

## Shabbos Shuva 2011

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Rabbi Moshe Taub

# ISAAC'S LAST LAUGH<sup>1</sup>

*(The reader should note: Hebrew names and phrases will be translated, but only once. After the initial occurrence the writer may switch back and forth between the English and Hebrew versions. All Hebrew words and phrases are italicized except names, places and books)*

## I

**T**he *siddur* is a mysterious work. In it one finds prayers and poetry that were composed anywhere from the period of the *Anshei Kenesses HaGedola* (a period that ended around 100 BCE) to the

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Rabbi Kenneth Hain who first suggested the idea of focusing an entire Shabbos Shuva Drasha on Isaac. Using his suggestion, much of this Drasha was then culled from a series I gave in 2007 that is found in *Devarim Shavim II* (2007) by this author (Parsha Chayay Sarah). The reader should see there for further study. The opening questions regarding *Unesana Tokeph* began organically and, coincidentally, tied into the idea that follows it. Footnote #27 was heard from my father Shlita many years ago in the name of a Chaver Tov of his whose name escapes me today. Any other idea that came from others (generally, after the lecture was given) can be found sourced in the footnotes throughout this essay (footnotes # 20, 24). Pertaining to Tephilla during Rosh Hashana in general that is briefly touched upon here, see Shabbos Shuva 2010 “*Zichronos*” where many of the questions have been raised by this writer and answered there more thoroughly. *The research, organization and creative-study behind this lecture was benefited by hours of hard work and while the author would delight in its usage by others with no credit given, claiming them as one’s own, however, will not be tolerated.*

dark-ages (500 CE- 900 CE) up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century (the 17<sup>th</sup> century hymn “*Shalom Aleichem*”, to cite one example). There are prayers whose composers are anonymous and whose implementers are not quite clear. Who composed “*Avinu Malkeinu*” (not simply the few stanzas that come from Rabbi Akiva<sup>2</sup>)? Who designed *Pesukei D’zimra* in its current form (not just the daily ‘*Hallel*’ referenced by the Gemera<sup>3</sup>)? Yet this book –the ‘*siddur*’- is seen as one unit<sup>4</sup>. The term ‘*siddur*’ unleashes strong feelings in all of us; our favorite publisher and fonts and translations and customs.

The *machzor* too is filled with such mystery. The *tanna-amora*<sup>5</sup> Rav (3<sup>rd</sup> century) composed the *shachris*<sup>6</sup> and *mussaf amida* for the High Holidays. But who composed the prayers within it, such as *Aleinu l’shabeach*? In regards to *Aleinu*, some say that it was Yehoshua as the camp circled Jericho, others suggest that it was none other than Rav himself<sup>7</sup>. In addition, many of the *piyutim* (poems) emotionally sung during the Chazan’s repetition are of unknown origin. For instance, who

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<sup>2</sup> Tractate Taanis 25b

<sup>3</sup> Tractate Shabbos 118b, not to be confused with another statement (also found on this page) “*Whoever recites Hallel daily (too often) blasphemes the name of Gd...*”

<sup>4</sup> The reader should not confuse the term ‘*siddur*’ –which as described, can have additions and alterations – with the *Amida*, *Birchas Shma*, et al whose source predates Queen Esther and whose obligations are biblical and can never be altered (although the foolish have tried).

<sup>5</sup> He straddled the line between these two epochs.

<sup>6</sup> Initially the *musaph amida* that we recite on Rosh Hashanah was to be said as well for *shachris*.

<sup>7</sup> The novice reader is encouraged to read up on the history of *Aleinu* at [http://www.aleinu.org/intro\\_history.html](http://www.aleinu.org/intro_history.html)

wrote “*Hayom Horas Olam*”<sup>8</sup>? Even some of the psalms recited at particular moments came into convention at undefined times in our history.

Yet we embrace this mystery. We see this no clearer than when we emotionally recite these 7 words from the “*Unesana Tokeph*” prayer:

“U’Teshuva, U’Tephila, U’Tzedaka, Ma’avirin Es Roah HaGezera – Repentance, Prayer, and Charity (can) eradicate the negative decree”.

While most believe that these words, and in fact all of the *Unesana Tokef* prayer, were composed by Rav Amnon (a very early *Rishon*, 10<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>9</sup>, it remains unclear, at least to me, from where he derived his calculus. How did he know that these three things, and they more than others, are our charge during these days?

Why, one cannot even perform two out of the three on *Rosh Hashanah*<sup>10</sup>!

In searching for his source I came to this *pasuk* in *Divrei HaYamim* (Chronicles) (2:7:12):

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<sup>8</sup> A curious refrain, to say the least, being that Rosh Hashanah celebrates the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation, not the first.

<sup>9</sup> The earliest known reference to this being Rav Amnon’s composition and to the famous events behind it can be found in the 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of the Oh Zarua by the Ri’az where he quotes from the Jewish documentarian R. Ephraim of Bonn the legend that we know. See <http://cf.uba.uva.nl/nl/publicaties/treasures/text/t02.html> for further study.

<sup>10</sup> The Vilna Gaon went as far as prohibiting crying on Rosh Hashanah, and charity most certainly can not be given, at least the monetary sort.

*“And my nation... humbled themselves and they prayed and sought my presence and they changed from their evil ways, and I heard from the heavens and I forgave them for their sins...”*

The Midrash (Bareishis Rabba, 42) explains the above verse:

*“...Three things nullify bad decrees...Tephila, Tzedaka, Teshuvah, and all three are learnt (in that particular order) from one Pasuk:*

*(DY2 7:12)*

- 1- ‘They humbled...’ This is Prayer;*
- 2- ‘And sought my presence’ This is Tzedaka;*
- 3-‘And returned’ This is Teshuva...”*

This is not ‘simply’ a Midrash. The *Talmud Yerushalmi*<sup>11</sup> (Jerusalem Talmud) gives the same exposition, from the same verse, in the same order (*Tephila, Tzedaka, Teshuvah*).

