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The Rabbinic Literature About Isaac

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I owe a great debt to Professor Lewis Barth for kindling my interest in midrash. I would like to especially thank Professor Edward Goldman for all the help he gave me as my advisor. Because of his assistance, this thesis is much better than it would have been.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Barbara who not only helped proofread the final copy, but gave me the support and comfort I needed every step of the way.

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Digest

This thesis attempts to assemble, translate and interpret the rabbinic literature about Isaac, beginning with references in the Mishnah and Tosephta through citations in late collections of midrash such as Yalkut Shimoni. The material is presented chronologically and divided according to the major experiences of Isaac's life: birth, relationship to Ishmael, akedah, marriage to Rebecca, sojourn in Gerar, blessing of his sons, and death. A final chapter analyzes Isaac's place among the Patriarchs, derived from midrashim which compare and contrast them.

According to the rabbis Isaac is the hero of the akedah, who willingly offered his life in obedience to God's command. His willingness to offer his life earned him the epithet "master of suffering," which means that he not only experienced suffering, but also overcame it. This title appropriately characterizes much of his life as viewed by the rabbis.

The rabbis depict Isaac as being very sensitive to his fellow human beings and to his responsibilities toward God. He is also viewed as being quite perceptive. The rabbis consider Isaac to be much more than a link between Abraham and Jacob, as one might conclude from the biblical text. He is a unique figure, distinct from, and equal in prominence to, Abraham and Jacob.

Introduction

Of the three Patriarchs, Isaac is the least prominent in the Bible. The reader learns very little about the personality or life of Isaac from the biblical text. In the stories of two of the major incidents of his life, the akedah and the blessing of his sons, he is not the central figure. Indeed, Gunther Plaut has observed that in the Bible "Isaac serves primarily as the link between Abraham and Jacob."¹

The rabbinic literature makes up for the sparseness of the biblical narrative. Each of the stages of Isaac's life is treated thoroughly. Rather than a victim of the akedah, the rabbis consider him to be the hero who willingly offers his life in obedience to God's will. To the rabbis, Isaac was much more than a link between Abraham and Jacob. He was one of the three Patriarchs who were the foundation of the Jewish religion. Isaac was equal in prominence to, but distinct from, his father Abraham and his son Jacob.

This thesis attempts to assemble, translate and interpret the rabbinic literature about Isaac. The sources were collected by using various indices to rabbinic works, Aaron Hyman's work citing rabbinic passages according to verse,² footnotes in Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews, and other secondary literature. Then, using critical editions wherever available, the midrashim were translated and compared.

¹Gunther Plaut, The Torah: A Modern Commentary I, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974), p. 245.

²Aaron Hyman, Sefer Torah Haketuvah Vehamesorah Al Torah, Neviim Vikituvim, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1947).

The material is herein presented chronologically and divided according to the major experiences of Isaac's life: birth, relationship to Ishmael, akedah, marriage to Rebecca, sojourn in Gerar, blessing of his sons, and death. A final chapter analyzes Isaac's place among the Patriarchs, derived from midrashim which compare and contrast them.

Where several versions of the same midrash exist, the earliest source is usually offered, and others are cited in the footnotes. Sometimes more than one version is offered, if they contain significant differences.

The title of this thesis is derived from the following midrash.

R. Berechiah said two things. The Holy One blessed be He never unites His name with one who is alive, except with masters of suffering (בעלי יסורים), and behold Isaac was a master of suffering. The rabbis said: One sees his ashes as if they were piled on the altar.³

Not only does Isaac's suffering derive from the ordeal of the akedah, but also from the blindness he experienced in his old age. Apparently, Isaac is considered to have mastered suffering because he was able to withstand it and rise above it.

The following pages contain a list of sources cited in the footnotes.

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The Birth of Isaac

"The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice (גִּוֹל יְגוֹל); and one who fathers a wise child will have joy of him" (Proverbs 23:24). According to a midrash this proverb was written about the birth of Isaac.

For when Isaac was born everything was happy: heaven and earth, sun and moon, stars and constellations. And why were they happy? Because if Isaac had not been created, the world would not have been preserved, as it is said: "If My covenant (בְּרִיתִי) is not with day and night, if I had not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth, [then will I also cast away the seed of Jacob, and of David My servant, so that I will not take of his seed to be rulers over the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...]" (Jeremiah 33:25-6). And the word "בְּרִיתִי" refers only to Isaac, as it is said: "But my covenant (בְּרִיתִי) I will establish with Isaac" (Genesis 17:21).¹

Another midrash, based on the same verse, offers a reason for such happiness. Commenting on the double usage of the root "ג-י-ל," the midrash states: "There is rejoicing upon rejoicing when one is a righteous person the son of a righteous person."²

Isaac's birth is indeed quite special. According to one comment God remembered Sarah in order to reward Abraham, who had prayed on Abimelech's behalf (Genesis 20:17).³ The ages of Abraham (100) and Sarah (90) at Isaac's birth are interpreted as being especially significant. Israel did not merit entering the land of Canaan,

¹Tanchuma Toledot 2 (34b).

²Bereshit Rabbah 63:1 (p. 678); see also Yalkut Shimoni II 960.

³Pesikta Rabbati 38 (165a); Tanchuma Vayera 14 (29a); Tanchuma Buber Vayera 30, 32, 36 (52b-53b).

but when God was reminded of the birth of Isaac --specifically that the combined ages of Abraham and Sarah (190) are equal to the value of the word "Canaan (כנען) in gematria (20+50+70+50=190)-- Israel was permitted to enter.⁴

Abraham even received a hint that when he was 100 years old he would father a son fit to inherit his covenant. God said to Abraham: "לך לך" (Genesis 12:1), the value of which in gematria is 100.⁵ Indeed, Abraham was not able to father a fit son until he had been circumcized at age 99.

Let (Abraham) be circumcized at 85 years of age, when (the covenant) was spoken of with him (at the covenant) between the pieces. Rather, (he was not circumcized then) so that Isaac would come forth from a holy source [and so that Ishmael, who was born when Abraham was 86 years old, would not].⁶

Isaac was one of only a few biblical figures who were named by God before they were born. Isaac's name, therefore, was not changed.

Why were the names of Abraham and Jacob changed while Isaac's name was not changed? With regard to (Abraham and Jacob), their fathers named them. But with regard to Isaac, the Holy One blessed be He named him Isaac, as it is said: "[And God said: 'But Sarah your wife will bear you a son,] and you shall name him Isaac'" (Genesis 17:19). Four were named before they were born. They are Isaac and Ishmael, Josiah and Solomon.⁷

⁴Yalkut Shimoni I 742.

⁵Tanchuma Lech Lecha 3 (19b).

⁶Bereshit Rabbah 46:2 (pp. 459-60); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 80, II 968.

⁷Y. Berachot ch. 1 hal. 6 (4a); see also Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bo pp. 59-60; Bereshit Rabbah 45:8 (pp. 455-6); Yalkut Shimoni I 217. Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (30a) and Yalkut Shimoni I 45, II 200 also include Moses and the Messiah.

A related midrash says that God names all righteous persons, either prior to their birth as with Isaac, or during their lifetime (by changing their names) as with Abraham and Jacob.⁸ According to another explanation, God did not change Isaac's name to reward him for calling the wells which he dug by the same names which Abraham called them (Genesis 26:18).⁹

A number of explanations are offered for the significance of Isaac's name. Few sources, however, cite the biblical pun which relates the name Isaac (יִצְחָק) to the root "ק-ח-ח" meaning "to laugh."

"And God said: 'But Sarah your wife [shall bear you a son], and you shall name him Isaac'" (Genesis 17:19). Because they laughed at the matter. Of Abraham it is written: "And Abraham fell on his face and laughed" (Genesis 17:17). And of Sarah it is written: "And Sarah laughed to herself" (Genesis 18:12). The Holy One blessed be He said to them: "You laughed at the matter; by your lives it is as his name, Isaac." And also Sarah says: "God made me laugh" (Genesis 21:6).¹⁰

Perhaps this interpretation was too obvious for the rabbis to consider.

