

ISAAC BETRAYED AND TRIUMPHANT

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Longman Dictionary: BETRAY: to be disloyal to someone who trusts you so that they are harmed or upset.

"Rabbi Berakhia said, [Isaac] . . . was a child of suffering"
(*Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* 36.4[5]).

Though the phrase "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" is well familiar, it is the lives of Abraham and Jacob that command people's attention. Biblical Isaac is a kind of afterthought. People have difficulty remembering much about Isaac in the Bible, aside from his role at Moriah as the victim in the narrative of the *akedah* [binding] (Gen. 22).

Everett Fox correctly describes Abraham as "a towering figure, almost unapproachable as a model in his intimacy with God and his ability to hurdle nearly every obstacle." Jacob, explains Fox, "emerges as the most dynamic and most human personality in the book" of Genesis. Fox, however, dismisses Isaac as "practically a non-character." He explains that Isaac "has almost no personality of his own."¹

Paul Borgman describes Isaac as "passive," and "never too adept at anything." He muses that "[p]erhaps God takes by the hand those who can't quite cope, but whose heart is fine, though fragile."²

These descriptions damn Isaac with their faint praise. They fail to take note of how much Isaac accomplishes in his lifetime. The horrific trauma Isaac experienced as a lad at Moriah scarred him. That shock notwithstanding, he achieved a tremendous amount in his life; a testament to the might of his inner fortitude and to the strength of his will.

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Isaac is not as venturesome as is Abraham. Nor does he seem to have as close a relationship with God as did his father. In several ways, however Isaac's life echoes that of Abraham:

Each marries a close family member from the old country.

Each achieves fatherhood after a long delay.

Each is involved in a wife/sister episode.

Each is directly involved in sending away his first son (in the case of Esau, a temporary departure), so that the second son receives the patriarchal blessing.

Each travels through the land and prospers.

Each interacts with his neighbors to mutual advantage.

Each outlives his wife. While Sarah's death is specifically mentioned, in the Bible the death of women is rarely noted. Given the relationship of Rebekah and Isaac, the absence of her name at Isaac's burial suggests she predeceased him.

Each is buried by both of his sons.

ISAAC RESILIENT

Isaac is a resilient character. That Isaac was able to survive his father's betrayal as a parent is testimony to the power of his inner spirit. Suddenly and unexpectedly, he had turned from being the beloved child to being the sacrificial lamb. Moments later, Abraham released Isaac because he heard a voice – and it is not at all clear that Isaac also heard that voice – drawing Abraham back from the abyss. Isaac somehow found the way to make some kind of sense of what had happened in Moriah, and have the courage to move on with his life.

The moment on the mountain was terrifying and traumatic. According to a midrash, Isaac, in both fear and desire to please his father, had asked to be bound "for the instinct of life is so strong that when I see the knife coming towards me, I may move compulsively [and have you cut me in a place] that will disqualify me as an offering."³

Following the incident at Moriah, Isaac chooses to separate himself from Abraham. It is likely that he goes to live with Hagar at Beer Leḥai Ro-i, for it is at that locale that he is next seen (24:62 ff.).⁴ Isaac reconnects to his brother Ishmael, and when Abraham dies, they bury him together (25:9).

In his late fifties, Isaac actively entreats God's help, for Rebekah has yet to conceive (25:21). God honors his request, and Esau and Jacob are born.

God addresses Isaac directly and maintains an open connection with him. God promises Isaac a prosperous life (25:11; 26:2 ff.)

In Genesis 26, Isaac moves to Gerar. He sows and reaps in the land. He *grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy* (26:13). He builds up large flocks of sheep, herds of oxen, and a retinue of servants. Enterprisingly, Isaac reclaims wells dug by his father (26:18). These are clear signs of material success. It is clear that Isaac and his retinue are a powerful force with which to reckon, for Abimelech of Gerar seeks a non-aggression pact with him (26:28-29).

Even in his elder years, Isaac makes clear decisions. Just as Abraham had given gifts to his later sons by Keturah, but *willed all that he owned to Isaac* (25:5); so Isaac gave the patriarchal blessing to Jacob, but promised Esau that he too would know blessings, for Esau was to *'enjoy the fat of the earth and the dew of the heaven above'* (27:40).

ISAAC BETRAYED

Yet for all the many deeds Isaac accomplishes in his life, from the perspective of Isaac himself, he is the victim of child abuse. His father takes him to a place in the wilderness, far from home. Abraham literally binds him, places him on an altar, and then raises a knife to slaughter him. Isaac also is the victim of elder abuse. When he is of a goodly age, his son second Jacob willingly seeks to usurp the family blessings, taking advantage of Isaac's failing eyesight.

