

Parshat Chaye Sarah:

Even a simple person can be a hero

I remember that when I was in School I was asked to read Hemingway's book "The Old Man and the Sea". When I read it I was impressed by the image of that old, lonely and humble man struggling to arrive to the shore with the big fish he has caught. Different circumstances tried to prevent him from doing it and finally he could come back only with some remains of the fish, but even though he showed an impressive commitment and decided not to give up, no matter how difficult it was for him. The message of the book, I think, is about the heroism of ordinary people trying to make what life demands from them in a world that doesn't always make it easy; people that sometimes are unable to do it but never fail to make the effort.

So today I want to speak with you about that message: How simple people can show extraordinary courage, devotion and generosity. Specifically I want to speak about Isaac. I really think Isaac was what we can call a "simple person": He was not so remarkable as his father Abraham and not as his son Jacob.

He didn't leave any deep mark in the history of our people at least as a main character. It is true that we remember him because of the Akeda, his almost sacrifice, but we remember him for being passive and almost absent, so absent as when he was deceived by Rivka, his wife, and Jacob his son, in the last years of his life.

However, even not being Isaac the typical biblical hero, I am convinced he was an extraordinary person. He was a man with remarkable values, goodness and generosity, probably even more values than the ones showed by his close relatives, according to the biblical text. I think it is possible to know Isaac from that human point of view taking into account two different moments, actions or relationships in his life:

The first one is when Isaac was escaping from the famine in Canaan and they went to live temporarily in a place called Gerar. There Isaac was received by the King who in some moment of the story looked through the window inside Isaac's house, and "*Ve Hine Itzhak Metzachek et Rivka*". The meaning of that verse is complicated. Some traditional commentators give, let's say, an "R-rated" interpretation of what "*metzachek*" means, but the most simple and literal

meaning is that the King of Gerar looked inside Isaac's house and "he saw that Isaac was making his wife Rivka to laugh." And nobody else in the Bible did that! There is nowhere else in the Bible a description of someone trying to make somebody else feel good by making his wife laugh. We don't know the reason for the laugh, but we can see an Isaac who cared about the feelings of his wife.

The second time is when we check Isaac's attitude toward his wife's infertility, a very repetitive theme in the Bible. You know that many important women in the Bible were not able to have children, and only after receiving God's blessing they could fulfill their greatest desire of being mothers. It is very interesting that we tend to pay attention only on how those women reacted to their infertility but we don't devote too much energy to see how their husbands reacted. Incredibly, from all of them, Isaac should receive a special prize:

The first husband with an infertile wife was Isaac's father, Abraham. As you know, Sara was desperate and saw no other option more than giving Agar, her servant, to her husband. And how Abraham responded to that proposal? He said "That's a great idea!" and went to have children with Agar, provoking resentment and jealousy on Sarah's part to the point where she forgot it was her idea and she expelled Hagar and her son Ishmael out of the house to an unknown future.

Then we have Jacob. He married two sisters, Rachel and Leah. Rachel was infertile and only Leah could have children. In a particular moment of desperation Rachel said to Jacob: "*Hava li banim, ki im ayin metah anochi*" - "Please give me children because if not, what is the purpose of being alive". Rachel was not blaming Jacob for her infertility: She was absolutely hopeless. And pay attention on how he reacted: The Torah says "*Vayichar af Yaakov b'Rachel, Vayomer: Hatachat Elohim Anochi?*" Jacob got angry with her and said: "What do you want from me? I'm not God!" Clearly, Jacob did not understand his wife's feelings and he that's why he gives that answer.

And now the best of the reactions: There was a woman called Hanna who after being blessed by God was the mother of Samuel the prophet. But much before that she also was infertile and she suffered many years for not having children. In one moment of deep sadness, Elkana, her husband who perfectly knew what was happening to her and the reason of her sadness, approached to her and said:

“Why are you sad - *Halo Anochi tov lach me’asarah banim?* “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” When we read the classical commentaries on that story, most male commentators praise Elkana for trying to comfort his wife and every female commentator without exception criticizes him saying “what a silly man!! He thought he was going to comfort her saying “If you already have me, what else could you want in life?”

But, what happens with Isaac? How he reacted to the infertility of his wife Rivka? Whitouth even been asked by his wife, the Torah tells “*Vaye’etar Yitzhak LAdonai l’nochach ishto ki akarah hi*” - Rivkah was childless and Isaac prayed for her, and she conceived.”

The anonymous Isaac, the one passive and without charisma, he was the only one who cared about making his wife laugh, listening to her even the words she wasn’t speaking. He was the only biblical figure for whom his wife’s feelings seemed as important as his own.

Isaac was that type of human being who does not show their greatness in public. He was an outstanding person, showing his values and virtues in his personal relationships and the way he cared about other people. Maybe he was quiet and passive, maybe it’s difficult for us to find his place within the patriarchs, but he gave us a model of heroism which is not so easy for us to recognize: The heroism of simple people with ordinary problems showing extraordinary courage, devotion and generosity.

Isaac gave us enough lessons to learn and reasons to be proud of him. Let’s ask God His blessing so we can try to follow his example.

Shabbat Shalom,
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