

Poor Isaac! Sandwiched between his revolutionary father Abraham and his prolific son Jacob, he seems to play only a minor role in the Torah. Even in our parashah, the only one devoted to telling his story, he functions primarily as a bridge between these two towering figures. Like Abraham, his sojourn as an economic migrant with a beautiful wife whom he identifies as his sister in order to protect himself, ends in his amassing great wealth. Like her mother-in-law Sarah, Rebecca has fertility issues, and like Jakob's wife Rachel, her life with the family begins at a well. But these ancient tropes are mere props in the drama of Isaac's life, whose trajectory reaches far into the future and continues to impact our lives. It is noteworthy that Isaac is the only one of the three patriarchs who never leaves the Promised Land, and he is also the only one whose name is not changed. Isaac follows closely in Abraham's footsteps, but with significant differences. Unlike his father, who spent the famine years in Egypt, Isaac is ordered by HaShem to remain in Canaan. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Toldot 6: "... 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?'" They both dig wells, but Abraham only plants a few trees, while Isaac dares to plant a field – a powerful statement. And in the midst of famine, that field flourishes. Like his father, Isaac prospers in the land of Avimelech, but unlike him, he encounters greater envy and opposition from the local inhabitants. While Avimelech enters into a treaty with Abraham (21:22-34 – the end of the Rosh HaShanah Day 1 reading) and allows him to stay in his land, he makes Isaac leave in order to avoid further conflict because of his enormous wealth. This is another trope, harkening back to Abraham and Lot, and forward to Jakob's descendants in Egypt and beyond. As we know all too well, prospering in the midst of poverty, and excelling in the midst of mediocrity have always fomented jealousy and usually led to tragedy. Isaac moves to the valley of Gerar, reopens Abraham's wells, and gives them the same names. 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, resulting in strife with the local shepherds. In arid climates water is always a source of conflict, as the names of these wells indicate. Isaac calls the first one *Esek* (strife). In modern Hebrew *ashak* (אֲשַׁק) means to exploit/abuse, while *esek* (עֵסֶק) is transaction/matter. He names the second one *Sitnah* (adversary – accusation/slander/denunciation in modern Hebrew). Finally, with the third, they do not quarrel. Isaac names this well *Rechoboth*, (רְחֹב – wide/broad), declaring, "For now, the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land." (26:22) A prophetic and provocative statement that still reverberates today. Isaac then settles in Be'er Sheva, another eloquent gesture that demonstrates his quiet persistence in the face of opposition. It was here that Abraham and Avimelech had 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 Abraham, but from the far more established position of having been born and raised on this land. This time water is only a minor detail. Avimelech is more interested in peace, but for him, peace simply means the absence of war. Isaac realizes that this is too simplistic to be achievable. To his "Why have you come to me, since you hate me and sent me away from you?" Avimelech responds, "We have seen that God has been with you, so we said, let the oath between us now be between us and you, and let us make a covenant (*brit*) with you. He then dictates the terms: "that you will do us no evil, just as we did you no harm and ... sent you away in peace. Now, it's up to you, who are blessed by God." (26:27-29) Isaac's answer is a feast, after which they go to sleep. The next morning they swear an oath (*shevua*), but there is no mention of a *brit*. As Senator Hubert Humphrey z'l said, "Peace does not 'happen,' it requires work." And we are still working. The Ramban (Nachmanides) taught that Isaac's three wells symbolize the temples in Jerusalem: After the first temple was built, the nation split into two rival kingdoms that fought until the northern kingdom was exiled. The second temple was destroyed due to "baseless hatred" (Talmud Yoma 9b). The third temple will only be realized when peace is established, and sadly, that still an elusive goal. Today most of us do not yearn for the return of the ancient sacrificial system, but rather, for that blessed time when we will have learned to live together as fellow human beings, respecting each other's differences and marshalling our commonalities to serve the common good. A time when we will finally understand that there is no "one truth," but rather, many truths, defined by how each of us sees the world through the lens of our own culture. We will always have profound differences, but perhaps someday we will learn how to use them as opportunities, rather than obstacles, for mutual understanding. In Tractate Berakhot 56b Rabbi Chanina says, "One who sees a well in a dream sees peace." Peace itself is a far-off dream, but we must continue to dream it. And like Isaac, we must continue to persist, for the sake of our people, and for the sake of the whole world.

Shabbat shalom!