

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Isaac: Our Patriarch of Strength



*Then God said,
“Yes, but your
wife Sarah will
bear you a son,
and you will
call him Isaac.
I will establish
my covenant
with him as
an everlasting
covenant for his
descendants
after him.”*

— Genesis 17:19

Isaac (Yitzchak in Hebrew), the second patriarch in the Jewish Bible had a critical role to fill as the link between his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob, the first and third patriarchs. Indeed, Isaac is the conduit through which both the knowledge of God and God's promises were passed down to subsequent generations.

As the psalmist wrote in Psalm 105: *“He [God] remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant”* (vv. 8-10).

Yitzchak, יִצְחָק, means, “he will laugh.” When both Abraham and Sarah received the news that they would have a child in their old age (100 and 90 respectively), their first response was laughter. After hearing the news, Abraham *“laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’”* (Genesis 17:17). And Sarah, when she overheard the news, *“laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?’”* (Genesis 18:12).

However, the name Isaac was not chosen just because Abraham and Sarah laughed. As the name implies – “he will laugh” – it also refers to the future, to Isaac's life. We all know that laughter is often the reaction to unexpected events, so we can appreciate the laughter that must have been woven into the very fabric of Isaac's life.

Everything that happened to Isaac was unexpected, beginning with his birth. When Isaac was offered as a sacrifice to God only to be saved at the last minute, Isaac learned that every day is an unexpected gift from God. Isaac's love for Rebekah, a woman he had never met and who was chosen for him, was certainly not expected. Yet, Scripture teaches us, *“So she became his wife, and he loved her; and*

Isaac was comforted after his mother's death” (Genesis 24:67).

Isaac prayed for his wife Rebekah who had not yet borne children. Isaac waited 20 years before his prayer was answered, and then Rebekah unexpectedly had not one, but two sons. Surely, Isaac must have laughed with sheer joy when his twin sons arrived. Later, when there was a famine in Canaan, Isaac headed toward Egypt as his father had done before him, but God told him to stay in the land. Although the land was barren for most in Canaan, Isaac prospered *“a hundredfold”* (Genesis 26:12).

Finally, when Isaac was old and about to bless his sons, his intention was to bless his older son, Esau, with the material blessings of the world while Jacob would receive the spiritual blessing. Isaac had thought that both sons would carry on the covenant that God had promised to him before his birth (Genesis 17:19). But in events Isaac certainly was not expecting, Jacob deceived him and received both blessings. It became clear that Jacob alone would become father to the nation of Israel.

From beginning to end, Isaac's life was filled with an undercurrent of laughter at the unexpected gifts he received. However, when the Jewish sages chose one attribute to describe Isaac, they chose the characteristic of strength. It was Isaac's inner strength that allowed him to overcome life's unexpected challenges with laughter.

Join us in this month's *Limmud* as we take a deeper look at the enigmatic patriarch Isaac, and discover how a life filled with obedience, faith, perseverance, and yes, laughter, allowed him to be a bridge, passing along the covenant given to his father, Abraham, to his son, Jacob, and finally, to us, God's children.

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Strength in Obedience

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

— Genesis 22:9

As previously mentioned, Isaac, the second patriarch in the Jewish Bible, is typically associated with the character trait of strength. Yet, of the three patriarchs, Isaac seems the least likely candidate to exemplify this trait.

Consider that Abraham was a revolutionary as the first monotheist, who refused to conform and who fought against the entire world for the sake of truth. Jacob faced a life of challenges, starting with his twin brother Esau, his epic wrestling match with God's angel (Genesis 32:22-26), his years of labour under his treacherous father-in-law Laban, the death of his beloved wife Rachel, and the agony of believing that his favourite son Joseph was dead.

In contrast, Isaac's life was relatively devoid of such monumental achievements. Isaac was born into a righteous family (Genesis 17:19), never left the land of Canaan, had his wife handpicked and brought to him (Genesis 24), and even prospered during a famine (Genesis 26:1-14). For 180 years, Isaac lived not only a more tranquil life than his father and his son, but also a longer one.

So in what way does Isaac represent strength?

Understanding the Jewish concept of strength will shed some light. The *Talmud* (Judaism's Oral Tradition that was committed to writing) asks: "Who is a strong person? One who has mastered his inclinations." True strength, according to this view, is the ability to control our natural tendencies and desires. In the Christian Bible, self-control is considered a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and is one of the defining characteristics of a church leader (1 Timothy 3:2).

In this way, Isaac was indeed a paragon of strength.

Aside from his birth, the first main event in Isaac's life recorded in the *Torah* can be found in Genesis 22 — Abraham's test from God in bringing Isaac as a sacrifice to Mount Moriah. While we typically focus on Abraham's experience during this difficult test, undeniably, the event was also critical to Isaac's life and spiritual development. Consider that in both Hebrew and in English, this incident is referred to as "The Binding of Isaac," not "The Test of Abraham." Isaac's experience is at least as significant as Abraham's was.

