

**In Defense of Yitzchak**  
**By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman**

Of all the Patriarchs, Yitzchak, without question, is the least understood. Avraham, we can all readily appreciate, is the founder of our faith. He recognized Divine unity, and commanded his progeny “to guard the path of Hashem, to do justice and righteousness”, thereby laying the spiritual foundation of our nation. Ya’akov, or Yisrael, is our very name sake, from whose family the basic structure of the Jewish people, the twelve tribes, emerge. The Sages even refer to him as the ‘choicest of the Patriarchs’. Yitzchak, and his contribution, are somewhat harder to define.

Moreover, if one simply measures the sheer quantity of text, one can readily appreciate the significance of the first and third patriarchs. Avraham, who emerges at the coda of Parshat Noach, is the protagonist of the next two Parshiyot, Lech Licha and Vayera, and the beginning of the following Parshah, Chaye Sarah, a massive portion of text spanning some 12 chapters. Yaakov is granted still more real estate, as he emerges in Parshat Toldot, Chapter 25, and remains an essential figure in the text until the very conclusion of the entire Book of Genesis, twenty five chapters later. Yitzchak, by comparison, receives scant attention. There is not a single parshah, with the possible exception of Toldot, in which he is the dominant figure.

Still further, in all of the critical narratives involving Yitzchak, he is not the dynamic subject driving events, but appears to be acted upon, as an object. He is offered by his father as a sacrifice in the *Akeidah* narrative; Avraham’s trusted servant seeks out a wife on behalf of Yitzchak (in stark contrast to Yaakov, who seeks out his own wife in Rachel); Yaakov acts upon his father, and deceives him, in wresting the blessing from Esav.

On this basis, some have concluded that Yitzchak is a weak figure, unequal to the measure of his pioneering father or illustrious son. His actual blindness is understood as symbolic of broader decay and weakness. And yet, it seems to me that this misses the point entirely. No doubt, Yitzchak is inwardly oriented, lacking his father’s charisma or his son’s dynamism. There is less narrative about him in the Torah specifically for this reason- the major project of his life was not in the social arena, in his interactions with others, but in an inner struggle of self-perfection and Divine service.

Yitzchak is twice featured in the Torah engaged in intense prayer, the outward manifestation of an inner life consumed by commitment to the Almighty. He never ceases being the individual who had been prepared to literally be slaughtered in fulfillment of Divine edict. For this reason, the Sages identify him with the virtue of *gevurah*, of inner strength. He alone subjugated even that most fundamental of human drives, for life itself, to Divine service, and this continues to be the *raison d’etre* of his existence.

In this sense, Yitzchak was the perfect man to follow in the footsteps of his trailblazing, charismatic father. Avraham’s contribution could have, and would have, been completely lost

had there not been a Yitzchak to unplug all of the wells, both literal and figurative, that his father had dug but had been subsequently filled. Someone with a larger ego would have sought his 'own' legacy, and been unwilling to constrict himself to reopening his father's wells, and even calling them the very same names which his father had called them. Yitzchak succeeds in consolidating Avraham's groundbreaking contributions, and in simultaneously setting the stage for his dynamic son to begin the process of transforming the family of Abraham into a nascent nation.

In sum, Yitzchak had been prepared to lay down his life at the *akeidah* as part of his father's mission. In the most literal sense, he was not required to do so at the time. But, in a deeper sense, Yitzchak absolutely did dedicate his life to furthering his father's mission, and in so doing, sacrificed whatever personal ambitions he might have otherwise had. The well established rabbinic principle that Yitzchak retained his status as a consecrated sacrifice<sup>1</sup> seems to confirm this reading of his character.

In our extroverted age of celebrity worship, social media, and personal branding, it is no small wonder that Yitzchak is not appreciated. Our society values the reality star, the musician, the politician, the extroverted and outspoken shaper of events and affairs. The quiet, introverted man of *gravitas* whose life is devoted to refining his own character and drawing closer to God is a virtual nonentity in our culture. Yet, perhaps that says more about us than it does about him.

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<sup>1</sup> And thus, for example, was not permitted to descend to leave the Land of Israel. See Rashi to Bereishit 26:2.