

# THE NATION OF ISAAC

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In Genesis 13 chapters have stories dealing with Abraham, eight with Jacob, and in 13 Joseph is the focus. Yet only one chapter deals with Isaac alone. From the paucity of “Isaac only” stories, we might think that he is not a significantly important figure in his own right. He is just a bridge between his father Abraham and his son Jacob. However, the structure of the Torah indicates otherwise.

The Book of Genesis is broken up into sections that contain chiasmic or similar structures. For example, the story of Abraham begins with the divine command *Lekh Lekha* (“Go forth!”) (Gen. 12:1) and his last major story, the Akedah, also begins with *Lekh Lekha* (Gen. 22:2). There are other parallel elements as well – Sarah being taken by Pharaoh and Abimelech, Hagar being expelled twice and more. One of the principles of chiasms is that the middle story is the central element and provides the key to understanding all the preceding and subsequent stories in that structure.

We can view the entire Book of Genesis as a chiasm, with these five sections providing this structure:

A. Chapters 1-11: The Primeval Stories of Humanity. Starting with the creation of the world and ending with Tower of Babel, these stories are universal in nature. God deals with humanity as a whole.

B. Chapters 12-25: Stories of Abraham. God begins a relationship with a particular individual, Abraham, and so moves from Universal to the Particular. Abraham too moves from the imperial Mesopotamia to the small land of Canaan.

C. Chapter 26: The Isaac stories – purely Particular, as Isaac never leaves the land.

B’ Chapters 27-35: Stories of Jacob – he moves from Particular to Universal. Jacob reverses Abraham’s journey and goes back from Canaan to Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup>

A' Chapters 37-50: Stories of Joseph – these can be viewed as Universal stories, as the famine affected the entire world of the biblical characters, with Joseph and Pharaoh providing sustenance to all.<sup>2</sup>

Based on this model Isaac appears to be the focal point, making him the pivotal character of Genesis. The most important, not the least. But why? Perhaps Genesis was actually supposed to end with Isaac.<sup>3</sup>

Consider that at the beginning of chapter 12, God promises Abraham the land and a nation. Why could it not have simply ended with Isaac being the son to found that nation, with no various stories of children breaking off, and no time spent outside the land? In the end, it does not work out that way, and the overall structure of Genesis seems to indicate that this was a failure, as the book ends up with this promised nation in exile in a foreign land.

We can understand that the reason the Isaac story is so short is to show us the story that could have been. Such a brief chapter makes us long for the story that was never told. Had things not gone wrong, the Isaac story would have been the rest of the book.

This is reminiscent of the midrash that discusses how the story of Joseph might have turned out differently:

R' Isaac said: The Torah teaches us the proper way to act (*derekh eretz*). When a person does a mitzva, he should do it wholeheartedly. For if Reuben had known that God would write about him *Reuben heard and rescued (Joseph) from their hands* (Gen. 37:21), he would have picked up Joseph on his shoulders and carried him back to his father. (*Leviticus Rabba* 34:8)

Had Reuben understood how history would play out, how the Torah would eventually be written, he might have prevented the unfolding calamity. Here too, perhaps had different choices been made, the promise of a nation in its land could have been fulfilled without interruption.

What exactly triggered the decline? There seem to be two possible causes, which are related to each other.

One cause is that during the famine, Abraham decided to go to Egypt. As Ramban says, this is the ultimate cause of the slavery in Egypt:

Also his going out from the land - of which he had been commanded at the beginning - due to famine, was a transgression that he committed, because God would have saved him from dying (even) in a fam-

ine. And because of this deed it was decreed that his seed would be in exile in Egypt under the hand of Pharaoh. (Ramban, Gen. 12:10)

God had just promised the land to Abraham, and Abraham could (or should) have had the necessary faith to stay in the land.<sup>4</sup>

The second cause is Abraham taking Hagar, leading to the birth of Ishmael. If Abraham had complete faith in God, he would have relied on God to provide a child through Sarah. R. Yonatan Grossman writes

God's promises and the development of the Abraham cycle both indicate that the birth of Abram's son is destined at a specific time. Although if at this point the reader does not know why the fate of Abram's family must be delayed, there is a sense that Sarai's initiative might harm the planned sequence of Abram's history. One might say that the story interrupts God's plan. The following chapter (Gen. 17:19) reveals that Abram and Sarai's joint son will be the one to inherit Abram's covenant. To this end, their son will have to be born in a miraculous way, when Abram and Sarai are too old to have a child naturally. The birth of Ishmael does not advance the divine process; in fact it disturbs its complete realization.<sup>5</sup>

These two stories are connected. Abraham descends to Egypt, and Hagar comes from Egypt (he very possibly acquired her there). And in the end of Genesis, the family of Abraham gets stuck in Egypt. The mighty empire of Egypt here represents the universal. By introducing a universal element into what was intended to be a “particular” relationship, Abraham ultimately sets the course for his family to leave the particular and return to the universal in Egypt.