My first reaction in finding the source for our popular refrain was one of relief; not solely because I found what I sought, but because the source answered an old question of mine: What is *Tephila* doing here? One can no more *daven* for *Teshuva* than he can pray to wear *Tephilin* or beseech Gd that he treat his wife with respect! Since when can one simply pray that Gd erase his sins? Now, perhaps the *Tephila* referred to in *Nesana Tokef* –I would often pontificate – is *Tephila* for “state of mind”, that Gd makes us a vessel for change. But that would only beg a follow-up question: why then is *Tephila* listed *after Teshuva*? If it is a prayer that one should be *brought to Teshuva* should it then not come first?

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<sup>11</sup> Taanis, 2:65

But as this Midrash, Gemara and *pasuk* make clear *Tephila* is first on the list (although it is unclear why Reb Amnon, or another poet {or the copyist}, switched the order<sup>12</sup>).

Nevertheless, the Yiffa Toar on this Midrash is still bothered by the prospect of prayer in lieu of *Teshuva*. He states:

*“Prayer without Teshuvah is like going into a Mikveh with a Sheretz...”*<sup>13</sup>

To understand *Tephila* as it exists in this refrain I turned to a stratagem often utilized by the *Baalei Machshava* (scholars of Jewish philosophy). This theory teaches that groups of three (i.e. *Teshuva*, *Tephilla*, *Tzedaka*) found within our laws or liturgy can be interpreted as representing the *Avos* (forefathers; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), and in particular, the *middos* (unique character traits) that they each represent. These “*Middos HaAvos*” are then utilized to teach us how to perform such essential deeds.

A famous example of this tool would be Maharal’s commentary to the second Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers):

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<sup>12</sup> See Rambam in his *Sefer HaMitzvos* and Ibn Ezra in his *Yesod Moreh* where they point out that little can be gleaned – *halachikly* – from many *piyutim* for the *paytanim*, typically, were not scholars. If in fact Unesana Tokeph was not composed by Rav Amnon, or, if it was but the legend never happened (the legend being that he revealed its wording to a scion of the illustrious Kloynimos family in a dream after his own martyrdom) rather he was a poet who composed a poem, then this question is not a question at all rather simply a matter of poetic license. For this reason I did not dwell on it. For further references on the topic of *piyutim*, their composers and their scholarly reliability see R. Eliezer Brodt’s article “*The Custom of Azharot on Shavout*”.

<sup>13</sup> See there for his response to his own question.

*“...The world stands on three things: Torah, Avodah (worship/prayer), and Gemilas Chasadim (acts of charity/kindness)”*

According to Maharal, one need look no further than the *Avos* and each one's representation of one of these foundations to understand the meaning of this statement.

This much celebrated idea of the *Avos* being defined by unique traits has its relatively recent<sup>14</sup> roots in an elusive<sup>15</sup> Ramban (Nachmonidies) found on Bereishis 17:25:

*“Chesed of Abraham, Emes L'Yaakov...Pachad Yitzchok...Hamaskil Yavin...”*

The ambiguity of this Ramban aside, this basic premise of representative *middos* of the Forefathers has been accepted by our greatest scholars and has entered the vast catalog of our *hashkofic* notions, and did not stop our greatest minds from seeking to discover which *Av* stood for

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<sup>14</sup> To be sure, even before the Ramban we find similar allusions see, for example, Tur OHC 417 in the name of the Midrash regarding how the *Avos* are represented in each of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals. Although their *Middos* were not the focus of this Midrash, the assumption of dividing a group of three in to *Avos*-categories is apparent. See also Rama in OHC 651 regarding the three rings to be put on a *lulav*. See also Tractate Sukkos where the 4 species are divided similarly (to include Yoseph; see end of this Drashah where adding Yoseph to the list of *Avos* can be explained).

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the new Artscroll Ramban the editors pulled the relevant section from the text claiming it falls under the rubric of Kabala which they, wisely in my view, felt would be excised from this edition being published for public consumption.

what<sup>16</sup>. We can best see the fluidity of this concept of primary *middos* for each one of the *Avos* in the fact that Yaakov can be seen defined as representing chiefly the ‘*Yoshev Ohal*’ (or ‘Torah’) by one commentator, and ‘*Emes*’ (Truth) by another.

However all would agree, and it has become well cosseted within our *Hashkofic* culture, that Yitzchak stood for *Avodah/Tephilla/Gevurah*<sup>17</sup> (all three are essentially rooted by the same common thread).

This, I posit, would be a great investigative tool in discovering how *Tephilla* has a role during these days. For if we could understand the *man* who represents *Tephila* –in life, and perhaps in the refrain “*U’Teshuva, U’Tephila, etc*” – we can better understand how to approach prayer during these days.

Now, it is tempting to explain this idea of Yitzchak representing *Tephila* as being based on Rivkah’s (Rebecca) introduction to Yitzchak (Isaac) while he was on his way “*LaSuach BaSadeh*/to pray in the field, which according to some<sup>18</sup> was at the site of the *Akeida* (‘Bounding of Isaac’) where he was almost slaughtered. More, that he was returning from praying at ‘*Bear Roey Lechi*’, the very place where his rival Yishmoel (Ishmael) was saved. This would show that not only does the Torah find it crucial to inform us that Yitzchak prayed but also, more, so obsessed was he with prayer that he went to the very place where his nemesis was granted his life thus knowing that there does Gd answer people, no

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<sup>16</sup> See *Michtav Elyahu* Vol. 2; *Maggid Devarav L’Yaakov* (ed. Shatz) pg. 42; Maharal, *Derech HaChaim*, *Avos* 1:2, inter alia.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Maharal ad loc.