Our obligation as people who revere the Torah and engage with it seriously, is to read it afresh in each generation. One way to read the Torah is through the eyes of someone who is aware of contemporary thinking when it comes to the areas of child abuse and elder abuse. In today's world, if parents took their child, bound the child, placed the child on an altar, and then lifted up a knife with the full intent to slaughter the child, it would be an example of child abuse. In like manner, if a child willingly sought to take advantage of a parent's lack of sight to gain an inheritance, that in today's world would be an example of elder abuse. Each of these cases would be an abuse of power;

each would be a betrayal of the sacred trust held by those in power over those who hold less power, or are powerless.

Betrayal is a very strong designation and description. It is one of many valid ways to characterize and understand the actions of our biblical ancestors. A range of interpretations is possible when considering their deeds, from the more negative to those which praise their acts. It is not a matter of either/or, but rather of both/and.

To suggest that the honored forebears in the Bible at times acted inappropriately might make readers uncomfortable. Certainly, there is a time-honored tradition to refer to many biblical figures as *tzaddikim* [righteous ones]. Yet a close reading of the text "makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society."⁵

Likewise, while the sages of the Talmudic period often portray the biblical ancestors in a positive light, there are also examples where they offer criticism, for on occasion the "midrash is not hesitant to point out the flaws and weaknesses of the Biblical [heroes]."⁶

CHAPTER 22: BINDING AS BETRAYAL

One day, apparently without warning, God asks Abraham to take his son Isaac to a distant mountain, slay him, and then offer him to God as a burnt offering. It is as direct, and as brutal, as that. *'Take your son . . . Isaac . . . and offer him . . . as a burnt offering'* (22:2).

Abraham does not protest. He does not question God's intent. Rather, the biblical text attests that Abraham rose up early and took Isaac on this fateful journey. Neither on the road to Moriah nor as father and son ascend the mountain is there any indication that Abraham has second thoughts about God's strange request.

Everett Fox highlights this eerie calm:

Most noticeable in the narrative is Avraham's silence, his mute acceptance of, and acting on, God's command. We are told of no sleepless night, nor does he ever say a word to God. Instead he is described with a series of verbs: hurrying, saddling, taking, splitting, arising, going (v. 3; similarly in vv. 6 and 9-10). Abraham the bar-

gainer, so willing to enter into negotiations with relations (Chap. 13), allies (Chap. 14), local princes (Chap. 20), and even God himself (Chap. 18), here falls completely silent.⁷

On the mountain, Abraham lifts his hand, ready to kill his son. He stops only when a voice calls out from heaven telling the Patriarch to desist. A ram suddenly comes into view. Then, Abraham sets the ram on the altar in place of Isaac.

Abraham's actions at Moriah have sparked debate and countless commentaries for centuries. Biblical scholars, philosophers, and religious leaders have sought answers about what he did, and why he did it. They have offered various analyses.⁸ Abraham's moral dilemma, succinctly described, is: What is the correct position of the person of faith?

The Book of Genesis presents us with two contrasting pictures of Abraham. The first is Abraham of Genesis 18, where Abraham argues with God over the approaching destruction of Sodom. Abraham challenges God to spare the righteous, with the striking verse: 'Far it be from you to destroy the righteous with the wicked . . . shall the judge of the entire world not do justice?' This Abraham stands before God with full confidence in the deepest moral convictions, invoking his moral sensibilities to rebuke the creator of heaven and earth. This Abraham asks God to respect his human autonomy and personal integrity. In this picture of Jewish spirituality, the Person of Faith stands upright before God.

The second Abraham is in Genesis 22, Abraham on Mt. Moriah, Abraham of the *akedah*, who in total submission to God's command and in full self-denial goes forth to sacrifice his dearly loved son, Isaac. This Abraham, knowing no autonomous moral truths, sets out to kill an innocent child, because God has told him to. This is the Abraham of the surrender to God. In this picture of Jewish spirituality, the Person of Faith appears bowed before God.⁹

Traditional religious sources, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, praise Abraham as the quintessential person of faith.¹⁰ Abraham so trusted God, he was willing to do whatever God asked of him, even something so terrible and terrifying.¹¹

At no point during this faithful and fateful journey does Abraham challenge God. Abraham never questions if this is truly what God desires. He passively follows what God requested. Whatever happens on the mountain, simply by binding and placing Isaac on the altar, Abraham betrays his son. Genesis 22 begins with the words that *God put Abraham to the test*. In failing to protect his child, in failing to question God, even rebuke God, as Abraham willingly did in Chapter 18, it is clear that Abraham failed this test.