It is important to note that the question of faith is a difficult one. What is the proper way of show faith and exert effort? Without being told explicitly, which is preferable: to stay in the land despite the famine, or leave for Egypt to get food? To continue to try to have a child with Sarah or try with Hagar? How is this dilemma meant to be resolved? The answer can be found in the contrast between Abraham and Isaac.

Genesis does not ever mention Abraham praying for Sarah to have children. Yet we know that Abraham was capable of prayer – he prayed for Sodom and Abimelech. Nevertheless, he did not pray for the cessation of Sarah’s barrenness. Rather, he tried adoption (Lot) and using a concubine (Hagar).

In contrast, the Bible reports that Isaac prayed. *Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren* (Gen. 25:21). This prayer was unique to Isaac. Even Isaac's son Jacob didn't pray in similar circumstances.

When Rachel saw that she was barren, she complained to Jacob. But Jacob apparently didn't seem to realize that prayer was an option: *When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?"* (Gen 30:1-2).

What was the difference between Isaac on the one hand, and Abraham and Jacob on the other? The difference was that Isaac did not believe he had an alternative. Abraham and Jacob both left the Land of Israel. Certainly, they both knew the significance of the land, but the difficult situation caused them both to leave. However, Isaac, despite the famine and other troubles, never left the land. He had no alternative.

Similarly, Abraham and Jacob both had other wives and concubines. Isaac was the only one of the Patriarchs that never married another woman. He was completely dedicated to Rebecca. R. Hirsch notes that Isaac must have known that he would have children since God promised Abraham that *for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you* (Gen. 21:12). But because of his dedication to Rebecca, Isaac would not consider another choice. Prayer was the only option.

Why is the lack of an alternative so important here? It has to do with how we view relationships. If the goal of the relationship is to accomplish something external, then an alternative land or spouse can be found. But if the relationship itself has value, then the solution must be found within its confines. Therefore, Isaac needed to stay and deal with the famine in the land, and remain with Rebecca despite her barrenness. And that is why he was the only one to pray in that situation. It was the only choice left. Understanding that a relationship requires exclusivity and particularity is the key to the ultimate health of that relationship.

The choices of Abraham and Jacob, while certainly understandable and even logical, did not demonstrate the faith and commitment that Isaac had

both to the land and to his wife. Isaac's one chapter describes how he stayed in the land during a famine, unlike his father.<sup>6</sup>

Isaac also shows greater commitment in chapter 26 to Rebecca than Abraham did with Sarah in Egypt. R. Amnon Bazak points out that Sarah was taken by both Pharaoh and Abimelech, but it never says that Rebecca was taken.<sup>7</sup> Why? Because Isaac did not give up on her as fast. Abraham told the Egyptians and Philistines that Sarah was his sister, *As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are... please say that you are my sister'* (Gen. 12:11-13); *While he was sojourning in Gerar, Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister'* (Gen. 20:1-2). But Isaac only said so when asked, at the last minute, when it was absolutely necessary: *When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' for he was afraid to say 'my wife'* (Gen. 26:7).

This chapter is full of faithfulness both to the land and to Rebecca, and that faithfulness paid off in the end. The story of Isaac (in this chapter) is one of prosperity and abundance. The faithfulness of Isaac was the story that could have, should have, been.

Had Abraham acted like Isaac, the story might have ended with the birth of Isaac and the founding of the nation in land. But in the end, these two parallel paths of a) descent to Egypt, and b) choosing one son over his brother (which we see repeat throughout the book) eventually led to a descent to Egypt and the reset of the Genesis story.<sup>8</sup>

A reset was necessary because in this particular relationship between Abraham and God, the expectations were not made fully clear. The words *emuna* and *he'emin* are today identified with belief, to believe that something exists. But certainly Abraham knew that God existed, since God spoke to him. For Abraham to have *emuna* in God meant not that he thought that God exists, but rather that he *relied* on God. He showed God *neemanut*, faithfulness. He relied upon God and God could rely upon him. This is the key to a successful relationship. Abraham progressed from the difficult days of the descent to Egypt and taking Hagar, to the full *emuna* shown at the Akedah, relying upon God even in defiance of logic. He relied upon God even though the result of following God would mean an annulment of the original promise. Isaac, as a participant in the Akedah saw and learned from this later Abraham. This is the *neemanut* that Isaac showed throughout his life to both Rebecca and the

Land of Canaan. He understood that in relationships based on dedication, no alternative to the relationship need be sought.