<sup>18</sup> See *Tosphos*, *Berachos* 34b, s.v. *Chatziph*. See also *Zohar Chodash* for a different view.

matter who it was that He answered there. A man clearly addicted to prayer.

However, this alone cannot be the reason why many understand Yitzchak, uniquely, as Prayer.

In fact we find that *each* of the *Avos* prayed. What follows is an excerpt from this writer's private *kuntros* on *Sefer Bereishis*, titled *Davarim Shavim*:

*"We find by each of the Avos a reference to them praying to G-d, and again, every time {usually it is the moment when they are inventing "their" Tephilla, i.e. Shachris, etc.} a different term is used.*

*Avraham-18:23*

— ויגש

*See Rashi there that it comes from the etymology of getting up to fight a מלחמה*

*Yitzchak-24:63*

— לשוה

*See Malbim, Abarbenel et al that this literally means to talk freely and flowingly, sometimes to relieve that which is on one's mind*

*Yaakov-28:11*

— ויפגע

*See Rashi et al that this word typically connotes two objects moving toward each other and then meeting*

*A possible explanation for this entry may be explained by turning to a famous*



*idea of the Vilna Goan where he clarifies the Pasuk (22:12) after the Akeida  
Where G-d says to Abraham "Now I know that you fear heaven..."*

*By explaining that until this point in time all of the good deeds that Avraham had done were only naturally fulfilling his innate inclination towards kindness, and, only now, after G-d saw him go against his nature by (almost) sacrificing his own child did G-d comment on a recognition of complete servitude.*

*Now, in line with this theme we can consider the following: Perhaps, since when the Avos prayed they gave all of themselves into the Tephila (this is not a generic point, see Rashi to 25:22 in how he explains the complaint of Rivka "Lama Zeh Anochy"- that she gave her entire "self" in prayer for a child and now she is suffering), so much so, that each one of them prayed in a way that went against their tendencies: Avraham prayed like he was fighting (although he stood for kindness and gentility); Yitzchak prayed as if it were having a dialogue (although he represented quiet service, hardly ever, throughout scripture, taking on the active talking role {see next entry as well as Drasha by this author on Parshas Chayay Sarah}),; Yaakov approached prayer like a physical journey (this although he was Yashov Ohalim).*

*Perhaps it is apropos here to also make mention, that it appears that this same requirement might have also been incumbent on the Imohos/matriarchs; it was always the mother/wife who fought their innate motherly mercy and was able to "throw" out a child or who noticed the evils of a child...the Avos had to, even in deed, go against their tendencies: Jacob had to lie to Laban, Abraham had to throw out a child..."*

In any event, we see from the above that in fact *all* of the Avos stood for prayer of some kind. In fact they each institutionalized a prayer, i.e. Abraham-*shachris* (morning prayer); Yitzchak-*mincha* (afternoon prayer), Yaakov-*ma'ariv* (evening prayer).

Clearly, then, it is not so much that Yitzchak prayed but that he introduced some other dimension to prayer. What that was is as yet unclear but can be gleaned, I believe, from the above reference of *Bear Lachy Roey*: what, pray tell, was Yitzchak praying for? While it is tempting to suggest that he was praying for success in Eliezer's mission in finding him a wife, a quick perusal of the commentators (and in particular, Onkoles) would force us to understand this trip as one done frequently.

Did he not live a charmed life? Why pray?

To better understand our question of *Tephila* as an essential ingredient during these days, and to understand what made Yitzchak unique regarding Prayer in general, let us delve into the general character and life of Yitzchak, a man as mysterious and mystifying as the concept of prayer itself.

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## II

Many have wondered, and some have explained, why, of our three Forefathers, Isaac seems to be talked about the least in the Torah.

Perhaps an even deeper mystery to be found, a pattern, is in what the Torah *does* reveal about his life, for, what we are told about him, is not really about "him" at all:

Consider:

- Abraham is told to sacrifice his son Isaac. Isaac was not even informed until the last minute, and even that was only parenthetical;
- when G-d sent a messenger to inform them not to proceed in the *Akeida*, it was a message to Abraham, the “sacrifice-er”, not Isaac, the “sacrifice-ee”;
- The *Akeida* itself, Isaac’s *raison d’être*, never even *happened*;
- Ishmael is a bad influence on Isaac, so it is Sarah, his mother, who solves the problem with the final approval of Abraham, again behind Isaac’s back;
- Isaac needs a wife, so Abraham and his trusted servant Eliezer embark on a mission for a spouse while completely shunning Isaac from the process (Isaac was close to forty at the time!);
- Isaac needs to bless his progeny Israel, so behind the scenes, Rivka, together with her son Yaakov/Jacob, make sure he blesses the right one - whether Isaac knows it or not;
- Isaac’s blindness –which itself may be indicative of how he seemed to often be manipulated by others- is explained by the Midresh as Gd’s way to make certain that Isaac is fooled by Eisav (Esau);
- Continuing on the Eisav theme, Ramban (Nachmonidies, d. 1270) points out that in reality Isaac should have known the truth about his son for Rivkeh was told during her pregnancy about his wicked ways! Rather, explains the Ramban, Rivkeh, for whatever reason (likely due to the fact that the prophesy was directed at her and no other) kept this as a secret from her husband;
- Even Isaac’s name was dictated before he was born!;
- Speaking of his name, his was the only name (from among the *Avos*) that was never changed or modified.

What was it about Isaac that makes it appear as if he lived through the actions of others, rarely acting on his own, thus forcing the Torah to omit what seems like his almost passive life?

