

Isaac: Schlimazel, or Something More?

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In his book *The Joys of Yiddish*, Leo Rosten defines one of the most useful words in our tradition: “When a schlimazel winds a clock, it stops; when he kills a chicken, it walks; when he sells umbrellas, the sun comes out; when he manufactures shrouds, people stop dying” (347).

In the entire Torah, it seems, there is no bigger schlimazel than Isaac.

At the beginning of his life, he’s nearly killed by his father. At the end of his life, he’s deceived by his son. He barely participates in the courtship of his own wife. Isaac is hapless, passive, an eternal victim—the archetypal schlimazel.

That’s why the 26th chapter of Genesis is so fascinating. Sandwiched between Rebecca’s evocative pregnancy plea in chapter 25 and her and Jacob’s “Great Berakhah Caper” in chapter 27, Isaac’s adventure in the land of Gerar is understandably often overlooked. But it actually offers a key to his character: he is not so much defined by his passivity as by his active choices—specifically, his choice not to deviate from his father Abraham’s actions.

Again and again in chapter 26, Isaac follows in Abraham’s footsteps, sometimes literally. Just as Abraham did, Isaac takes his family to the land of Gerar. Just as Abraham did, Isaac tricks King Abimelech into believing that his wife is actually his sister, and eventually establishes with him a peace treaty. Isaac re-opens the exact wells that Abraham first dug—and the Torah is quick to note that Isaac “gave them the same names that his father had given them” (Gen. 26:18). Most importantly, God speaks to Isaac and promises to “bless you and increase your offspring,” like God had done with Isaac’s father before him—though, notably, the blessing is “for the sake of My servant Abraham,” not for anything that Isaac himself has done (Gen. 26:24).

It’s not that Isaac could not escape his father’s shadow. To give Isaac credit as a person with agency, one must assume that he chose to copy his dad because he believed that this was the way, perhaps the only way, to live a holy life—and presumably was vindicated by God’s blessing, which so closely tied Isaac’s reward and legacy to the fact that he was his father’s son, and not that he was his own man.

So it’s no surprise that Isaac would have thought that others should follow precedent as well. This belief was so strong that, according to one midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 65:9), physical suffering did not exist in the world until Isaac pleaded to God that it should be so. “When a person dies without suffering, the attribute of Divine Judgment [rather than Divine Mercy] is placed upon them,” Isaac said. “If You were to bring suffering upon them, the attribute of Divine Judgment would not be placed upon them.”

“You have demanded a good thing,” God replied, “and I will begin with you”—and so God gave Isaac suffering through the blindness that afflicted him in his old age.

Isaac’s belief that earthly suffering leads to eternal rewards is an old one within Judaism (though pushback against that idea is just as old). But while the midrash describes the “first suffering” as being the first example of physical pain or disability, it’s not hard to look at Isaac’s life and conclude that the first historical example of suffering was actually his traumatic experience on the altar, looking up at his father holding a knife to his throat. It makes sense, then, that Isaac, devoted to upholding the burden of history and driven by his belief in having been vindicated by God’s blessing, would have believed that since emotional or physical pain was good for him, it ought to be the standard for everyone else.

In his book *Heavenly Torah*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains how Judaism welcomes diversity of opinion: “Jewish thought is nourished from two sources, and it follows two parallel paths: the path of vision and the path of reason. With respect to those things that are given to objective measurement, reason is primary. With respect to things of the heart, vision is primary Torah can only be acquired in two ways: With reason’s lens *and* the heart’s lens” (707–709, emphasis added). He then quotes from the Talmud: “One who is blind in one eye is exempt from the obligation to go on pilgrimage” (Hagigah 2b).

In other words, the Torah—God’s instructions for how to live an ethical and holy life—can only be understood by using both the head and the heart, by having both reason and vision. Without both, one cannot be expected to have the capability to encounter or understand that which is holy.

In both of these categories, Isaac missed the mark. He did not demonstrate enough intellectual reasoning to realize that he had options beyond those chosen by his father. And his emotional vision was also deficient: he wished for others to have pain just because he experienced it himself—a common sentiment, one that is often expressed in the phrase “hurt people hurt people,” but not one to be emulated. And so ultimately Isaac’s intellectual and emotional blindness was made manifest in his physical blindness—in both eyes, not just one. No wonder that God’s continuation of the covenant with Isaac was nonetheless instead made “for the sake of My servant Abraham.”

What Isaac could not see, even while he still had physical eyesight, was that while Jews are called to uphold the mitzvot and our traditions, we should not be so beholden to them as to inhibit our own individuality—or worse, cause suffering upon others who do not fit the historic mold. When the students of the Hasidic master Reb Zusha found him crying on his deathbed, they asked him, “Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham.” Reb Zusha answered, “When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won’t ask me, ‘Zusha, why weren’t you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham?’ Rather, they will ask me, ‘Zusha, why weren’t

you Zusha?’” Isaac was trying so hard to be Abraham that he nearly failed at being Isaac.

But Judaism also teaches us that everyone, even late in life, is capable of change, and so too is Isaac: when Esau asks him for a blessing to replace the one that Jacob stole, Isaac at first reverts to his pattern of relying on precedent, saying that nothing can be done once the original blessing has been uttered. But then, in response to the tears of his firstborn son, Isaac finally makes an independent choice—listening to both his head and his heart—and offers a blessing nonetheless. It is then, finally, in his last recorded act before he dies, that Isaac leaves behind schlimazel-dom and becomes a patriarch worthy of emulating, an independent and empathetic thinker; to use another Yiddish word: a mensch.