

Every Rosh Hashanah, every Jewish New Year we are invited once again to wade into one of the most provocative and disturbing stories in all of the Torah, Akedat Yitzchak -- the binding of Isaac. So, what is there for us in this story?

For a number of years now, I have been thinking more and more about Isaac, clearly the most enigmatic of the three Patriarchs. In so many of our blessings, we call upon our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And thankfully, in recent times, we include in our blessings, the Matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah.

Among our spiritual fathers, Abraham is the trailblazer, the boundary crosser, and along with Sarah, a founder of Judaism. There are so many narrative stories: rich, compelling, provocative sacred stories about Abraham. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, is also a remarkable character. He struggles with his brother Esav, and makes off with Esav's birthrite; he falls in love with Rachel, is tricked into marrying her sister Leah, and then ends up marrying Rachel as well and on and on. These two are classic role models. With all of their flaws they are larger than life, sources of inspiration.

But what of Isaac? He is radically different than the two other Jewish Patriarchs, Abraham, his father and Jacob, his son.

There is so much chaos going on around Isaac, he tends to be overlooked. In many ways he seems almost invisible. He literally disappears after the near death experience at the hands of his father in the story we read on Rosh Hashanah.

When I truly focused on Isaac, pulled together all of the verses that mention him in the Torah, a picture emerged that was quite stunning. Isaac is a miracle baby. He is born to Sarah after she has given up ever hoping for a child and is felt to be considerably past child-bearing years. She even names him, Yitzchak, which comes from the word for laughter. She says, "God has made a mockery of me, giving me a child at such an old age, everyone who hears about it will laugh at me."

The great medieval Torah interpreter, Rashi, thinks that Sarah's laughter signified joy, but the Torah Scholar Onkelos, joins the ranks of other sages who said her reaction was of ridicule.

She certainly seems bitter to me. Why would a woman who has waited all of her life to have a child, has suffered through infertility, be bitter when she finally bears a child? Wouldn't we expect her to be deliriously happy? Why isn't she celebrating and jubilant? What would cause a woman, who gives birth at an advanced age, to be bitter and despondent? Could it be that there was something wrong with the baby? Could it have been that Isaac was born developmentally disabled?

The next big event, is of course, the deeply disturbing text of Rosh Hashanah, the near sacrifice of Isaac. Many commentators understand this text as a cautionary tale against child sacrifice. However, we do know that the most common cause of child sacrifice in

the ancient world was when children were seen to be unhealthy or disabled. It was felt that their chance of survival was poor and few families could afford the burden of a child who was compromised in this way. What if Abraham, went up on that mountain to do what other parents did who had disabled children? Maybe he was going to end Isaac's life and in the primitive thinking of the ancient world, spare everyone a lot of misery.

In this story, Isaac, is not a little boy. He is, at best, overly obedient, if not simple. He asks his father, "Father, where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham responds, "God will provide us the lamb." How is it that Isaac allows himself to be bound on the altar? When exactly does it dawn on him that he IS the sacrifice? And why doesn't he get it sooner, and why doesn't he protest.

How much more powerful does this story become if Abraham looked into the eyes of his son, and decided to brook the contemporary convention and save this special young person?

If we maintain this thesis, we can much better understand why Isaac is the only one of the Patriarchs who doesn't find a wife on his own. Abraham has to send his chief steward, Eliezer, to go to his ancestral village, Nachor in Mesopotamia, to find a wife for Isaac from among his own kinsmen. Why would this be? Maybe Abraham understood that Isaac wasn't capable to find a wife on his own.

Both Abraham and Jacob undergo name changes, Avram becomes Avraham when circumcision becomes the sign of the covenant between God and Israel. Jacob becomes Israel when he wrestles with the angel during his own dark night of the soul. Each of these Patriarchs undergoes significant transformations, large shifts in identity. Isaac, remains Isaac and undergoes no essential growth or change. Even more significantly, unlike his father and son, he achieves no meaningful accomplishments during his lifetime.

We move forward to Isaac's final scene. Isaac has decided to bestow the mantle of leadership on his son Esav. He asks him to hunt some game and prepare one of his favorite feasts. Then Isaac would bestow his blessing, pass on the family inheritance to Esav. Meanwhile, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, overhears this and enlists Jacob, Esav's younger twin in a plan to deceive Isaac and steal the inheritance.