In this parent-child relationship, Abraham holds the position of trust. He is the adult. Power and authority belong to him. The inherent power differential between Abraham as father and Isaac as his child¹² prevents Isaac from challenging his father in any meaningful way.¹³

Abraham appear[s] as the dominant father and Isaac as the archetype of the submissive son . . . Abraham . . . overawes his timid son, whose will to independence may well have been crippled by doting and protective parents In a way all parents seek to dominate their children and are in danger of seeking to sacrifice them to parental plans or hopes.¹⁴

CHAPTER 27: DECEPTION AS BETRAYAL

Genesis 27 is the familiar narrative where Jacob purloins the birthright blessing. Descriptions of this chapter include "Isaac Deceived" and the "Cunning Acquisition of the Blessing."¹⁵ That Jacob intends to deceive his father, that Jacob wishes to acquire for himself the firstborn blessing that technically belongs to Esau, is clear. A surface reading of the text suggests that Jacob's mother Rebekah designs the plan.

The matter is far more complex. A closer reading of the chapter, one that credits Isaac with his full mental faculties despite impaired eyesight, suggests a very different plan is at work. Jacob wants to take advantage of his father's infirmity. Jacob's betrayal plan notwithstanding, Isaac knows that it is his younger son before him.¹⁶ Isaac, in repeated statements, challenges Jacob's actions. Isaac says, '*How did you succeed so quickly?*' . . . '*Come closer that I may feel you my son – whether you are really my son Esau or not*' . . . '*The voice is the voice of Jacob,*' . . . '*Are you really my son Esau?*' . . . '*Come close and kiss me*' (27:20, 21, 22, 24, 26).

There is deception in this chapter but, ironically, Jacob is the one deceived. Jacob was at least 40 years old, unmarried, and giving his parents no indication that he was going to marry, much less marry within the family. He was content to stay at home, among the tents. He would only leave home if forced to go. Consequently, both of his parents *together* arrange a ruse that will force Jacob to seek refuge with his uncle Laban. Isaac works this plan in concert with Rebekah.¹⁷ They have a close and clearly intimate relationship. When, following the deception/theft, Rebekah suggests that Jacob should marry within the family, Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-Aram, Rebekah's place of origin (27:48-28:2). Before Jacob leaves, Isaac presents him with additional blessing. Were Isaac angry at being deceived, had he felt disadvantaged by his wife and son, he would not bless Jacob a second time.

Jacob did not understand that his parents set up this scenario. That fact notwithstanding, Jacob fully intended to betray his father. He took advantage of his position as a trusted figure in Isaac's life. Jacob, according to the text, is at least 40. Isaac is about 100 years old. Isaac is limited in sight. Jacob seeks to *place a stumbling block before the blind* (Lev. 19:14). Jacob is disloyal. He *knowingly* violates his obligations to protect his father. He betrays him. He takes advantage of his position of power as a young and healthy man, to hoodwink someone aged and infirm. Were this set in a modern context, we would label this "elder abuse" or familial betrayal.

CONCLUSION

Though Chapters 28-32 and most of 35 center on Jacob (and a bit on his encounter with Esau, primarily in Chapter 33), the narrative finally returns to focus on Father Isaac. Isaac lives a long and productive life despite several incidents that would have stopped a lesser man. He is not as adventurous as his father and his son Jacob, but that does not deny what he has accomplished. When he dies, Isaac is 180. In an age where longevity was a statement of Divine favor, this is an astounding achievement. It is several years more than the "towering figure" of Abraham. It is more than three decades older than the "dynamic" figure of Jacob. One hundred eighty is not bad number for "practically a non-character." Isaac dies at an age older than any of his immediate clan, or descendants. Sarah dies at 127, Abraham at 175,

Ishmael at 137, Jacob at 147, Joseph at a mere 110, and Moses at 120 (Gen. 23:1; 25:7; 25:17; 47:28, 50:26; Deut. 34:7).

The Genesis narratives, subsequent rabbinic midrashim, countless sermons through the ages, Jewish and Christian alike (and probably Muslim as well), articles and books, and many works of art are devoted to the larger-than-life figures of Abraham and Jacob. Compared to those major personalities, Isaac is a quieter man, less daring and less flamboyant. That Isaac is more reserved, and not as demonstrative, is not a criticism of the man. He is betrayed by his father, and he is betrayed by his son Jacob. He has a difficult life; yet he made the best of it, despite earlier and later traumas. Given his family history, that he accomplished what he did is quite remarkable.