We could continue with this list<sup>19</sup>, but let us end with one final feature from Isaac's life that, to me, is the most curious, and is distinctive from the others listed above because it is mentioned by the major commentaries, and their explanation of it is profound:

*Yitzchak never received the Abrahamic Blessings.*<sup>20</sup>

That's right. The very blessings that Yaakov risked everything to receive, that Isaac himself knew to be *the* essential link to be given to one of his sons so as to continue a contiguous line from Abraham, was one that *he* never received!

Rashi (25:5), clearly bothered by this<sup>21</sup>, explains the *pasuk* (ad loc) "*And Abraham gave/left everything he had to Isaac*" as including the ability to bless others. Meaning that Isaac's ability to bless Yaakov with the Abrahamic Blessings was due to a *power* vested in him, inherited from his father, but it was *not* transference from that which he himself possessed.

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<sup>19</sup> To cite one further example mentioned by R. Oren Wachstock after this lecture was given: Rabbeinu Bachaya states (beginning of Chayay Sara) that Yitzchak was not informed of his mother's death.

<sup>20</sup> See however Ramban to chapter 26:3 where he, disagreeing with many, believes that the verses 26:4-6 should be interpreted as Isaac receiving from Gd the Abrahamic Blessings. Note that even according to Ramban Yitzchak did not receive these blessings through Avraham.

<sup>21</sup> He was also bothered by a redundancy; see 24:36.

The Sphorno<sup>22</sup> (d. 1550) furthers this idea. Commenting on the *pasuk* (26:5) “(Gd says to Isaac)...*Because Abraham heeded my voice...*” he writes (translation follows R. Pelkowitz’s edition to Sphorno):

*“We see here that the merits of others is invoked when Gd speaks to Isaac...we see this also in verse 24...Not so with Yaakov, and certainly not Avraham...”*

This is a staggering commentary on the life of Isaac! From it, and the Rashi quoted above, it would seem as if Isaac lived in the shadow of Avraham<sup>23</sup>. In fact, the Torah itself seems to indicate as much when it states (25:19):

*“This is the story/family of Yitzchak ben Avraham, Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak...”*

It is as if the Torah is informing us that to understand the story of Yitzchak one must first know his father<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> 26:5

<sup>23</sup> My brother-in-law, R. Ari Zwickler, who was staying by our home for Rosh Hashanah and attended this lecture, pointed out something extraordinary: the Talmud Sota 5a teaches that the term “all” is found in reference to each of the *Avos*; in that Gd blessed them with everything. Notice that, while by Yaakov the term is “KOL” (33:11) and by Avraham it is “*BaKOL*” (24:11), by Yitzchak it is “*MiKOL*” (27:33), meaning he DERIVED (the prefix “*mi*”) his good from another source.

<sup>24</sup>See Abarbanel who similarly explains this verse as an indication that Yitzchak’s life so mirrored Avraham’s. Cf. Rashi to this verse, quoting from Midrash Tanchuma, for an explanation *Al Pi Pshat* (simple understanding) to the ending to the verse. See Midrash Rabba where Proverbs 17:6 is quoted. Cf. Rashbam, Ramban and Ibn Ezra ad loc.

So, we have Yitzchak whose life seems to be a life lived and manipulated by others, a relative absence from text, and Avraham being the source of all the good in his life.

In addition we have our initial questions: Why, or what type of, Prayer is essential during these Days? What was unique about Yitzchak as it relates to Prayer? What would have Yitzchak been praying for?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Derashah, Chayay Sarah (2007) by this author for a more complete list of Isaac's ambiguity in scripture. See there as well for another approach on how to explain some of the peculiarities, in particular in how Isaac relates to Rebecca. To quote from that essay: "...*This week's Parsha is no exception. Rivka/Rebecca, after being asked to marry a man from Canaan, says she must first go to "Beis Ima", Yitzchak/Isaac too, after meeting his new wife, first must test her in his mother's tent; Eliezer was Mishtomem (astounded, as Rashi explains the verse) upon first meeting Rivka, and, Rivka was Mishtomem (astounded, as Rashi explains that verse) upon first meeting Isaac. This list too goes on. ...To answer the above as well as to explain the patterns we have thus far shared in this week's Parsha between Isaac and Rivka, we must define and explain a seemingly unrelated set of events.*

*Avraham charges his trusted servant to find a match for his son, and, while on this blinded mission (like Avraham in Lech Lcha and again by the Akaida, Eliezer was not sure where, or better said to whom, he was going), Eliezer prays, and, so bold is his prayer that some sages find in it a cruel miscalculation (see Taanis 4a<sup>25</sup>). But, amazingly, it seemed to work. A young lady came and went beyond the call of duty by feeding not just him and his men, but the camels as well. But as the Pasuk says and Rashi explains, he still was not sure if this was "the one", both familial-wise and in character. Yet, in the very next Pasuk, before even asking for her name or any new information - just five words later ("when the camels finished drinking") - he gives her the "jewelry of the bride"! What changed? Did not Rashi and the Pasuk a few words before say he was not sure yet? Indeed, some, like Ramban, change the order of events to say that this giving of the gifts took place later, after he asked her the basic questions about her family, yet it is Rashi, of all commentators, who does not change the order, explaining that since Eliezer had faith in G-d he knew it would work out. This although Rashi just taught otherwise! So again, what changed between the time of Eliezer's doubt and the five words of the camels finishing to drink that eliminated that same reservation and uncertainty?*

*What was Eliezer looking to find for Isaac? Who was Isaac and whom did he need? Isaac, as we know, represents Teffila – "LaSuach BaSadeh" was his introduction to Rivka- Pachad Yitzchak, serving to and*

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trusting in G-d was his life. So drunk<sup>25</sup> was he with this approach to the divine, it would seem, that he prayed at Bear Roey Lechey, named so, for it was the place where Yishmoel was answered, who goes to a place where his exiled, idol worshipping, adversarial brother is answered? Only someone who embraces Tephila, whatever its source. Avraham and Sara knew their own child well. Isaac's blind faith and endless tolerance in seeing G-d's plan through was an impediment to the world of Hishdatlut, and, although Tephila was a necessary ingredient, even a road block if it should ever be lacking, without "doing" and only "waiting", however, a Forefather can not accomplish what is needed of him.