Two other explanations of Isaac's name are prevalent in the literature.

"And Abraham named the son that was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac (יִצְחָק)" (Genesis 21:3). Law went forth (קָם מֵעַם) to the world. A gift was given to the world.¹¹

⁸Yalkut Shimoni II 449.

⁹Midrash Chaserot Veyitrot p. 229; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:18.

¹⁰Midrash Hagadol Genesis 17:19; see also Midrash Chaserot Veyitrot p. 229.

¹¹Bereshit Rabbah 53:7 (p. 562); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 92, II 1073.

According to this midrash the name "קִיץ" is a combination of the words "קָם אֵץ" which means "law went forth." This interpretation refers to the fact that Isaac was the first person to be circumcized at eight days.¹²

"[And God said: 'But Sarah your wife will bear you a son,] and you shall name him Isaac (קִיץ)'" (Genesis 17:19). Why was he named Isaac? The letter yod corresponds to the ten trials with which Abraham was tested. The letter tzadi corresponds to ninety years, for Sarah our mother was ninety years old (when she gave birth). The letter chet corresponds to the eight days when [Isaac] was circumcized. The letter kof corresponds to 100 years that were to Abraham our father, as it is said: "And Abraham was 100 years old [when his son Isaac was born to him]" (Genesis 21:5).¹³

In other versions of this midrash the letter yod is said to correspond to the Ten Commandments.¹⁴ In one manuscript of Bereshit Rabbah, both interpretations of the letter yod are offered.¹⁵

The numerical value of Isaac's name is important for another reason.

"And these are the names..." (Exodus 1:1). Names are pleasant to Israel. You find that the Holy One blessed be He names them (Israel). (God) gave a son to Abraham and said to him: "And you shall name him Isaac" (Genesis 17:19). Yod has the value ten, tzadi the value ninety, chet the value eight, kof the value 100 which totals 208. And Israel spent 210 years in Egypt even though God said to Abraham: "And

¹²Lekach Tov Genesis 21:3; see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 12:1; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:2:5.

¹³Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (30a); see also Tanchuma Korach 12 (74a-b); Bemidbar Rabbah 18:21; Yalkut Shimoni I 45, II 200; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 17:19; Lekach Tov Genesis 21:3; Midrash Chaserot Veyitrot p. 229.

¹⁴Bereshit Rabbah 53:7 (p. 562); Yalkut Shimoni I 92, II 1073.

¹⁵Notes to Bereshit Rabbah 53:7 (p. 562).

(Israel) shall serve (Egypt) and (Egypt) shall oppress (Israel) 400 years" (Genesis 15:13). (God) said to him: "Your seed (זרעך) shall be a stranger from the time you shall have seed (זרע)." God began counting from the birth of Isaac.¹⁶

The discrepancy between 208 and 210 is not explained here. Louis Ginzberg explains that the 210 years of Egyptian bondage corresponds to the reduction in the numerical value of Isaac's name. He should have been called "יִשְׁחָק," but was instead called "יִצְחָק." The difference between sin (300) and tzadi (90) equals 210.¹⁷ Perhaps the value 210 is derived from the value of "יִצְחָק" in Genesis 21:12:

"For through Isaac (יִצְחָק) seed (זרע) will be named for you."

This midrash indicates the significance of the birth of Isaac for reckoning the number of years Israel spent in Egypt. This problem puzzled the rabbis because of seemingly contradictory passages in the Torah.

"The time that the Israelites remained [in Egypt] was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt]" (Exodus 12:40-1). One passage says "430 years," but another passage says: "And (Israel) shall serve (Egypt) and (Egypt) shall oppress (Israel) 400 years" (Genesis 15:13). How does one reconcile these two verses? Thirty years before Isaac was born the decree was made at the covenant between the pieces.¹⁸

Another midrash explains why the birth of Isaac is chosen.

Rabbi Elazar ben Arach said to them: The Holy One blessed be He said to them specifically from the time he had offspring, as it is said: "[Know] that your offspring (זרעך) will be a

¹⁶Tanchuma Shmot 4 (63b).

¹⁷Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, vol. 5, p. 281.

¹⁸Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bo p. 50; see also Mechilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai Bo 12:40.

stranger [in a land not theirs, and (Israel) shall serve (Egypt) and (Egypt) shall oppress (Israel) 400 years]" (Genesis 15:13). And it is written: "For through Isaac offspring (יִצְחָק) will be named for you" (Genesis 21:12). And from the birth of Isaac until Israel left Egypt was 400 years.¹⁹

Those who erred in the calculation suffered greatly.

"God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines" (Exodus 13:17). Why? Because the tribe of Ephraim erred and left Egypt before the period was complete and 30,000 of them were murdered. And why were they murdered? Because they calculated from the day that God spoke to Abraham at the covenant between the pieces and they erred thirty years, as it is said: "The children of Ephraim were as archers handling the bow [that turned back in the day of battle. They kept not the covenant of God and refused to walk in His law]" (Psalms 78:9-10). Had they not miscalculated, they would not have departed.²⁰

Another midrash attempts to reconcile the discrepancy between the 400 years of servitude foretold to Abraham, and the actual 210 years Israel spent in Egypt.²¹ Moses initially declined to approach Pharaoh on behalf of the Jews. He said to God:

"Master of all Worlds, I already calculated what you said to Abraham our father at the covenant between the pieces. 'And (Israel) shall serve (Egypt) and (Egypt) shall oppress (Israel) 400 years' (Genesis 15:13). And they are not complete and they have only spent 210 years there." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "It is not as you calculated for yourself. For from the day that Isaac was born I advanced the end (of servitude) for them and skimped on it. And thus it says: '[My Beloved] skimped (אָלַף) on [the time because of Isaac who was offered on] one of

¹⁹Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 48 (50b); see also Tanchuma Shmot 4 (63b); Yalkut Shimoni I 77.

²⁰Shmot Rabbah 20:11; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 226.

²¹The number 210 is derived from the word "כָּדָר" (Genesis 42:4), the value of which in gematria equals 210. See Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 48 (50b-51a); Yalkut Shimoni I 77.

the hills' (Song of Songs 2:8).²² And it is already completed." And that is what is written: "God made known His ways to Moses, His calculations for the children of Israel" (Psalms 103:7). (God made known) the calculation He did for the children of Israel.²³

According to this midrash not only was Isaac's birth important as the beginning of the 400 years, but also the Israelites were rewarded, due to the binding of Isaac, by having the time they would have spent in Egyptian bondage reduced.

To summarize these midrashim, Israel spent 210 years in Egyptian bondage. Isaac's birth marks the beginning of the 400 years of oppression which God revealed to Abraham at the covenant between the pieces. This conclusion is based upon the uses of the word "זרע" meaning "offspring" in Genesis 15:13 and 21:12. The rabbis consider Exodus 12:40, which numbers the years of slavery at 430, to have been calculated from the covenant between the pieces.²⁴ The fact that Israel spent only 210 years in Egypt, rather than 400 years as foretold to Abraham, is credited to the binding of Isaac.

According to the rabbis Israel left Egypt at the exact date and time when the covenant between the pieces occurred and at the exact date and time when Isaac was born.

²²This verse is usually translated "My beloved skipped on the hills." The commentator understands the root "א-ל-ל" in terms of skipping time.

²³Midrash on Psalms 18:22. See Mechilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai Bo 12:40 and Yalkut Shimoni I 77 for a reckoning of 210, 400 and 430 years.

²⁴This would mean that Abraham was seventy years old then, which differs from midrashim cited above.