In Genesis 22, Isaac asked his father Abraham, "...where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (v.7). Abraham replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering,

my son" (v.8). It was then that Isaac understood he was the intended sacrifice, yet he did not run away or even protest. On the contrary, the Scriptures record that after Abraham answered Isaac, "*the two of them went on together*" (v.8). Clearly, Isaac was a willing partner in fulfilling God's plan.

Had Isaac not been in agreement with Abraham's intentions, surely there was ample opportunity for Isaac to protest or even fight to escape his plight. Isaac was old enough to go on a three-day journey by foot and to carry the wood for the sacrifice (vv. 3-6). Abraham was well over 100 at this point. Surely, Isaac could have easily overpowered his father.

Isaac was willing to die for God. We read that when the two reached the place where God

told them to go, Abraham "*bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood*" (v. 9). Again, if the younger and stronger Isaac hadn't wanted to be tied up or sacrificed, he could have broken free of his father's grip. Have you ever wondered if Isaac asked to be bound because he was concerned that his instinct to survive might overtake him and cause him to flee when the knife drew close?

Isaac had the ability to change his situation, yet chose not to do so. Isaac's strength was his mastery over his natural inclination for survival and his willingness to be the sacrifice. Isaac acted in total obedience to his father, and in total faith in our Father; he put God's will before his own — even his will to live. Christians find parallels in Jesus' own unflinching obedience to God's will. (See Matthew 26:39; John 10:18.)

In the end, Isaac was not sacrificed. Ultimately, what God desires is our obedience. As the angel of the Lord told Abraham, "*Do not lay a hand on the boy...Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son*" (v. 12).

The prophet Samuel said in 1 Samuel 15:22, "*Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*" (See also Psalm 40:6-8; Proverbs 21:3; Micah 6:6-8).

Obedience like Isaac's requires inner strength. Like Isaac, we must be willing to put God's will before our own — even if we have to make difficult sacrifices in order to do so. When Isaac willingly gave himself to God, he gave us the example to do the same.

*"To obey is better than sacrifice
and to heed is better than
the fat of rams."*

— 1 Samuel 15:22



Strength in Perseverance

So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar, where he settled.

— Genesis 26:17

It's easy to overlook Isaac's story and his part in the foundation of Israel. After all, relatively little is written about him in the Bible. He figures prominently in two of the major incidents of his life, the binding (Genesis 22) and the blessing of his sons (Genesis 27), but in both stories, Isaac plays a subordinate role to the more dominant figures of his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob.

Yet, as we dig deeper into the stories of Isaac's life, we catch glimpses of his unique role and character that can serve as a model for us. For example, in Genesis 25, we read in verse 21 that Isaac's wife, Rebekah, like Sarah, was childless. But Isaac reacts to this situation in a very different way from Abraham and Sarah, who when unable to conceive, devised their own plan to have a child.

What did Isaac do? He prayed. In verse 21, we read, *"Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless."* And in the very same verse, we read, *"The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant."* What is missing between the beginning and end of verse 21 is that 20 years passed from the time Isaac uttered his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant. (See Genesis 25:20; 26.) Twenty years is a long time to wait for an answer to prayer, but not once did Isaac stray from the course. He trusted in God and with extraordinary patience waited upon the Lord.

It is the type of patience that the psalmist hailed in Psalm 27:14, *"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD,"* and that Jeremiah promised would be rewarded, *"The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him"* (Lamentations 3:25). And in the Christian Bible, we read, *"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him"* (James 1:12). There is real strength in that type of patience and perseverance.

Then, in Genesis 26, we read about a famine striking the land. While Isaac intended to go to Egypt to wait out the famine, as Abraham had done, instead he remained obedient to God, who told him to stay in the land of Gerar where *"I will be with you and will bless you"* (Genesis 26:3). And, indeed, while the rest of the country suffered, Isaac prospered. He planted crops *"which reaped a hundredfold"* and became so wealthy that the Philistines who lived there became quite jealous and tried to sabotage God's promise to Isaac (vv. 12-14).

First, they filled in all the wells that Abraham had dug (v.15). Then, they demanded that Isaac leave (v.16). Despite the unjustified hatred toward him, Isaac was undeterred. He simply moved on and continued to prosper, digging well after well. Repeatedly, Isaac's servants located a new well, dug it out, and then the Philistines claimed it as their own.

By the third time Isaac's servants dug new wells, the Philistines understood that Isaac was not going to give up. They left Isaac alone and stopped harassing him. Eventually Abimelech, the king of Gerar, asked for a peace treaty with Isaac, explaining, *"We saw clearly that the LORD was with you"* (Genesis 26:28).

Once again, Isaac's actions provide us with an example of his strength, a model to follow. In the face of challenges, Isaac never gave up. He moved on and moved on again, tried and tried again, until he was successful in achieving his goals. This required commitment, determination, willpower, and inner strength.