Why does Rebekah feel the need to manipulate Isaac? Why does she seem to treat him like such a child? Perhaps this is the way she had grown accustomed to taking care of business when in a patriarchal culture, her husband was limited. The story of the theft of the blessing takes on a whole different feel if one considers that Isaac was not merely old and going blind, but the impairment was greater than just his sight.

The story of a son, under the guidance of a mother, feeling the need to fool a disabled father in order to obtain the mantle of leadership of the next generation evokes such profound pathos. It is no longer so challenging to understand why Isaac doesn't

comprehend what is going on. When Jacob makes off with the inheritance, and Esav returns and asks for the blessing the scene is even more heartbreaking. In Genesis 27:32, Isaac asks, “Who are you?”

Esav replies, “I am your first-born son, Esav.”

Then it says, “Isaac was seized by a violent fit of trembling. Who . . . where . . . is the one who trapped game and just served it to me? I ate it all before you came and I blessed him. The blessing will remain his.” After Esav lets out a wounded howl from the depths of his soul and pleads for his own blessing, the confused Isaac replies, “Where . . . what . . . can I do for you my son? And yet, he finds a way to console his bereft son and offers him a blessing as well.

So, why have I subjected you to this challenging interpretive path?

When I imagine that one of our great forefathers was damaged, my appreciation of our spiritual tradition grows enormously. It is easy to have role models like Abraham and Jacob. But Isaac, is an essentially different kind of role model. Isaac is the one almost disposed of, nearly sacrificed. And yet, he perseveres. With all of his limitations, his woundedness, he marries and raises two children. He affirms life from his place of woundedness.

Maybe this is why Isaac loves Esav so much. Maybe he does know that Jacob is to inherit the mantle, but feels deeply Esav’s pain and rejection and does all that he can to soothe and comfort him.

Perhaps we are meant to return to this story every year on Rosh Hashanah not only because of Abraham’s last minute decision not to sacrifice Isaac, but, because we learn that Isaac, who was disadvantaged to begin with, was able to overcome this horrific experience and make a life.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, we understand that all of us carry our past with us and some scars remain forever -- the scars of an abused child . . . the vestiges of pain from a failed marriage . . . the sense of failure from an economic reversal . . . the sadness we bear from the loss of loved ones.

Imagine Isaac retaining a connection to God after almost being sacrificed to his father’s distorted sense of God. Ironically, while it is his son, Jacob, who becomes Israel, which means God wrestler, perhaps it is Isaac who creates the more enduring legacy of wrestling with a relationship with God in the face of adversity.

On Rosh Hashanah, we learn from our forefather and teacher, Isaac, that one doesn’t have to be a trailblazer or a charismatic leader like an Abraham or a Jacob. Our most precious contributions can be simply going on after tragedy, living with our childhood scars without allowing them to overcome us; imparting sacred values to our children by setting an example with our own lives.

A Chasidic master, Reb Tzaddok Ha’Cohen of Lublin taught, “Through the very quality in which one is lacking or wounded, by that very quality one finds one’s unique gift or strength.” So it is with Isaac.

Isaac is, as Elie Wiesel describes him, the consummate survivor. In his loving naivete, he trusted his father and was betrayed by him. He got up off that altar on which his blood might have been shed, and he didn't give up on loving and caring. This is not something that comes from a weakness or deficiency of character. This is a spirit that is so large, so amazing that this is a part of our legacy as a people.

There is a midrash, a commentary, that we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah to remind God of the Akedah, of this story. To remind ourselves that we all have damaged parts. Our challenge is to see them, recognize them, own them, and appreciate that claiming our limitations does not have to stop us from leading a life of meaning. I believe that being able to see our own woundedness is the key to living a meaningful life.

Isaac's soul is the Jewish soul. It is the soul that fights through the deepest pain, the most profound disappointment, the worst betrayal imaginable and it still throbs with love and compassion. On this Rosh Hashanah, 5770, may we be nourished by the possibility that our ancestor Isaac had enormous challenges, and that he remained a loving and caring soul. May we be supported and encouraged to embrace our most profound challenges and limitations and know that we can live a life of purpose and still experience love and being loved.