"And at the end (עקב) of 430 years [on the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt]" (Exodus 12:41). It teaches that when the end (עקב) arrived, God did not cause them to delay even the wink of an eye. On the fifteenth of Nisan God spoke to Abraham our father (at the covenant) between the pieces. On the fifteenth of Nisan the ministering angels came to Abraham our father to give him good news.²⁵ On the fifteenth of Nisan Isaac was born. And how do we know that on the fifteenth of Nisan the decree was made (at the covenant) between the pieces? Because it is said: "And at the end (עקב) [of 430 years]"--one end (עקב) for all of them. And thus Scripture says: "On the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt."²⁶

At midnight (God) spoke with Abraham our father [at the covenant] between the pieces. And at midnight Isaac was born. And at midnight the first-born of Egypt were killed, as it is said: "At the end (עקב) [of 430 years]" (Exodus 12:41)--one end for all of them.²⁷

According to another source, however, Isaac was born at noon.

Rav Huna said in the name of Hezekiah: (Isaac) was born in the middle of the day. The word "מועד" is said here: ["Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the exact time (מועד) of which God had spoken" (Genesis 21:2).] And the word "מועד" is said there: "[There alone shall you slaughter the Pesach sacrifice...] at the exact time (מועד) that you came forth from Egypt" (Deuteronomy 16:6).²⁸

The meaning of "מועד" in Deuteronomy 16:6 is learned by translating Exodus 12:51: "In the middle of the day (במצות היום הזה), the Lord brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt."

²⁵See Genesis 18:10.

²⁶Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bo p. 51; see also Seder Olam Rabbah 5 p. 20.

²⁷Mechilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai Bo 12:40.

²⁸Bereshit Rabbah 53:6 (p. 561).

These midrashim probably provide the basis for determining the date of Isaac's birth, and thereby the date when God remembered Sarah. One finds a general tendency toward uniformity in the literature with regard to the birth and death of the Patriarchs.

It has been taught: Rabbi Eliezer says: In Tishre the world was created. In Tishre the Patriarchs were born. In Tishre the Patriarchs died. On Pesach Isaac was born. On Rosh Hashanah Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were remembered.... Rabbi Joshua says: In Nisan the world was created. In Nisan the Patriarchs were born. In Nisan the Patriarchs died. On Pesach Isaac was born.²⁹

Uniformity is so important that the term "אבות" meaning "Patriarchs" is used, although Isaac is clearly not included. Isaac could not have been born in Tishre because of the relationship of his birth to the Egyptian bondage, as discussed above. The rabbinic literature concludes that Isaac was born on Pesach for other reasons as well.

Another interpretation: "How great are your works, O Lord, [Your thoughts are very deep]" (Psalms 92:6). What does "Your thoughts are very deep" mean? Rabbi Chanina said: The work of the Tabernacle was finished on the 25th day of Kislev, but it stayed packed away until the first of Nisan, as it is written: "On the first day of the first month you shall raise the Tabernacle of the tent of meeting" (Exodus 40:2). All the time that (the Tabernacle) was packed away Israel murmured against Moses saying: "Why was it not set up immediately? Perhaps it was damaged." But (God) calculated to bring the rejoicing of the Tabernacle in the month in which Isaac was born. For in Nisan Isaac was born. And how do we know? Because when the angels came to Abraham, what did he say? "Knead it and make cakes" (Genesis 18:6), for it was Pesach (and he was obviously referring to Passover cakes). And (one of the angels) said to

²⁹Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a; see also Pesikta Rabbati supplement 3 (198b); Shmot Rabbah 15:11; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:1.

(Abraham): "I will return to you at the season of life and behold a son will be to Sarah your wife" (Genesis 18:10).³⁰

According to the above interpretation God promised to return to Abraham in order to give him a son at the exact time in another year. The following talmudic passage does not conclude that the meeting between Abraham and the angels took place at Pesach.

How do we know that Isaac was born at Pesach? Because it is written: "I will return to you at the (next) festival (תָּיִב) [...and Sarah shall have a son]" (Genesis 18:14). When did this occur?³¹ If one says it occurred at Pesach and He said it ("I will return to you...") of Atzeret, could she give birth in fifty days? Rather, (perhaps it occurred) at Atzeret and He said it of Nisan. But in five months could she give birth? Rather, (perhaps it occurred) at Succot and He said it of Nisan. But in six months, could she give birth? It was taught that it was a leap year. But if one subtracts the days of uncleanness, the time is too short.³² Mar Zutra said: Even those who say that when a woman gives birth in nine months she does not give birth before the month is complete admit that if she gives birth at seven months, she can give birth before the month is complete. As it is said: "And after the cycle of days [Hannah conceived and bore a son]" (I Samuel 1:20).³³ The minimum of cycles is two and the minimum of days is two.³⁴

God tells Abraham that He will return to him at the "תָּיִב," a word

³⁰Pesikta Rabbati 6 (24a-b); see also Shmot Rabbah 52:2; Yalkut Shimoni II 184.

³¹I.e., When did God say this to Abraham? The author assumes that it was said on one of the festivals, and that Sarah became pregnant then and would give birth on the next festival.

³²According to tradition Sarah became niddah on that day.

³³This verse is usually translated: "And when the time was come about...."

³⁴Rosh Hashanah 11a.

which often means "festival," as it is understood here. The commentator assumes that this dialogue occurred on a festival, and concludes that it must have taken place on Succot and that Sarah would give birth in Nisan. However, this understanding would mean that Sarah experienced a short pregnancy, even during a leap year. Two other sources help to clarify the matter.

"And the Lord remembered Sarah [as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the festival of which God had spoken]" (Genesis 21:1-2)....On Rosh Hashanah Sarah was remembered and Isaac was born at seven months on the night of Pesach, as it is said: "I will return to you at the festival when life is due..." (Genesis 18:14).³⁵

"[Sarah conceived and bore a son...] at the festival of which God had spoken" (Genesis 21:2). Rabbi Judan said: He was born at nine months so that no one could say that he was scraped from the house of Abimelech. Rav Chama said: He was born at seven months which are nine incomplete months.³⁶

Rabbi Judan's concern, that Sarah was impregnated at the house of Abimelech, is discussed below. Rav Chama attempts to reconcile Rabbi Judan's opinion with the consensus that God remembered Sarah on Rosh Hashanah and that Isaac was born on Pesach. One other midrash is important to include in this discussion because it appears to reflect the tension between whether Sarah was pregnant for seven months or nine months.

"And the Lord remembered Sarah..." (Genesis 21:1). This is what Scripture says: "All the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree [have exalted

³⁵Tanchuma Vayera 17 (29a); see also Yebamot 64b; Yalkut Shimoni I 92, II 78.

³⁶Bereshit Rabbah 53:6 (p. 561).

the low tree, have dried up the moist tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish]" (Ezekiel 17:24)...."I have dried up the moist tree" refers to Abimelech's wife. "And made the dry tree to flourish" refers to Sarah, as it is said: "Sarah conceived and bore [a son to Abraham]" (Genesis 21:2)....Rav Levi said: When the period of Tammuz enters the grass withers and the trees bloom. Thus the grass withers: "For the Lord had closed up [all the wombs of the house of Abimelech]" (Genesis 20:18). And the trees bloom: "And the Lord remembered Sarah."³⁷

From Rav Levi's comment one might believe that God remembered Sarah in Tammuz, which is nine months before Nisan (when it is not a leap year). In Midrash Hagadol³⁸ this midrash appears, but rather than Tammuz, the month is Tishre! While this change could be the result of a scribal error, it might have been made consciously so that the text would be consistent with the view that Sarah was remembered on Rosh Hashanah.