Like Isaac, we can also muster the inner strength to persevere when life is difficult. We can choose peace in the face of disappointment, perseverance in the face of opposition, patience in the face of obstacles. Isaac provides us with an example worthy of following, worthy of his role as patriarch to Israel and to all God's children.

think about it...

1. Think about the people in your life. Who do you consider an example of a strong person? Why? What characteristics do you most associate with strength?
2. Does defining a strong person as someone "who conquers his will" change your perception of what it means to be strong? Does it change who you think of as strong?
3. What do you think your God-given role is in revealing the glory of His Kingdom?
4. How do you react when something unexpected happens?
5. How is your life similar to your parents' and grandparents' lives? How is it different? How do these insights inform your life and purpose?



Strength in Faithfulness

This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac.

— Genesis 25:19

The story of Isaac in the Bible will at times seem very familiar, particularly if you have read the story of his father, Abraham. Isaac's life is replete with references and parallels to his father's experiences.

Scripture seems to point us toward this connection starting with the famine in the land of Canaan: "*Now there was a famine in the land — besides the previous famine in Abraham's time*" (Genesis 26:1). As this verse reminds us, both Abraham and Isaac experienced a harsh famine in the Promised Land. Isaac reacted just as his father did and began to head toward Egypt where he could ride out the famine until it was over. However, in Isaac's case, God commanded him: "*Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live*" (Genesis 26:2).

While Abraham found himself in Egypt and Isaac stayed in Canaan, they both faced an identical challenge. Abraham was concerned that the pharaoh might have him killed because of his beautiful wife, Sarah. Isaac was concerned that Abimelek, the King of Gerar (where Isaac and Rebekah had chosen to settle), might have him killed in order to steal away the beautiful Rebekah. Both Abraham (Genesis 20:1-2) and Isaac (Genesis 26:7) solved their dilemma in the same way — by passing their wives off as their sisters.

As noted in the previous section, both patriarchs invested a significant amount of time digging wells and both endured conflicts with the Philistines regarding ownership of the wells. Ultimately, both Abraham (Genesis 21:27) and Isaac (Genesis 26:26-29) formed peace treaties with Abimelek (at his request) and formalized the agreement in the exact same place — Beersheba, "*well of the oath.*"

These parallels between the lives of both patriarchs are not by chance. They reveal Isaac's patriarchal role and provide insight into his character.

In Genesis 25, we read, "*This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac*" (v. 19). It seems redundant, however, to describe Isaac as Abraham's son, and immediately afterward, describe Abraham as the father of Isaac. Surely, either description would have been sufficient in explaining the father-son relationship!

The Bible is teaching us two separate ideas using two similar terms — they are not redundant. The first reference, describing Isaac as Abraham's son, introduces the subsequent verses talking about Isaac's life. The second, seemingly extra reference to Abraham being the father of Isaac is a description of Isaac himself.

First and foremost, Isaac was the son of Abraham, *Yitzhak ben Avraham*. Everything he did throughout

his life was dictated by this identity. Isaac understood that his role was to continue and consolidate the work of his father. Abraham was the innovator, the trailblazer, the dynamic teacher who introduced the idea of one God. But there was no way for Abraham to ensure that his message would continue after his death. Only Isaac, the critical link between the first patriarch and the third, could fulfill that mission.

As biblical scholar Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut wrote in his book, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, "Of the three patriarchs, Isaac's personality is the least clearly defined." Rabbi Plaut calls Isaac "the bridge between Abraham and Jacob, the essential link in the chain of greatness."

Another example of Isaac's inner strength? No doubt he was tempted to make his own unique mark. Surely, it wasn't easy always being in the shadow of his father. Isaac may have been tempted to create a following of his own. Yet, he held himself back because he understood that while Abraham was the initiator of the mission, Isaac was to be the sustainer, ensuring that God's message through Abraham took root and would continue to blossom.

Isaac's strength lay in his ability to reign in his own desires, to work hard on the tasks he had been given, and to walk with God in faith at all times.

apply it...

- 1. LIVE YOUR VALUES.** Ask yourself what you would be willing to sacrifice your life for. Now live with powerful dedication to those very values. (Proverbs 4:26; 1 Corinthians 15:58)
- 2. APPRECIATE EVERY DAY.** When we recognize that each day is a gift from God, we can live with more joy and greater contribution. (Psalm 118:24; Philippians 4:4)
- 3. EXERCISE YOUR INNER STRENGTH.** The New Year is a good time to think about exercising our body to build physical strength. Consider how you can exercise more of your inner strength to become stronger spiritually as well. (Job 17:9; Colossians 1:10-11)
- 4. PUT GOD FIRST.** Like Isaac, we must be willing to put God's will before our own. We may think we know best, but God knows better! (Proverbs 3:5-6; James 4:7-8)
- 5. PASS IT ON.** We must pass down the traditions, teachings, and values of those who came before us, passing along a spiritual legacy. (Deuteronomy 4:9; Ephesians 6:4)