlike him, he encounters greater envy and opposition on the part of the local inhabitants. While Avimelech enters into a treaty with Abraham (21:22-34 – the end of the reading for Rosh HaShanah Day 1) and allows him to stay in his land, he tells Isaac to leave in order to avoid further conflict because of his enormous wealth. This too, is a trope, harkening back to Abraham and Lot, and presaging Jakob's descendants in Egypt. Prospering in the midst of poverty, and excelling in the midst of mediocrity have always fomented jealousy and often led to tragedy, as we know all too well. Isaac moves to the valley of Gerar and reopens the wells, giving them names like the ones his father had given them. Our sages teach that this is not only to honor Abraham, but also to ensure that the inhabitants realize that he is only reclaiming his own inheritance, not stealing from them. Two additional wells are dug and there is contention with the local shepherds, but with the third, they do not quarrel. Isaac names this well *Rechoboth*, (רְחוֹבֶת – wide/broad), declaring, "For now, the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land." A prophetic and provocative statement that still reverberates. Isaac then moves to Be'er Sheva and settles there. Here again we see quiet persistence in the face of opposition, and his move to Be'er Sheva is another eloquent gesture. It was here that Abraham and Avimelech made a pact of mutual non-aggression centered on water rights. And it is here that Avimelech returns, again with his general Phichol, to reaffirm this covenant and extend it from three generations of their immediate families to the entire population. Both of these covenants are instigated by Avimelech, who, although he rules the land, is obviously fearful of these foreigners and their omnipotent, unseen God. Isaac responds much like his father, but from the far more established position of having been born and raised on this land. Isaac, who has never been abroad, is deeply rooted there, and unlike the other patriarchs, he engages actively in agriculture. When Abraham's servant arrives with Rebecca, he is "walking in the field toward evening" (24:63) Midrash Bereshit Rabbah defines the word *תָּשַׁל* (walking) as praying, but it is more than spiritual fervor that binds him to the land. He, like his favored son Esau, is an outdoorsman, at one with nature and happiest in its abundance and freedom. This is the secret of the serenity his father and son lack, and it has made him eminently able to assert his claim on the land in his own calm, but determined fashion. He lives for 180 years, longer than any of the others, and his very name, which derives from the root *tzachak* (to laugh), is prophetic. Sarah's incredulous laughter resonates in his self-assured stability and his quiet tenacity. Isaac's short time in the spotlight still looms large today.