The rabbinic understanding of the date of Isaac's birth appears to be that:

- God remembered Sarah on Rosh Hashanah.
- Sarah became pregnant either then or on Sukkot, when Abraham was informed about her pregnancy by an angel.
- Sarah was pregnant for seven months, beginning either the first or fifteenth of Tishre through the fifteenth of Nisan, during a leap year. This period can be considered nine incomplete months because the period between the fifteenth of Tishre and the fifteenth of Nisan is seven complete months. The first and last days of her

³⁷Tanchuma Vayera 15 (29a); see also Bereshit Rabbah 53:1 (pp. 554-5); Tanchuma Buber Vayera 33 (53a-b); Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 52 (56b); Agadat Bereshit 29:3; Yalkut Shimoni I 91, II 357.

³⁸Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:1.

pregnancy each represent an incomplete month.

--Isaac was born on Pesach.

The Tosephta and Talmud prescribe the reading of Genesis 21 on Rosh Hashanah, corresponding to the date when God remembered Sarah. However, this opinion is challenged by some authorities who say that Numbers 29 should be read.³⁹ Perhaps the latter is the older tradition, but when the rabbis established that Isaac was born on Pesach, and therefore that Sarah was remembered on Rosh Hashanah, they instituted the reading of Genesis 21.

The first significant event in Isaac's life, following his birth, was his circumcision. Isaac was the first person to have been circumcized at eight days old, as mentioned above. From this event the rabbis derive the law that a father is obligated to circumcize his son.⁴⁰ According to one rabbinic view the feast, which the Bible claims Abraham gave on the day Isaac was weaned, actually occurred on the day he was circumcized.

When Isaac was born, at eight days, (Abraham) brought him for circumcision, as it is said: "And Abraham circumcized Isaac his son of eight days" (Genesis 21:4). And he brought him for an offering on the altar and made a party and a feast. From here the sages say: A person must make a party and a feast on the day that he is privileged to circumcize his son, like our father Abraham, as it is said: "And Abraham made a great feast on the eighth day, he circumcized (לגמל) Isaac" (Genesis 21:8).⁴¹

This interpretation is reached by separating the word "לגמל"

³⁹Tosephta Megillah 3:6; Megillah 31a.

⁴⁰Kiddushin 29a.

⁴¹Midrash on Psalms 112:2; see also Devarim Rabbah 1:25; Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 29 (26b).

(usually translated "he was weaned") into two parts: "לן" and "לח." "לן" has the value eight in gematria, and "לח" means "he circumcized."⁴²

The predominant rabbinic opinion, however, follows the biblical text which states that Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. From what was he weaned? The rabbis offer three answers.

How do we know that Abraham initiated suffering? Abraham said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, If You had not given tranquility to the generation of the flood, its people would not have provoked Your anger. And if You had brought upon them afflictions, they would not have rebelled against You." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "From you I will begin." For (Abraham) was afflicted through his son, as it is said: "And the child grew and he was weaned" (Genesis 21:8). R. Hoshaya and R. Abin (disagreed). One [R. Abin] said that he was weaned from affliction. The other [R. Hoshaya] said that he was weaned from the evil inclination to the good inclination.⁴³

"And the child grew and he was weaned" (Genesis 21:18). R. Hoshaya the Elder said: He was weaned from the evil inclination. Our rabbis said: He was weaned from his milk.⁴⁴

The feast which Abraham made for this occasion is discussed in depth in the rabbinic literature. Many of the midrashim attempt to explain difficulties in Genesis 21:6-8.

And Sarah said: "God made me rejoice. All who hear will rejoice with me." And she said: "Who would have said (לח) to Abraham that Sarah nurses children, yet I gave birth to a son in his old age." And the child grew and he was weaned. And Abraham made a great (לח) feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

⁴²Midrash on Psalms 112:2, note 8. This understanding may have been precipitated because of the problem of a passive verb followed by an apparent direct object.

⁴³Tanchuma Buber Noach 20 (24a); see also Tanchuma Noach 14 (17a) in which R. Abin says Isaac was weaned from the good inclination.

⁴⁴Bereshit Rabbah 53:10 (p. 565); see also Yalkut Shimon I 94.

The major issues considered are:

--why should others laugh with Sarah?

--why is the rare word "מלל" used to mean "said?"

--what is the significance of the plural "children" when one would expect the singular?

--why was the feast which Abraham made called "great?"

The following midrash discusses some of these issues.

"And (Sarah) said: 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah nurses children?'" (Genesis 21:7). How many children did Sarah nurse? Rabbi Levi said: The day that Abraham weaned Isaac his son, he made a great feast. All the nations of the world were murmuring and saying: "Do you see the old man and old woman who brought a foundling from the market and say: 'He is our son.' And not only this, but they make a great feast to establish their words." What did Abraham our father do? He went and invited all the great ones (גבולי) of the generation. And Sarah our mother invited their wives and each and every one brought her son with her, but did not bring her wet-nurse. And a miracle occurred with Sarah our mother and her breasts were opened like two fountains and she nursed all of them. But still they were murmuring and saying: "Even if Sarah could give birth at ninety years of age, could Abraham father a child at 100 years of age?" Thereupon Isaac's facial features were changed and he was similar to Abraham. All of them began saying: "Abraham fathered Isaac" (Genesis 25:19). Until Abraham there was not old age. One who wished to talk with Abraham, talked with Isaac, and vice versa. Abraham came and prayed and there was old age, as it is said: "And Abraham was old, along in years" (Genesis 24:1).⁴⁵

The next midrash indicates how the conclusion that Isaac's features were changed to resemble Abraham's is derived from the biblical account of Isaac's birth.

⁴⁵Baba Metzia 87a; see also Tanchuma Toledot 3 (34b); Yalkut Shimoni I 93.

"And Sarah conceived and bore to Abraham [a son in his old age]" (Genesis 21:2). This (verse) teaches that she did not steal the seed from another place. "A son in his old age (זקוניו)" teaches that (Isaac's) image (איִקוֹנִין) was similar to (Abraham's).⁴⁶

Four manuscripts offer an alternative reading which is helpful. They add the word "זיו" before "איִקוֹנִין." This midrash indicates that the word "זקוניו" in the biblical text is an abbreviation of "זיו איִקוֹנִין," derived by taking the "ז" from "זיו," dropping the "א" from "איִקוֹנִין" and combining the two words. This interpretation is explicit in latter collections of midrashim.⁴⁷

According to another opinion, while still in the womb, Isaac had his appearance changed to resemble Abraham's

"[These are the generations of Isaac son of Abraham:] Abraham fathered Isaac" (Genesis 25:19). But don't I know that Abraham fathered Isaac? R. Chanina the Elder said: It is like the story of a dove which eagles and ravens were pursuing. It fled from them and went and sat on her nest. But people were saying: "These eggs are from the eagle." And someone would say: "They are from the raven." She said to them: "While they are eggs, no one knows whether they are of a raven or they are of an eagle." But wait until she gives birth and they will be young birds and you will know from whom they are. Similarly, Sarah was found many times with Pharaoh and with Abimelech. Thus people began saying: "She is only pregnant from Pharaoh." And others were saying: "She is only pregnant from Abimelech." The Holy One blessed be He said to them: "Let the mouths close which utter a lie. Wait until she gives birth and you will see to whom he is similar." Thereupon, the Holy One blessed be He commanded the angel appointed over the formation of the fetus. (God) said to him: "Do not form him similar to his mother, but to his father so that everyone will know that he could only be

⁴⁶Bereshit Rabbah 53:6 (p. 561).

⁴⁷Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:2; Lekach Tov Genesis 21:2.

from his father." Thereupon, he went forth similar to his father. Therefore it is said: "These are the generations of Isaac son of Abraham: [Abraham fathered Isaac]."48

Many other midrashim confirm that Isaac resembled Abraham.⁴⁹

Sarah's good fortune was shared by many other women of her generation.