*With G-d alone we survive, but through our efforts He responds.*

*So they (Sara, Avraham, Eliezer and later Yaakov and Rivka) set out to make sure that his Tephilos were answered, doing the physical effort that Isaac found so anathema: kicking out Yishmoel and finding him a mate, never just waiting for the answer of his Tephilos to fall from the sky. Like Avraham who had to go against his tendency for kindness by fighting wars and sacrificing his son, and Yaakov who although he represented truth, had to lie (to Lavan, as the Talmud teaches- "Said Yaakov, 'I am his brother in crookedness.' ") to protect his progeny – Isaac too needed to be tested in his greatest attribute to see if he would be willing to forgo that absolute faith and do, act. Kindness is survived by caring, Truthfulness needs a precise intellect (Yaakov Yashav Bohel), and the Midda of Isaac, Tephilla, too needs a predicate, namely patience. The ability to wait for the moment G-d decides to act and realize His promise.*

*Rivka comes along and she is proactive, doing, accomplishing through action and deeds, performing, even beyond what was expected. Eliezer knew then that this is the balance that Isaac so badly needed, yet, he was not entirely convinced. A match has to compliment itself but it is also critical that a spouse can relate to the other half, only then will they be able to translate known feelings into their higher dimension.*

*The Seporno peripherally explains, as does the commentary to Hirsh, that to feed the camels of these men would take well over 180 gallons of water! They continue that what Eliezer saw at that moment (in those five words-) was the catalyst, the patient resolve needed to convince him that she was the one both in contrast and in common to/with Isaac. She did act but she knew as well how to patiently wait and see it through as well. This was the straw on Eliezer's camel's back; action because of, not in spite of, patience<sup>25</sup>.*

*We all have the internal struggle between patience/faith and Hishtadlus/action, we all fall trap to each one's opulent and duplicitous temptations between "It is all good, Hashem will take care of it" and "Kochi Votzam Yodi". We believe Israel will be fine in the end because ...well...it has to be...right? Or do we understand that she needs our physical support? We strive for growth in our respective communities yet,*

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### III

There is a highly illuminating Gemara in Rosh Hashana (16a):

**T**“Says Rav Avohu: Why do we sound the Shofar of a ram (on Rosh Hashana)? (Because,) Says Gd, ‘Sound the Shofar of a ram before me (on Rosh Hashana) in order that I remember the Akeida (sacrifice) of Yitzchak ben Avraham, and will then consider it as if you yourselves self-sacrificed before me’”

This Gemara comes with many questions<sup>26</sup>.

- Do we not already know who Yitzchak is? Why the need to tell us who his father is, something that the Talmud *does not do* when it frequently mentions Isaac.
- Are we not taught in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers) to focus on **Abraham’s** test in having to sacrifice his son? Why do we seem, here, to (finally?<sup>27</sup>) focus on the trauma of Isaac?

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*sometimes, we are not sure if our actions and wants are getting in the way with our needed patience, and, visa versa.*

*Let us follow Eliezer’s example and fuse these two qualities, Faith and Hishtadlus/Effort, into one common goal”*

<sup>26</sup> Many ask some, but not all, of these questions. See *Har Tzvi* to Tractate Berachos.

<sup>27</sup> As for why this is so: Jewish thought teaches, based on an idea found in *Nefesh Hachaim* (Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin) that “firsts” are always harder than “seconds”. This is why we find that once a discovery is made, or an invention thought of, many can come up with it on their own (Benjamin Franklin discovered



- Do we not explain the *Akeida* as an aberration? Meaning, that Gd does not want such sacrifice from us, from our children through our hand, as it is never found again in the Torah. Yet from here it would seem that we seek to, yearly, vicariously perform it en-masse?
- If the *Akeida* never happened, if Isaac never died on that alter, how is it that Gd –through hearing the sound of Isaac’s *temurah* (exchange), the ram –will consider it as if we did what even Isaac did not do?
- Finally, aside for chronological dates, how is it that the *Akeida* relates so much to these Days in particular? This Gemera – and the *mitzva* of Shofar in and of itself – as well as countless statements in our *davening* would indicate that the *Akeida* is at the heart of these days. Why?

This Gemera should not be seen purely as *aggada* (‘Legends’ of the Talmud, the less authoritative parts of our canon<sup>28</sup>) either. In fact, Rambam (Maimonides), ignoring the many Gemeras later in that tractate that deal with which Shofar and from which animal is to be used for this Mitzvah, rules (*Hilchos Shofar* 1:1), inexplicably, in accordance with the above statement of Rav Avahu, that only a ram’s horn is Kosher for this

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that when a warm breeze feels cool when we are sweating or wet it is not the breeze that is cold but the water on our skin. While mind-blowing in his time, any child today can figure this out). Abraham was the first to risk death by jumping into Nimrod’s fiery pits, *this* is what made it easier (but by no means easy {although *sefarim* to teach that when one dies Al Kiddush Hashem there is no pain} for so many in future generations to die in order to sacrifice Gd’s name. Yitzchak then was not first to agree to die for Gd, thus he is not celebrated compared to Abraham who was the first to agree to sacrifice his own son. This also explains the significance of the Abrahamic tests.