However, despite the successes of Isaac, through Abraham's earlier actions the die was cast.<sup>9</sup> The later stories of Genesis lead to the descent to Egypt, and it would seem that God's experiment with particularity, with one family, had, at the end of Genesis, ended in failure. Abraham's family was about to be swallowed up and disappear in Egypt, who replaced the empire of Babel in Abraham's time – building huge buildings, utilizing slaves, etc. If we stopped reading the book here, we would think that we had returned to the days of Tower of Babel.

However, the story does not end with the conclusion of Genesis. What do we have following this end? Another *Lekh Lekha*. God once again takes out His covenantal partner from an empire – first with Abraham (*I took you out of Ur Kasdim*, Gen 15:7) and now with Moses (*I took you out of the Land of Egypt*, Ex. 20:2).

Why would this be different? Why would this not end up like Genesis again? Because this time, the covenant of *neemanut* included actual laws and mitzvot. Abraham decided on his own to go to Egypt and take Hagar, without consulting God. This time, however, it would be different.

After leaving Egypt, the nation of Israel received the Torah. The giving of the Torah was the restoration of the covenant between Abraham and God. But this time, the covenant would not just speak about promises, but include obligations, mitzvot, fulfilling God's expectations.<sup>10</sup> If Israel would keep those mitzvot, then they will be God's treasure (*segula*) among all the nations, as stated just before the giving of the Torah: *Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession (segula) among all the peoples.* (Ex. 19:5). The Sinai covenant is a return to particularity, to *segula*, but it is conditional on following the laws that God gave. Acting like Isaac, showing God full *neemanut*, allows the Jewish People to be rewarded by living as Isaac lived, *Now at last the Lord has granted us ample space to increase in the land* (Gen. 26:22).

#### NOTES

1. Notably missing from this structure is Chapter 36 – the chronology of Isaac's son Esau. The Torah details at length Esau's descendants and their reign in Seir. As J. Grossman points out (*Jacob: The Story of a Family*, Rishon Letzion: Yediot, 2019, pp. 477-497), Esau, by marrying

the local inhabitants of the land, eventually becomes indistinguishable from them. While Isaac hoped that Esau would continue his legacy, this chapter shows that Esau reversed of the focus on particularity of the rest of his family.

2. A linguistic parallel between the first and final chapters of Genesis can be found in the use of the phrase *upon all the earth* [*al pnei kol haaretz*] in Genesis 1:29 (regarding the food God provides to Adam), Genesis 8:9 (when after the flood the dove could not find food), and Genesis 11:4 in the story of Tower of Babel. The very similar phrase *al kol pnei haaretz* appears in Genesis 41:56 describing the famine Joseph's time that was "over the whole world." As we will see later, there are other similarities as well between the Tower of Babel and Egyptian society. Additionally, Joseph's dream with the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him (Genesis 37:9) foreshadows a time when he will be universally esteemed.

3. Further evidence for the centrality of Isaac can be found by comparing the various mentions of *toledot* (generations) in Genesis. We find, for example, *toledot* of Noah (Gen. 6:9), Terah (11:27), and Jacob (37:2), but no *toledot* of Abraham. Rather, Abraham's legacy is bound to that of Isaac, who receives his own *toledot*: *These are the generations of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac* (Gen. 25:19). Abraham's nation was meant to begin and end with Isaac, and only later developments caused another set of *toledot* to start again with Jacob.

4. Note that Radak disagrees with Ramban and is not critical of Abraham here.

5. J. Grossman, *Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), p. 194.

6. Rashi on Genesis 26:2 quotes a midrash saying that God's command to Isaac to stay in the land indicates that he intended to go down to Egypt like his father. However, R. Bazak provides a convincing argument that Isaac acted differently than Abraham in this regard. Preceding God's message was Isaac's own decision to go Gerar and not to Egypt. And in the following verses (26:3-4), Isaac received a unique blessing, one that Abraham never received.

7. Virtual Beit Midrash: Amnon Bazak: Parashat Toldot: *Bein Avraham l'Yitzhak*.

8. One result of this reset are the many parallels between Abraham and Jacob. Both leave their family home, have their name changed, and nearly lose a son. These shared experiences are what ultimately allows Jacob to establish the nation of Israel. For more discussion of the similarities between the Abraham and Jacob stories, see Grossman, *Jacob*, pp. 23-36.

9. The prophecy to Abraham of an exile in a foreign land, in the *brit bein habetarim*, takes place after his descent to Egypt.

10. Note that many of the laws of the Torah come to prevent us from making the mistakes that the Patriarchs did when they lived in a pre-law era: not to marry two sisters, not to prefer one son over another, and more. For a look at Genesis in this light, see A. Dershowitz, *Genesis of Justice* (New York: Warner Books, 2000).