"And Sarah said: 'God has made (עשה) me rejoice; all who hear will rejoice with me'" (Genesis 21:6). R. Berechiah and R. Judah bar Simon and R. Chanan in the name of R. Samuel bar Rav Isaac: When Reuben is rejoicing, what does it matter to Simeon? Similarly, Sarah was remembered, what did it matter to others? But when Sarah our mother was remembered many barren women were remembered with her. Many deaf gained their hearing with her. Many blind gained their sight with her. Many insane became sane with her. The word "עשייה" is said here: ["God has made (עשה)"], and the word "עשייה" is said there: "[Then the king made a great feast for all the princes and his servants, even Esther's feast.] And he made (עשה) a release to the provinces [and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king]" (Esther 2:18). Just as when the word "עשייה" is used there, pardon was given to the world, so too when the word "עשייה" is used here, pardon was given to the world. R. Levi said: (Sarah) caused the luminaries to increase. The word "עשייה" is said here and the word "עשייה" is said there, as it is said: "And God made (ויעש) the two luminaries" (Genesis 1:16).⁵⁰

According to another version of this midrash, not only were all barren women remembered with Sarah, but they became pregnant with her and gave birth when she did.

⁴⁸Agadat Bereshit 37:5; see also Tanchuma Toledot 1 (34b).

⁴⁹Bereshit Rabbah 65:9 (p. 717); Sanhedrin 107b; Tanchuma Noach 14 (17a), Chayei Sarah 1 (31b), Toledot 6 (35b); Tanchuma Buber Vayishlach 25 (88b); Agadat Bereshit 34:2; Yalkut Shimoni I 105, II 141, 233, 243; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:1, 25:19.

⁵⁰Bereshit Rabbah 65:9 (p. 717); see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 22:1; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:6.

And not only this, but when Sarah gave birth every blind person in the world was given sight, and every cripple was made straight, and every mute person was given speech, and every madman was healed. This is like a king who had a friend. A happy occasion occurred. The king wanted to show how much his friend was honored by him. He gave permission to free the prisoners.... Rabbi Chanina ben Levi said a greater and more remarkable thing. For on the day on which Isaac was born the Holy One blessed be He increased the light of the sun's disk 48 times what it was. (God said:) "And because this world was yours and others, I decreed it.⁵¹ When your world will come, I will restore it for you. 'And the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be seven fold, as the light of seven days' (Isaiah 30:26). And it will shine only for you. 'Because of you who fear My name will the sun of righteousness arise for you, and healing is in its wings' (Malachai 3:20)."⁵²

The birth of Isaac marks the beginning of the period when light will be restored to the world.

One barren woman who was remembered with Sarah is specifically mentioned.

Milkah was barren and was with Nachor all those years and did not give birth. But when Sarah our mother was remembered, all the barren women were remembered with her and also she was remembered with them.⁵³

The following midrash comments on the use of the word "לל" in Genesis 21:7 and the use of the plural "children" in the same verse.

"And (Sarah) said: 'Who would have said (לל נ) to Abraham that Sarah nurses children

⁵¹I.e., God decreed that the light of the seven days of creation shall be hid for the righteous.

⁵²Pesikta Rabbati 42 (177a-b).

⁵³Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:20. Milkah is appropriately remembered, bearing a son, Bethuel, who is Rebecca's father.

(בְּנֵיִם)?'" (Genesis 21:7). R. Pinchas in the name of R. Chelkiah: "מִי אִמֶּר" and "מִי דִבֶּר" are not written here, rather "מִי מָלַל," hinting that (Abraham) fathered a child at 100 years of age.⁵⁴ R. Pinchas in the name of R. Chelkiah said: The standing crop of Abraham our father had dried up and it was made ripe (מְלִילוֹת).⁵⁵ "She nurses בְּנֵיִם" (means) she nurses builders (בְּנָאִים).⁵⁶ Sarah was much too modest. Abraham our father said to her: "This is not the time for modesty. Rather, bare your breasts in order that all will know that the Holy One blessed be He has begun doing miracles." She bared her breasts and they gushed forth milk like two fountains. Women would come and would nurse their children and say: "We are not worthy to nurse from the milk of this righteous woman." Our rabbis said: All who came in the name of heaven were made fearers of heaven. R. Acha said: Even one who did not come in the name of heaven, dominion in the world was given to him.⁵⁷

In other accounts Abraham's telling Sarah to bare her breasts is precipitated by suspicion on the part of the nations of the world that Hagar, not Sarah, was Isaac's mother. Also, the women ask Sarah to nurse their children because God dried up their breasts.⁵⁸

One other interpretation of the use of the plural "בְּנֵיִם" in Genesis 21:7 is offered.

⁵⁴The value of "מָלַל" in gematria equals 100. R. Pinchas is saying that while one would expect the use of either of the common roots "ר-ב-א" or "ר-ב-ד," the root "ל-ל-מ" is specifically used as a hint that Abraham fathered a son at 100 years of age.

⁵⁵R. Pinchas relates the word "מָלַל" to the word "מְלִילוֹת" meaning "to make ripe."

⁵⁶The word "בְּנֵיִם" which is usually rendered "children" is understood to be the participle of the root "ב-נ-ב" meaning "to build."

⁵⁷Bereshit Rabbah 53:9 (pp. 563-4); see also Pesikta Rabbati 43 (180a); Yalkut Shimoni I 93, II 947; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:7.

⁵⁸Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 52 (56b); Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 22:1; Midrash Hallel pp. 92-3.

Another interpretation of "She nursed children" (Genesis 21:7). It teaches that the son given to her was equivalent to many children, similar to what is said: "Am I not better for you than ten children?" (I Samuel 1:8). And also it says: "And I multiplied (וַאֲרַב) his seed and I gave him Isaac" (Joshua 24:3). It teaches that Isaac was equivalent to many children. R. Judah said: It is written "וַאֲרַב" but it is read "וַאֲרַבָּה." The Holy One blessed be He said: "I made many quarrels with (Abraham) before I gave him Isaac."⁵⁹

The rabbis identify the guests who attended the feast celebrating Isaac's weaning.

"And Abraham made a great (גָּדוֹל) feast..." (Genesis 21:8). R. Judah said: The Great One (גָּדוֹל) of the universe was there. R. Judah in the name of R. Jose bar Chanina: "Then the king made a great (גָּדוֹל) feast" (Esther 12:18). The Great One (גָּדוֹל) in the universe was there. That is what is written: "For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good [as God rejoiced over your fathers]" (Deuteronomy 30:9). "For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good" in the days of Mordecai and Esther. "As God rejoiced over your fathers" in the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁶⁰ R. Judah said: "A great feast" means a feast of the great ones (גְּדוּלִים). Og and all the great ones were there. They said to Og: "Didn't you say to Abraham that he was a barren mule and could not father a child?" He said to them: "Now, his gift, isn't he puny? If I were to put my finger on him, I would crush him." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Why do you disparage my gift? By your life, you will see thousands upon ten thousands of his children, and it is your destiny to fall into the hands of his children," [as it is said: "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Do not fear him, for in your hand I will deliver him'" (Numbers 21:34)]. R. Levi said: The cradle was rocked for the first time in the

⁵⁹Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:7. Since the word is written defectively, it can be understood as being from the root "ל-י-ב" meaning "to quarrel." See also Y. Pesachim ch. 10 hal. 5 (37d).

⁶⁰One manuscript includes only Abraham, which makes more sense here.

house of Abraham our father. For R. Joshua bar Nachman said: The 31 kings whom Joshua murdered, all of them were at the feast of Abraham.⁶¹

Other people, including family, were there too.