<sup>28</sup> See *Sh’ut Noda B’Yehudah* and *Shvus Ya’akov* where they debate if and when *aggada* can influence Halachah. See *Encyclopedia D’Talmudis, erech Agada*.

Mitzvah! Raavad<sup>29</sup> was so bothered by this that he comments there that Rambam “...*Hiphriz Al Midosav...*” – “...*went beyond his province of authority...*”.

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## IV

# The Solution

To explain, the relevance of Prayer to these Days; what new dimension Yitzchak brought to that act of servitude; many of the peculiarities we had mentioned that are found scattered throughout Isaac’s life; the significance of the *Akeida*, etc., let us turn to another famous Gemera.

The Gemera<sup>30</sup> is bothered by the fact that when the Torah informs us that Rivkeh and Yitzchak’s prayers for children were answered it states “*And Gd answered **him***” seemingly excluding the relative viability of Rivkeh’s prayer:

*“...’Answered him’? ‘Answered them’, it should have said!? This is because one can not compare the prayers of the righteous who is a child of the righteous to the prayers of the righteous who is a child of the wicked”*

Inexplicably, the Gemera seems to be teaching that it is a greater feat to be an FFB (frum, or religious, from birth) than a BT (*Baal Teshuva*, someone not raised religious).

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<sup>29</sup> D. 1198. He was the father, ironically for this article, of ‘Isaac the Blind’ a great 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Rabbi and mystic.

<sup>30</sup> Yevamus 64a

How bizarre!!!

In a famous essay Reb Simcha Ziisel of Kelm, famed student of Rabbi Yisreol Salanter and mentor to Rabbi Dessler, marshals this Gemara to make a point about *individuality*, which, by doing so, may also shed light on the life of Yitzchak.

He explains that of course Yitzchak had it easier than Rivkeh in terms of simply being religious. After all, Yitzchak had *Alokei Avoseinu* (the Gd of his parents), something that Rivkeh was not fortunate enough to have. However, points out Reb Simcha Zissel, neither Yitzchak or Rivkeh – or any of us for that matter –are born with an *Elokeinu*, our own self-discovered Gd. For Rivkeh this was an uncomplicated challenge: simply keep Shabbos, or don't lie, or treat others well, etc. and she would have already created a unique path to Gd different than from her parents.

But for Isaac, for the son of Abraham, this was no uncomplicated task. Sure, he could have easily continued in a path already forged by Avraham, he could have simply continued following Gd in the inherited way, the only way, he knew how –focusing primarily on Chesed (kindness). But he did not. No, Isaac was going to forge his own path, his own attachment to Gd. This is the test of the “righteous the son of the righteous”, and no one was tested in it like Isaac. This is why the Gemara teaches that Gd gave special value to the prayers of the sons of the righteous.

With Reb Simcha Zissel's stunning idea in hand let us now revisit the *Akeida*.

Here was Isaac, always *figuratively* bound by the life of the founder of our faith, who was now, by the *Akeida*, *literally* bound by him. Everything, at that moment, came together.

“*Mi Shena Yitzchak B’Akeida* (see footnote<sup>31</sup>)”. Yitzchak prayed to be free. Free to find a Gd that had already been found, free to embrace a faith that he was already born into. This explains why the Midresh understands Isaac’s bound status of that of a *Tamid* offering<sup>32</sup>, the constant, twice daily, offering; the one that happens on its own every day, that is not unique, that does not bespeak of gifts or private donations.

While Avraham prayed for Sdom or for children, and while Yaakov prayed for safety and for success, Yitzchak prayed existentially.

Yitzchak prayed to find *himself*.

Amazingly, while using prayer as a tool to help himself find a self-made path, Yitzchak, thereby, created one: A new dimension of Prayer!

“*VaAni TePhilasī*”, Reb Simcha Bunim of Pshischa (d. 1827) teaches, **I** am Prayer. **I** am my Prayer. I pray not *for* something but for a life well lived and fulfilled. Prayer is *me*; my fears, insecurities, and doubts.

Existential Prayer, was what Yitzchak invented, this was the new dimension. And, existential prayer *is* true prayer.

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<sup>31</sup> From *selichos*. See *Harerei Kedem* (Rabbi M. Sherkin, second edition) where Rav Solevetchik explains that this refers to some silent, unspoken prayer. See *Drasha Rosh Hashana 2011* by this writer, Day One “*The Sound Of Silence*”.

<sup>32</sup> On this point see *Chidushei HaGriz Al HaTorah*; *Chavtzalus HaSharim*, Bereishis.

Oh, the questions this answers:

The *Akeida* is a feature during these Days not to remember the deed of Avraham, but to remember Yitzchak and the *ayil*, the ram that... Broke. Isaac. Free.

This was the moment that Yitzchak figuratively and literally broke free from the grip, the chains, of perfect inheritance and became his own man. This is why the Talmud highlights that the *Akeida* was to happen to Yitzchak ***BEN Avraham!*** This is why we sound the horn of a ram, for we too are waiting for our rendezvous with destiny; when we can untie that which *forces* us to be religious and tie *ourselves* to Gd.

Yitzchak understood the concept of “*Taluy Bi*” *it dependant on me; my effort, my hishtadlus*. This was his challenge, repeating over and over in the events of his life; always someone else controlling his destiny, and he always finding a way to pull through for himself in the end. This is why Gd purposefully blinded him so as not to see Eisav, for Yitzchak’s life-mission was forging a path himself, putting the pieces together with no help, even from his senses, even through a prophesy made secretly to Rivkeh.