NOTES

1. E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary and Notes* [Schocken Bible, Vol 1] (New York: Schocken, 1995) p. 111. Fox's comments echo Nahum Sarna's description found in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, where Sarna describes Isaac's personality as a "rather pale one" especially since he is "overshadowed . . . by the towering figures of his father Abraham and his son Jacob." N. M. Sarna, "Isaac," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) 9: 4.
2. P. Borgman, Paul, *Genesis: the Story We Haven't Heard*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) pp. 138, 127.
3. *Pesikta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths*. Translated by W. G. Braude (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968) 40.6. In *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Isaac says to Abraham, 'bind me, (and presumably gag me as well) lest in fright I curse you and transgress the commandment to honor father and mother.' *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Translated and Annotated by G. Friedlander (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981) Chap. 31.
4. For a more detailed development of this idea see D. J. Zucker, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Sarah," *Judaism*, (Fall/Winter 2006) 55, No. 3-4:30-39. N. J. Cohen, *Voices From Genesis*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998) pp. 96-97.
5. Judith Plaskow, "Contemporary Reflection," ed. T. C. Eskenazi and A. L. Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, (New York: URJ Press [Union for Reform Judaism] and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008) p. 107.
6. Emily Shapiro, "Approaching the Avot," ATID, 1999. Shapiro raises many of the issues surrounding, and discusses the controversy over, presenting biblical ancestors in a negative light. See www.atid.org/journal/journal98/default1.asp Criticism of biblical ancestors include Reuben's flaws, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*: Rabbi Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days. Translated by W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975) *Piska* 24.9; Abraham's errors, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, *Piska* 11.9; Joseph's immorality, *Babylonian Talmud Sotah* 36b; David and Bathsheba, *Babylonian Talmud, Megillah* 14b; Abraham and Moses' failings, *Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim* 32a. Nahmanides (Ramban) criticizes Sarah ("Sarah our mother sinned" – comment to Gen. 16:6) as earlier he had criticized

Abraham ("Abraham sinned a great sin" – comment to Gen. 12:10.) For an example of how the sages recast Jacob's dark deeds in a positive way, see D. J. Zucker, "Jacob in Darkness (and Light): A Study in Contrasts," *Judaism*, (Fall, 1986) 35, No. 4:402-413.

7. Fox, p. 92. "Abraham, the man who advocates for Ishmael (17:18) and actively negotiates with the Deity for the people of Sodom (18:23-33), is surprisingly silent after receiving the command." T. J. Scheider, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*, in press, p. 101.

8. The literature on the Binding/*Akedah* of Isaac is well known and easily researched. Nonetheless, a recent work compares unlikely sources. J. I. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

9. Gellman, p. 105.

10. Judaism: *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4, 7; *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Piska* 40.6. Christianity: "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac" (Heb 11:17). Cf. Rom 4:3, 13. Islam: "And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands [*kalimat*] which he fulfilled." *Qur'an*, *Surah* 2.124. "Al-Tabari [major commentator on Qur'an, d. 923 CE] understood this verse to refer to the religious requirements of Islam with which Abraham was tested after he demonstrated a steadfast belief in one God." R. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) pp. 108, 165.

11. Though on the face of it, it would appear that he does not die, there are traditions claiming that Abraham slaughtered Isaac on the mountain. In this explanation, Abraham offers Isaac's lifeless body as a burnt offering, and his ashes heaped up on the altar. S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967) p. 4, note 2. Spiegel quotes *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Genesis 22:19. Cf. Rashi on Genesis 22:14; *Leviticus Rabbah* 36.5; *BT Ta'anit* 16a.

12. In several midrashim, the rabbis infantilize Isaac. They claim he is nearly 40, but acts as a young child. The Bible does not specify Isaac's age in Genesis 22. Several times he is termed a *na'ar* [lad] (Gen. 22: 5, 12.) The dialogue between father and son ascending the mountain reflect the words of a grown man with his young child, at best a teenager. In common biblical language, a lad/boy/servant-lad/young man has not yet reached maturity. A lad/*na'ar* certainly is not a man of thirty-seven years. Yet it is just this age of 37 that several midrashim claim is Isaac's age at the Binding/*Akedah*. In suggesting this, these midrashim cast doubts about the fullness of his adulthood on that fateful occasion. Isaac as age 37 is specifically stated in *Genesis Rabbah* 56.8 and *Tanna Debe Eliyyahu: The Lore of the School of Elijah*. Translated by W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981) p. 137, chap. 27 (25) p. 301.

13. For contemporary implications of this misuse of adult power, see D. J. Zucker and B. E Taylor, "Forgiveness is not Always Possible," "The Orchard," UJC Communities, (Fall, 2007) pp. 13-14. www.ujc.org/theorchard.

14. G. Plaut, Editor, D. E. S. Stein, Editor, Revised edition, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary: Revised Edition* (New York: URJ Press, 2006) p. 142.

15. "Isaac Deceived," E. A. Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible*, (New York: Doubleday, 1964) p. 205; "The Cunning Acquisition of the Blessing," G. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia; Westminster 1973) p. 273.

16. Cohen, pp. 105-106.

17. For a more detailed explanation showing that Isaac and Rebekah have colluded to deceive Jacob, see D. J. Zucker, "A Still Stranger Stratagem: Revisiting Genesis 27," *Conservative Ju-*

daism, (Winter, 2004), 56, No 2:21-31. See also D. J. Zucker, "The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27" (forthcoming). *Jewish Bible Quarterly*.