Shem and Eber and all the great ones of the land came. And Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and all his servants and Phicol, the minister of his army, to eat and to drink and to rejoice at the feast which Abraham made on the day Isaac, his son, was weaned. And also Terach, Abraham's father, and Nachor, his brother, came from Haran, they and all their household. And they rejoiced greatly when they heard that a son was born to Sarah. And they came to Abraham and they ate and drank at the feast which Abraham made on the day Isaac was weaned. And Terach and Nachor rejoiced with Abraham and dwelt with him in the land of the Philistines for many days.⁶²

To summarize the concerns of the rabbinic literature with regard to the feast Abraham made on the day Isaac was weaned:

- God, Og, Abimelech and all the great ones of the land, as well as family members, attended.
- the nations of the world suspected that Abraham and Sarah were not Isaac's parents because they were so old.
- the nations speculated that Pharoah or Abimelech had fathered Isaac, that Hagar was his mother, or that Sarah and Abraham had obtained Isaac from the market.
- God changed Isaac's facial features --either before or after his birth-- to resemble Abraham's, so that everyone would say that Abraham fathered Isaac.

⁶¹Bereshit Rabbah 53:10 (pp. 565-7); see also Devarim Rabbah 1:25; Kohelet Rabbah 7:2:4; Yalkut Shimoni I 94, II 22, 973.

⁶²Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 66.

--Abraham told Sarah to bare her breasts. They miraculously flowed with milk so that she was able to nurse the children of all the women, whose own breasts had dried up.

One other interpretation of the feast is found in the Talmud.

Rav Avera explained, sometimes in the name of Rav (Ammi) and sometimes in the name of Rav (Ashi): What is meant by: "And the boy grew and he was weaned (ויגמל)". [And Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned (הגמל)]" (Genesis 21:8)? The Holy One blessed be He will make a feast for the righteous on the day that God manifests (יגמל) His kindness to the seed of Isaac.⁶³

⁶³Pesachim 119b; see also Yalkut Shimoni II 847.

II

Isaac and Ishmael

"Oh that you were as a brother to me, who nursed at my mother's breast. When I met you in the street I could kiss you, and no one would despise me" (Song of Songs 8:1).

This verse surprised the rabbis. "Like which brother?" they asked. "You find that from the beginning of the world's creation until now brothers hated each other." Cain and Abel are one example. So too are Isaac and Ishmael.

Ishmael hated Isaac, as it is said: "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore to Abraham, playing (מצחק)" (Genesis 21:9). And the word "מצחק" means that he wanted to kill him, as it is said: "[And Abner said to Joab:] 'If you please, let the men arise and fight (וישחקו)¹ before us.' [...And each person caught his neighbor by the head and thrust his sword into the side of his neighbor, and they fell together]" (II Samuel 2:14, 16).²

Immediately following Isaac's weaning, Sarah tells Abraham to send away Hagar and her son Ishmael. Sarah had observed Ishmael "playing (מצחק)." The word's root is identical to the root of Isaac's name. The rabbis offer a number of interpretations of the word.

"Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian..." (Genesis 21:9). R. Simeon said: R. Akiba said that it was a shameful matter. R. Akiba

¹The roots "פ-נ-ח" and "פ-נ-ש" represent different pronunciations of the same word. Isaac's name is usually written "פִּנְחָס," but is written "פִּנְחָס" in Jeremiah 33:26; Amos 7:9, 16; and Psalms 105:9.

²Tanchuma Buber Shmot 24 (7b-8a); see also Tanchuma Shmot 27 (70a-b); Shmot Rabbah 5:1; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 8:1:1; Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 16:5; Yalkut Shimon I 157, 443, II 993.

explained: "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore to Abraham, playing (מַצְחֵק)." The word "מַצְחֵק" means sexual immorality, as it is said: "[The Hebrew servant whom you have brought to us came in to me] to engage in intercourse (מַצְחֵק) with me" (Genesis 39:17). It teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael raping maidens and seducing married women and raping them. R. Ishmael taught: The root "ק-נ-ץ" means idol worship, as it is said: "[They arose early the next day and offered burnt-offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat to eat and drink] and they arose to worship (מַצְחֵק)" (Exodus 32:6).³ It teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael building altars and hunting locusts and sacrificing upon (the altars). R. Eliezer said: The root "ק-נ-ץ" means bloodshed. "If you please, let the men arise and fight (וַיִּשְׁחָקוּ) before us" (II Samuel 2:14). R. Azariah in the name of R. Levi said: (Ishmael said to Isaac:) "Come, let us see our portion in the field." Ishmael took a bow and arrows and shot at Isaac and pretended he was playing. That is what is written: "As a madman who casts firebrands, arrows and death, so is one who deceives his neighbor and says: 'Am I not playing (מַצְחֵק)?'" (Proverbs 26:18-19). But I [R. Simeon ben Jochai] say the word "מַצְחֵק" refers to inheritance. For when our father Isaac was born, everyone was happy. Ishmael said to them: "You are fools. I am the first-born, and I will receive a double portion." For from Sarah's response to Abraham you learn (this). "[And she said to Abraham: 'Send away this bondwoman and her son,] for the son of this bondwoman shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac'" (Genesis 21:10). (Ishmael shall not inherit) "with my son" even if he were not Isaac. (Ishmael shall not inherit) "with Isaac" even if he were not my son. How much the more so (shall Ishmael not inherit) "with my son, with Isaac."⁴

This midrash offers four interpretations of the word "מַצְחֵק." They are: sexual immorality, idol worship, bloodshed and inheritance.

³This verse is from the account of the incident of the Golden Calf.

⁴Bereshit Rabbah 53:11 (pp. 567-9); see also Tosephta Sota 6:6; Sifre Devarim 31 (pp. 49-50); Tanchuma Buber Vayera 5 (64b); Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 30 (27b); Agadat Bereshit 37:3; Yalkut Shimoni I 94; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:9.

The reason that Ishmael's idolatry bothered Sarah is explained in another source.

What did Ishmael do? When he was fifteen years old he first brought an idol from the market and would play (קמחק) with it and worship it as he had seen others doing. Thereupon, "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore to Abraham, playing (קמחק)" (Genesis 21:9). And the use of "קמחק" here means idol worship, as it is said: "And the people sat to eat and drink and they arose to worship (למחק)" (Exodus 32:6). Thereupon, "And (Sarah) said to Abraham: 'Send away this bondwoman and her son'" (Genesis 21:10), lest my son learn his ways.⁵

Sarah was afraid that Ishmael would influence Isaac to worship idols. Isaac was apparently quite young at the time. If Ishmael was fifteen years of age and was about fourteen years older than Isaac,⁶ then Isaac could not be more than one or two years old, which corresponds to one opinion of his age when he was weaned. According to another source, Isaac was five years old when Ishmael began shooting arrows at him.⁷

Abraham was upset when he had to send away Hagar and Ishmael.

"And God said to Abraham: 'Don't let it be grievous in your sight [on account of the boy and your bondwoman. All that Sarah said to you, listen to her,] for through Isaac (קמחק) offspring will be named for you'" (Genesis 21:12). R. Judan bar Shilum said: "קמחק" is not written, but "קמחק" (is written). R. Azariah in the name of Bar Chutah: The letter bet (has the value) two. The one who acknowledges the two worlds shall inherit the two

⁵Tanchuma Shmot 1 (62a); see also Shmot Rabbah 1:1; Tosephta Sota 5:2.

⁶Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (Seder Olam Rabbah 1 p. 4) and 100 years old when Isaac was born.

⁷Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 66.

worlds. R. Judan bar Shilum said: It is written: "Remember the marvelous works (God) has done, His signs and the judgments of His mouth" (Psalms 105:5). (God said:) "I have given a sign to him who brings forth from his mouth. All who acknowledge the two worlds will be called offspring for you, and all who do not acknowledge the two worlds will not be called offspring for you."⁸

Because Isaac recognizes the existence of the world to come as well as this world, a fact signified by the bet before his name in Genesis 21:12, he --and not Ishmael-- will carry on Abraham's name. Ishmael is excluded from the covenant.⁹

"And God seeks the pursued" (Ecclesiastes 3:15). R. Huna in the name of R. Joseph said: God always seeks the pursued....Isaac was pursued by Ishmael, "And God seeks the pursued." "For through Isaac offspring will be named for you" (Genesis 21:12).¹⁰

"And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I will bless him, [and I will make him fruitful and I will multiply him greatly. He will father twelve princes and I will make him a great nation]" (Genesis 17:20). I blessed him with the goodness of this world, with children and with wealth and with rulership. But the goodness of the world to come is only for Isaac and his offspring. As it is said: "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac" (Genesis 17:21).¹¹

The rabbis clearly establish that Isaac, not Ishmael, is Abraham's rightful heir to the covenant.¹² The following proverb is cited to

⁸Bereshit Rabbah 53:12 (p. 569); see also Bereshit Rabbati 21:12 (p. 88).