As for the Abrahamic Blessings: when one looks closely at the verses where the Sphorno made his stunning comments regarding Isaac always seeming to rely upon the merits of others (“...*the merits of others are invoked regarding Isaac...*”), one will notice the verse and event immediately preceding them. There was a famine in the Land. Isaac decides, that *like his father*, he was to go to Egypt. Gd stops him and says, in effect, “You stay in the Land, I have other plans for you”, it is then, seemingly as a non sequitur, that Gd informs Isaac “...*Because*

*Avraham heeded the Torah...*” On the one hand he was told *not* to follow the path of Avraham (“don’t go to Egypt”) and in the same breath Isaac is informed that he must accept being an heir to the spiritual royalties of his illustrious father. These verses, then, contain the nucleus of Isaac’s challenge in life. This is the life of a righteous the son of the righteous. Gd was simply laying out his challenge. Gd’s duplicitous message in verses 26:1-6, His mixed signals was for Isaac to somehow untangle.

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## V

We all feel stuck, at times, between *Alokeinu* (our own, personal, Gd) and *Alokei Avoseinu* (The Gd, and religion, we inherit). We know where we come from. We know what we want for our children and we therefore send them to the best *yeshivos* and schools. But we ourselves feel stuck in-between Avraham and Yaakov, the middle, lost, child.

The *Benoni* (‘In-between’ a classic term during these Days referring to he/she who has good deeds and bad, the average person. We use it here homiletically, or literally)

We desire to find that which has already been found. We want to discover for ourselves what already was realized by others. We are the heirs of giants but feel, ourselves, small. We, like, Yitzchak, are *Beinonim*. Not the *Benoni* as classically defined. But one who is stuck in-between, trapped by lives on cruise control, the *Tamid* of our own existence.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:3-5) introduces us to the *Benoni*:

“...*the Benoni is judged not until Yom Kippur*”

Oddly he immediately goes into another subject – that of Shofar and a new allusion to this *mitzva* taken from the verse “Wake up from your slumber...” – and then, just as abruptly, he returns to the concept of *Benoni* with these words:

“...therefore every person must view himself all year as being a *Benoni*”

From there he never returns again to Shofar.

The questions on this Rambam are myriad, and dizzying.

- Why did he change topics from the Benoni to Shofar and back again?
- What does he mean by “therefore”; as if *because* of this new allusion to Shofar we should therefore always see ourselves as a Benoni? How so?
- Why does he shepherd an allusion for a Law that is clearly –and thrice – mentioned in the Pentateuch?

The Shofar is a jolt to awaken us from the slumber, the rote, of our religious lives. We *therefore* must consider ourselves as the Benoni, if not in half Mitzvos and half *aveiros* (sins) than as trapped, stuck in the repetitiveness and monotony of our inherited religious selves. Stuck, like Yitzchak, between the religious life we inherited (Avraham) and the one we want for our children (Yaakov). Only when we realize that we all suffer from this same claustrophobia can we become the *Tzadik Ben Tzadik*. If we are not aware that we are in a slumber we will never forge a unique path for ourselves. If we do not awaken ourselves then the same Mitzvos we kept last year, the same *halachos* we took seriously, the same ten or

so of the 39-*Melachos* we took to heart, will continue. Nothing will change. We will come to *davening* the same number of times, go to the same amount of classes, learn the same amount of Torah.

The Shofar says, “NO!”

The *Shevet HaMussar* (d.1729) explains the blessing recited at weddings, “...*yotzer ha’adam*”, as being in *b’lashon-Hoveh* (present-tense) because only the married couple, who at that moment are exiting the homes of their parents to “go at it on their own” are considered newly created at that very instant.

This is why the *paytan* (poet) writes in *Unesaneh Tokeph*, “*La Sachpotz Bmos HaMeis*” (“{Gd} does not desire the death of the dead...”). If he is already dead how could Gd kill him? Because as the Talmud teaches, those that are alive are called *holchim* (movers, moving) while those that are dead are called *omdim* (immobile); if someone did not repent, change, do, then to kill them would in fact be an act of redundancy. The *paytan* therefore continues “*Ki Im B’Shuvu V’Chaya*” (“*but {he desires} we repent and be alive*”) rather repent, change, do, get out of your repetitiveness, your inherited faith and then, then, you shall be deemed truly ***alive!***

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## VI

There is a gas station that I frequent. It is run by a kind Indian family, immigrants, and I like to support small businesses. In any event, they have been through a lot these past few years; the owner passed leaving



the gas station to his wife and son, the rise in gas prices, etc. I have talked to them about their troubles but never as a rabbi; they have no idea what it is I do for a living. Last week I had to buy something for the house immediately following Shabbos and I ran into their store wearing my hat. The proprietor sees me and asks, "Are you a Rabbi?" "Yes", I reply. "So you are the rabbi at the temple down the road?" "Indeed", I tell her.

She begins to cry.

"Rabbi, I have trouble lately believing. I have good days, I have bad days, but I am scared."

I am not a *kiruv* (outreach) worker and I am not well practiced at quick answers to authentic questions. So I just listened, let her have her "day in court". Finally she said, "It is not that I am scared that I will end up not believing in Gd, rather it is that I feel guilty, that maybe Gd is upset with me for, at times, doubting His involvement in my life."

I explained, "Do not feel guilty that you, from time to time, lose some faith in Gd, for He too, sometimes, loses faith in you"

There is nothing revolutionary in my response.

*"Baruch HaGever Asher Yiphtach BaHashem, V'Hayuh Hashem Yiphtach Bo<sup>33</sup>" (Praised is the individual who trust in Gd, and behold, Hashem trusts in him")*

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<sup>33</sup> Jeremiah, 17:7

As Rabeinu BaChayay (d. 1330) explains<sup>34</sup>: Gd's involvement in our lives is parallel to our involvement in His existence.

We want Gd to break the monotony of our existence, to change the course of our lives, to make an exception for us during a financial crisis; and we feel this costs us nothing.

