

Parshat Chayei Sarah – Ensuring Jewish continuity

November 9, 2012

We have been reading in the Torah the stories of Abraham and Sarah, who were the founders of the Jewish people, and this week the attention moves from our first patriarchs to the second generation. Interestingly, Isaac is the most shy and quiet of our forefathers. We can say that his place within the patriarchs is similar to the one that occupies the typical middle child of a family: Low profile and almost unnoticed.

According to the Torah, Isaac's life is peaceful and without any major adventure: He did not have to leave his home country and never fought a war. He is also the only patriarch whose name was never changed. The Torah has a lot of stories about Abraham and more so in the case of Jacob, but hardly we will find great stories about Isaac as the main character. He is mostly the son of Abraham and the father of Jacob.

If we take on account those facts we should ask ourselves: Which were Isaac's merits which made him to be considered as one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people? What were his virtues which motivated our sages to see on him a protagonist of the history of our people?

About him the Torah will tell us later only one thing: *“And Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them”*.

Genesis 26:18.

Isaac reopened the wells of waters that belonged to his father Abraham and which were dried by the Philistines. What is the meaning and lesson we can learn from this brief and strange story?

For our sages of the Midrash, water is a symbol that represents Torah and the importance of tradition in our lives (Shir Hashirim Rabba). If we take on account that symbolism and apply it to Isaac, we can learn that our second patriarch dug the wells from Abraham's time because he understood that the job of finding the value of Torah and tradition is something he should do by himself. Abraham's spiritual quest, which led him to become the founder of the Jewish tradition, does not release his son Isaac to have to take on his own search.

Isaac decided to dig, looking for meaning in life, as every generation have to search for what is transcendent and important for it. Sometimes we act wrongly thinking that our children will automatically inherit from us the meaning we have found in Judaism. Maybe they can inherit practices, traditions, and also beliefs, but passion, meaning and real commitment is something that comes only after a personal search: Nobody can walk that way instead of us.

Isaac decided to look for water but did it not anywhere: First of all he searched where others already founded it. Probably if he would have looked for in other places he would have found water too. But he decided to do the search, first of all, taking on account the tradition he inherited from his father. Maybe that was his virtue: He wasn't a charismatic person, nor a great leader, but he was able to receive a tradition, making it his own, finding meaning in it, and finally transmitting it to his son Jacob.

Isaac's greatest virtue was assuring Jewish continuity. Isn't it a virtue we should also try to achieve?

Shabbat Shalom!

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