⁹Sanhedrin 59b; Nedarim 31a; Y. Nedarim ch. 3 hal. 12 (38a); Midrash Hagadol Genesis 17:19, 21:2.

¹⁰Vayikra Rabbah 27:5; see also Pesikta Rabbati supplement 1 (193b). However, one manuscript of Vayikra Rabbah and parallel midrashim in other sources say Isaac was pursued by the Philistines. See chapter five.

¹¹Midrash Hagadol Genesis 17:20-1.

¹²But not all offspring of Isaac, specifically not Esau and his descendants, are a part of this covenant.

indicate the difference between Isaac and Ishmael.¹³ "A wise son makes a father happy; but a foolish son is the grief of his mother" (Proverbs 10:1). Isaac, of course, is the wise son. Ishmael is the foolish son who actually causes Sarah and not his own mother grief.

Sarah is given credit for distinguishing between Isaac and Ishmael. "She seeks wool and linen" (Proverbs 31:13) between Ishmael and Isaac.¹⁴ Because Abraham listened to Sarah when she demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away, he earned that his offspring would be named for him through Isaac.¹⁵

The difference between the rabbis' view of Isaac and their view of Ishmael is expressed in the following midrash.

"And God said: 'But Sarah your wife [will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. And I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant and for his seed after him]. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you (שמעתיך). [Behold, I will bless him, and I will make him fruitful and I will multiply him greatly. He will father twelve princes and I will make him a great nation]'" (Genesis 17:19-20). R. Jochanan in the name of R. Joshua ben Chananiah: Thus the son of the bondwoman learned (that he would be blessed) from the son of the lady. "Behold, I will bless him" refers to Isaac. "And I will make him fruitful" refers to Isaac. "And I will multiply him" refers to Isaac. "And as for Ishmael," I already told you (שמעתיך)¹⁶ by way of an angel.¹⁷ R. Abba bar Kahana in the name of R. Biryai: Thus the son of the lady learned (that he would be blessed) from the son of the bondwoman. "Behold, I will

¹³Tanchuma Buber Toledot 1 (62b); see also Yalkut Shimoni II 994.

¹⁴Tanchuma Buber Chayei Sarah 3 (59a).

¹⁵Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 14:2; Devarim Rabbah 4:5.

¹⁶R. Jochanan reads "שמעתיך" as piel, rather than qal.

¹⁷See Genesis 16:10.

bless him" refers to Ishmael. "And I will make him fruitful" refers to Ishmael. All the more so "will I establish my covenant with Isaac" (Genesis 17:21). R. Isaac said: It is written: "All these are the twelve tribes (שְׁבִטֵי) of Israel" (Genesis 49:28). This refers to (the offspring of) the lady. But didn't Ishmael produce twelve (princes)? However, they are "נְשִׁימִים," as it is said: "As vapours (נְשִׁימִים) and wind [without rain is the person who boasts himself with a false gift]" (Proverbs 25:14). But these [referred to in Genesis 49:28] are rods (מִטָּה), as it is said: "[Your bow is made quite bare]. Sworn are the rods of the word, selah" (Habakkuk 3:9).¹⁸

The root of the word meaning "tribes" in Genesis 49:28 (שְׁבִיטֵי) also means rod. The word "מִטָּה," which means "rods" in Habakkuk 3:9, also means tribes. These metaphors (calling Ishmael "vapour" and Isaac's descendants "rods") apparently mean that Ishmael's glory will be transient and will soon pass, whereas Isaac's will endure as a rod that is planted.¹⁹ According to this midrash both Isaac and Ishmael receive blessings, but Ishmael's is related to material success and power, which are of this world and are therefore not permanent. Isaac, however, is part of an everlasting covenant with God.

One other incident involving Isaac and Ishmael is significant because it is one of the explanations of the event which precipitated the binding of Isaac.²⁰

"After these words" (Genesis 22:1). Isaac and Ishmael were arguing with one another. (Ishmael) said: "I am more beloved than you because I was

¹⁸Bereshit Rabbah 47:5 (pp. 473-4).

¹⁹Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, H. Freedman and Maurice Simon eds., vol. I, p. 402.

²⁰Other explanations of the incident which instigated the akedah are cited in the following chapter.

circumcized at thirteen years of age." And (Isaac) said: "I am more beloved than you because I was circumcized at eight days." Ishmael said to him: "I am more beloved because I was able to prevent it, but did not prevent it." At that moment Isaac said: "If only the Holy One blessed be He would appear to me and say to me that one of my limbs will be cut off, I would not hesitate." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "with the condition that you will offer yourself to me and not hesitate."²¹

Another version: Ishmael said to (Isaac): "I am more beloved than you because I was circumcized at thirteen years of age. But you were circumcized when you were tiny, and it was impossible to prevent it." Isaac said to him: "All that you loaned to the Holy One blessed be He was three drops of blood. But, behold, I am now 37 years old. If the Holy One blessed be He desired that I be slaughtered, I would not hesitate." The Holy One blessed be He said: "Now is the time." Thereupon, "And God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1).²²

"After these words" (Genesis 22:1). But what words were exchanged there? Ishmael said to Isaac: "I am greater than you because I was circumcized at thirteen years of age, and I withstood the pain. But you were circumcized at eight days and did not notice the pain. Even if your father had killed you, you would not have known. If you had been thirteen years of age you would not have withstood the pain." Isaac said to him: "This is nothing. If the Holy One blessed be He were to say to my father: 'Kill Isaac your son,' I would not hesitate." Immediately, the word jumped upon him,²³ as it is said: "After these words, God tested Abraham."²⁴

²¹Bereshit Rabbah 55:4 (pp. 587-8); see also Sanhedrin 89b; Yalkut Shimoni I 95.

²²Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 55:4.

²³I.e., he was given a chance to prove the validity of his statement.

²⁴Tanchuma Vayera 18 (29a-b).

And when Isaac was 37 years old, Ishmael his brother went and entered the tent. And Ishmael boasted to Isaac saying: "I was thirteen when the Lord spoke with my father to circumcize us. And I did the word of the Lord which He spoke to my father, and I gave my soul to the Lord and did not transgress His way which He commanded my father." And Isaac answered Ishmael saying: "Why do you boast about this thing, over a little piece of your flesh which the Lord commanded you to remove from yourself? The Lord, God of Abraham my father, lives. For if the Lord were to say to my father: 'Take Isaac, please, and offer him before me as an offering,' I would not prevent myself. Rather, I would do the thing happily." And the Lord heard what Isaac said to Ishmael. And it was good in the eyes of the Lord. And He decided to test Abraham with this thing.²⁵

In each of the accounts the plot is the same. Ishmael belittles Isaac because he was so young when he was circumcized. Isaac responds that Ishmael's circumcision is insignificant, because he (Isaac) is willing to offer his life. This comment instigates God's call to Abraham.

²⁵Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 71.

III

The Binding of Isaac

At the end of the previous chapter one explanation of the precipitating cause of the akedah is offered: the quarrel between Isaac and Ishmael. According to other explanations the words "And after these things" (Genesis 22:1) refer to incidents involving Abraham. Thus, the tension between considering Isaac the hero, as opposed to Abraham, is explicit from the outset. The midrashim cited above present the akedah as Isaac's test. The following midrashim, however, indicate that God tested Abraham.