As the Prophet just taught us, we must first show that we too are capable of forging a path to Him on our own, breaking our own cycles, then He too will use said path back to us.

A celebrated Hasidic story fits wonderfully with many of the themes we have discussed:

*A childless woman once visited Rabbi Mordechai of Chernobyl (d. 1837), a great Chasidic Magid (inspirational speaker). "Rebbe, you are a man of miracles. I plead with you to grant me a child" The Magid just sat there quietly. "Rebbe, say something! Who else but you can I turn to but you?!" The Rebbe finally speaks. "My dear child, I am sorry. There is nothing that I can do."*

*Dejected, the woman leaves his office. Walking outside she falls to the ground. Turning her eyes heavenward she cries "Gd of the heavens, I want a child. I went to my Rav, I went to my teachers, and I even traveled to this holy Magid. They claim that they cannot help me. So I turn to You, Lord, for there is no one else left to turn!"*

*Upon hearing this, the Rebbe turns to his sexton and said "THIS is the lesson she needed. No Rebbe can replace a personal relationship with Gd"*

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<sup>34</sup> *Chovos HaLavavos*, beginning of Shaar HaBitachon.

It is up to us. Up to us to both embrace the *Alokei Avoseinu* while at the same time finding *Elokeinu*. No inherence can replace a path forged on our own.

The Talmud relates a spectacular narrative<sup>35</sup>:

*"They said about Eleazar ben Durdia that there was no prostitute in the world with whom he did not have intercourse at least once. He heard that there was one particular prostitute in a town near the sea who would receive a purse full of dinars for her services. He took a purse full of dinars and went to her, crossing over seven rivers. During intercourse she let out a breath. She said: Just like this breath will never return to its place so too Eleazar ben Durdia will never have his repentance accepted (literally - will never return).*

*He went and sat between two mountains and hills. He said: Mountains and hills, request mercy for me. They said: Before we request mercy for you we have to request mercy for ourselves, at is says (Isaiah 54:10) "For the mountains will be moved and the hills will falter..."*

*He said: Heavens and earth, request mercy for me. They said: Before we request mercy for you we have to request mercy for ourselves, at is says (Isaiah 51:6) "For the heavens will dissipate like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a garment..."*

*He said: Sun and moon, request mercy for me. They said: Before we request mercy for you we have to request mercy for ourselves, at is says (Isaiah 24:23) "The moon will be humiliated and the sun will be shamed..."*

*He said: Stars and constellations, request mercy for me. They said: Before we request mercy for you we have to request mercy for ourselves, at is*

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<sup>35</sup> Avodah Zara 17a

*says (Isaiah 34:4) "All the host of the heavens will dissolve..."*

*He said: **This matter depends solely on me.** He put his head between his knees and began to tremble from crying until he died. A heavenly voice declared: R. Eleazar ben Durdia is ready for the world-to-come."<sup>36</sup>*

This is the challenge of the *Benoni*, the test of Yitzchak, and our life mission: to not only come to this same conclusion of "*Taloy Bi-It is dependent in me*", but to then "live", forge a path and a relationship with Hakodosh Baruch Hu that is matchless and exclusive.

This explains the following astounding Gemera relating to Yitzchak<sup>37</sup>:

*"...Says Rav Yonason: 'Why is it written (Isaiah 63:16) For You Are Our Father (referring to Isaac)? For in the future the Jews will sin and Gd will seek to destroy them. He will approach Abraham who will say 'Kill them so as to sanctify Your name. He will then go to Jacob thinking that he would relate to difficult children. He, however, will respond like Abraham. Finally Gd will approach Isaac and say 'Your sons have sinned'. Isaac will respond, 'My sons and not yours?! How much could they have sinned?... You take half and I will take half...(when Isaac's arguments prove effective, the nation shall call out You Are Our Father (Isaac)...'"*

It was Yitzchak, trained in the art of judging, changing, and doing, who would not accept the verdict as *it was* but rather sought to change it to how he felt *it should be*; the art of the *Tzadik Ben Tzadik* who can re-discover a faith, a belief, a verdict, anew.

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<sup>36</sup> Translation, with a few emendations, by R. Gil Student.

<sup>37</sup> Shabbos 89b

This is why that very Gemara ends with Yitzchak responding to the nation calling him (Isaac) their father:

*“...Don’t turn to me, but to Hashem”*

Like the Chernobyl Maggid, Yitzchak, is saying: “The lesson to take from what just happened is that everyone must find the power and courage to talk to Gd” We do not always need an intermediary.

Indeed, the Midrash<sup>38</sup> teaches that Yitzchak, who was laughed at before birth, had the “last laugh”:

*“...And his father cried” (After Yoseph was presumed dead. But it is not clear from this verse if this antecedent {“his father”} is referring to Yaakov or Yitzchak): ‘Rav Levi and Rav Simon both said that this is referring to Isaac. When he was near Yaakov he cried, but when he would depart he would bath, anoint, eat, and drink (for he knew the truth; Yoseph was alive) ‘Why should I reveal this secret if Gd did not tell him?’ (Yitzchak would say to himself)...’”*

Finally it was Yitzchak who was the one who was aware, who knew the whole story. Indeed, Yoseph, Yitzchak knew, was to carry on the mission of Yitzchak, the task of *galus* (exile, being alone): to fight for *Alokeinu*, for in *galus Elokei Avoseinu* (the Gd of our parents) is not enough.

The Midrash made a point to teach us that Yitzchak not only knew about the whereabouts of Yoseph but that he even bathed, anointed himself, ate and drank, all, startlingly, the very actions forbidden on Yom Kippur

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<sup>38</sup> Bareishis Rabba Parsha 84

(!); because he knew that he who finds *Elokeinu* in exile is safe from *Gezera Rah* (a bad decree).

And so we should, and so it should be.