

Toledot 5768 – Family Resemblances

Every so often, I'll wear my hair a certain way, catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and do a double take. Or, I'll do something quirky, like leave the refrigerator door open while I go back and forth grabbing items for dinner. Or, even worse, I'll say something a little too familiar. After each of these occurrences, I'll think, "Oh my God, I have become my mother." This is not a happy realization. Now, let me be clear: I love, admire, and respect my mother a lot. There are, as she might say, worse things in the world than being like someone who has been such an important part of my life. But still, I don't greet this realization with excitement or pleasure.

The truth is, I don't want to be my mother – I want to be myself. I am perfectly comfortable with the fact that many of my core values came out of the way I was raised. And I understand that it would have been impossible for me to live with my mother for 18 years and not absorb any of her personality, world outlook, or mannerisms. At the same time, especially as someone who has in

many ways struck out on a path very different from my mother's, I want to have my own unique take on the world. I want to know that I am wholly myself. I want to feel confident that the story of my life is my own story.

Our parasha this week, *Parashat Toledot*, begins on just this kind of independent note. ואלה תולדות יצחק בן אברהם [*V'eleh toledot eleh toledot Yitzhak ben Avraham*], "This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham."

With these words, the Torah tells us that we are about to read about the life of Isaac. However, as we read through the parasha, we begin to feel a sense of *déjà vu*, a sneaking suspicion that we've seen much of this before. And in fact, we have.

First, we see that Isaac, son of Abraham, marries a woman who has trouble conceiving. You may recall that Sarah, Isaac's mother, his father's wife, suffered from the same problem. Next, when Rebecca does become pregnant, God speaks to her, prophesying that her younger son will rule over the elder. Isaac, the younger son who carried on God's blessing, will be the father to a younger son who

will carry on God's blessing. Nonetheless, Isaac favored his elder son, just as Abraham cared for Ishmael.

As the story progresses, the similarities become even more stark. In Chapter 26, Isaac leaves his home, going off in search of food during a famine. While the Torah makes sure to tell us that this famine was different from that his father experienced, Isaac's sojourn feels eerily familiar. He goes down to the land of the Philistines, to Gerar, a place where Abraham spent some time some 75 years earlier, to seek food from their king, Avimelekh, who either is, or has the same name as, the king of Gerar who hosted Abraham. What happens next is even more shocking. Fearing for his life, concerned that the men of Gerar might kill him and take Rebecca, his exceedingly beautiful wife, Isaac passes her off – as his sister. This situation should have been familiar to Avimelekh – when Abraham and Sarah were in Gerar, Abraham also feared for his life on account of Sarah's beauty, and passed her off as his sister. Here, we might understand Isaac as somehow constitutionally like his father –

replicating his father's behaviors from before he himself was even born.

Isaac's story continues to follow his father's trajectory. After leaving Avimelekh's land, he settles nearby, in an area where Abraham before him had settled. He then re-digs his father's wells, giving them the same names his father had. Later, he goes to Be'er Sheva, and makes a pact with Avimelekh. The Torah then records that the name of the place was Be'er Sheva. This exact same course of events took place before, with Abraham, in Chapter 21 of *Bereishit*.

The similarities between Isaac and his father go beyond their shared taste in women, wandering, diversion tactics, and land. An often-repeated *midrash* explains that they even looked alike. Lest people be concerned about the veracity of Abraham and Sarah having a child at such advanced ages, the *midrash* records that God made certain that Isaac's face looked exactly like his father's. Whenever anyone saw Isaac, they would say, "אברהם הוליד את יצחק," the conclusion of our parasha's first verse, "Abraham begot Isaac."

Both in deed and in appearance, then, Isaac was really living his father's life.

We might look at all this and feel that it's not so terrible for Isaac to be so much like his father. There are, after all, worse things than leading a life that mirrors that of our first Patriarch, Abraham who loved and was loved by God. Usually, however, we tend to look at Isaac's inability to forge his own path as a weakness. Isaac is our lowest profile patriarch. Though he wanders, he never leaves the land of Israel, like his father or son did. Moreover, when he does wander, it seems to be in an attempt to avoid conflict and confrontation. He is the same man who, later in our own parasha, will allow himself to be duped into giving his younger son the blessing reserved for the elder. One of my students asked me last Shabbat, "Why doesn't Isaac **do** anything?" We read *Parashat Toledot* and see Isaac as passive, a victim of the active world around him.

As Jews, and certainly as Americans, we value individuality. We look to our biblical ancestors, and laud them for their unique

strengths and contributions. If all Isaac did was “re-do” his father’s life, what was his contribution?

What makes Isaac unique is that he followed in his father’s footsteps. He was the first to be able to do so – this is his contribution. Rada”k, Rabbi David Kimḥi, the 12th and 13th century Provençal commentator, notes that, yes, when everyone saw how much Isaac physically resembled his father, they would remark “אברהם הוליד את יצחק” [*Avraham holid et Yitzḥak*], “Abraham begat Isaac.” Rada”k adds, though, that Isaac, just like his father, was upright, trustworthy, kind to people, and on a good path. This similarity between the two men would also lead those who met Isaac to comment, “אברהם הוליד את יצחק” [*Avraham holid et Yitzḥak*], “Abraham begat Isaac.” Isaac was the first of our patriarchs to be able to follow in the traditions of his father – he was our first heir. And this is how, finally, we can see that he is not entirely like his father, that he has his own identity. Abraham first encountered God as an adult. Breaking from his ancestral traditions, literally leaving his father’s house, every practice, from prayer to circumcision, was

new. Isaac, on the other hand, was the first in the Torah to enter into the covenant at birth, to be circumcised at eight days of age, the first to grow up knowing God's presence. He was the first to carry on his father's traditions, indeed the first to have traditions that bore repeating.

Carrying on traditions is something we know lots about. Our traditions, whether communal or family-based, make us distinctive, and engender a sense of continuity, a feeling of connectedness to those who came before us. Isaac's traditions, the traditions of his father, have over time become our own. If it were not for Isaac's steadfast commitment to following in Abraham's ways, we might not be able to see how essential it can be to link ourselves to our predecessors. Rather than being a passive victim, a mirror image of his father, Isaac instead is a real leader, teaching us, as members of the Jewish community, to value the power and import of our tradition.

Shabbat Shalom.