"And after these things God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). R. Jochanan in the name of Rabbi Jose ben Zimra said: After the words of Satan, as it is written: "And the boy grew and was weaned and Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned" (Genesis 21:8). Satan said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, You favored this old man at 100 years of age with the fruit of the womb. At every feast that he made, he did not have one turtle-dove or one pigeon to sacrifice before you." (God) said to him: "Has he done nothing except for the benefit of his son? If I would say to him: 'Sacrifice your son before me,' immediately he would sacrifice him." Thereupon, "God tested Abraham.... And He said: 'Please (NJ) take your son...' " (Genesis 22:1-2). Rabbi Simeon bar Abba said: The word "NJ" is a word of request. It is like the story of a human king who faced many wars. He had one warrior and they won. After awhile, a difficult battle faced (the king). He said to (the warrior): "If you please, stand up for me in this war so that people will not say there was not among the earlier (wars) a real one." Similarly, the Holy One blessed be He said to Abraham: "I tested you with many tests and you stood up to them all. Now stand up for me in this test so that people will not say there was not a real (test) among the earlier ones."¹

¹Sanhedrin 89b; see also Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30a); Yalkut Shimoni I 96; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:1, 22:2.

According to this passage the akedah is initiated as God's response to Satan's challenge. God asks Abraham to undergo this test so that people will not deprecate the other tests he withstood, claiming they were not real tests.

In the following midrash Abraham's failure to have offered sacrifices is again the focus.

"After these things" (Genesis 22:1). Misgivings were there. Who had misgivings? Abraham (had them). He said: "I rejoiced, and I caused everyone to rejoice, but I did not set aside for the Holy One blessed be He either a bullock or a single ram." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "If it were said to you that you should sacrifice your son to me, you would not hesitate." According to R. Eliezer, who said: Is "אלהים" written? "והאלהים" is written (meaning) He and His court, the ministering angels² said: "Abraham, he rejoiced and caused everyone to rejoice, but did not set aside for the Holy One blessed be He either a bullock or a ram." The Holy One blessed be He said to (the ministering angels): "If it was said to him that he should sacrifice his son to me, he would not hesitate."³

In the following midrash the ministering angels use a different tactic.

Another interpretation (of "After these things"). It is similar to the story of a king who had a poor friend. The king said to him: "It is my responsibility to make you rich." So he gave him wealth in order that he could make a business with it. A few days later he entered the palace. (The king's men) said: "Why does this one enter?" The king said to them: "Because he is my faithful friend." They said to him: "If so, tell him to return your wealth." Thereupon, the king said to him: "Return to me what I gave to you." And he did not hesitate. And the people of the palace were ashamed. And the king

²And not Abraham as the first part of this midrash states.

³Bereshit Rabbah 55:4 (p. 587); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 95.

promised to increase his wealth. The Holy One blessed be He said to the ministering angels: "If I had listened to you when you said to me: 'What is man that You are mindful of him?' (Psalms 8:5), would there have been Abraham, who honored Me in My world?" The divine attribute of justice said before the Holy One: "All the trials with which You tested him regarded his wealth. Test him with regard to his body." (The ministering angels) said to Him: "Let (Abraham) sacrifice his son before You." Thereupon, (God) said to him: "Please take your son" (Genesis 22:2).⁴

The ministering angels' objection to God's creating the world is considered in another source.

When the Holy One blessed be He, may He be blessed, wanted to create the world, the ministering angels said to Him: "What is man that You are mindful of him, [and the son of man that You remember him]?" (Psalms 8:5). The Holy One blessed be He, may He be blessed, said to them: "You say 'What is man (אנוש) that You are mindful of him' because you look at the generation of Enosh (אנוש). But let Me show you the glory of Abraham 'that you are mindful of him (תזכורנו)'," as it is said: "And God remembered (ויזכור) Abraham" (Genesis 19:29). "You say 'And the son of man that You remember him (תפקדנו)'," as it is said: "And the Lord remembered (פקד) Sarah" (Genesis 21:1). (God) said to them: "In the future you will see the father who slaughters the son and the son who is slaughtered for the sanctification of My name."⁵

In one of the midrashim cited above Abraham was worried about his failure to offer sacrifices. In the following midrash he is concerned that he might have received his entire reward in this world, and will not be rewarded in the world to come.

You find that Abraham was concerned about the measure of justice. What did he say? Rabbi

⁴Yalkut Shimoni I 96.

⁵Tanchuma Vayera 18 (29b).

Levi said: He said: "It appears to me that I have received all my reward in this world. The Holy One blessed be He helped me against those kings and saved me from the furnace. I already received my reward, and I will not have a reward in the world to come." The Holy One blessed be He said: "Because you are concerned about My matters, you need a burnt-offering." Therefore, "And (God) said: 'Please take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up there for a burnt-offering on one of the mountains I will show you'" (Genesis 22:2).⁶

Not only do these midrashim explain why God tested Abraham, but they also suggest why the test consisted of a sacrifice.

The rabbis question why Isaac is identified in a long, drawn-out process. "And (God) said: 'Please take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac...'" (Genesis 22:2). The rabbis expand this statement into a dialogue between God and Abraham.

"[And (God) said: 'Please take] your son...'" (Genesis 22:2). (Abraham) said to Him: "Which son?" (God) said to him: "Your only son." (Abraham) said to Him: "This one is his mother's only son, and this one is his mother's only son." (God) said to him: "The one whom you love." (Abraham) said to Him: "Are there limits to feeling?" (God) said to him: "Isaac." And why didn't He reveal it to him (immediately)? In order to make (Isaac) beloved in his eyes, and in order to give (Abraham) a reward for each and every utterance.⁷

For Rav Huna in the name of R. Eliezer said: The Holy One blessed be He places doubt and suspense in the eyes of the righteous and afterward reveals to them the meaning of the matter.⁸

⁶Tanchuma Lech Lecha 10 (22a).

⁷Bereshit Rabbah 55:7 (p. 590); see also 39:9 (p. 372); Pesikta Rabbati 40 (169b); Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30a); Yalkut Shimoni I 62, II 343; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:2.

⁸Bereshit Rabbah 39:9 (p. 372).

Minor differences are found in other sources. For example, when God says: "Take your son," Abraham wants to take pity upon Isaac, so he answers: "Which son, the son (who was born when I was) uncircumcized, or the son (who was born when I was) circumcized?"⁹ Another source explains that Isaac is referred to as the one Abraham loves because God loved Isaac as He loves all who are pursued.¹⁰ The Talmud suggests that God used a drawn-out process to identify Isaac, lest Abraham be confused,¹¹ an interpretation also used to explain why Abraham and Isaac traveled three days before reaching Mount Moriah.¹²

Another source explains the significance of the word "יחידך."

Even had the Holy One blessed be He requested from Abraham his eyeball, he would have given it to Him. And not his eyeball alone, but even the soul that was most beloved to him of all, as it is said: "Please take your son, your only son (יחידך)" (Genesis 22:2). And wasn't it known that he was his son, his only son? Rather (the word "יחידך" is used meaning) this is the soul that is called "יחידה," as it is said: "Deliver my soul from the sword, my only one (יחידתי) from the power of the dog" (Psalms 22:21).¹³

Following God's request that Abraham sacrifice his son, Abraham was in a dilemma. He wasn't sure how he should, or even whether he should tell his wife. In some midrashim about the akedah Abraham apparently does not tell his wife.¹⁴ But according to other

⁹Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (28b).

¹⁰Pesikta Rabbati supplement 1 (193b).

¹¹Sanhedrin 89b; see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:2.

¹²Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30a); see also Agadat Bereshit 31:3.

¹³Sifre Devarim 313 (p. 355); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 943; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:2.

¹⁴Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (28b-30a); Pesikta Rabbati 40 (169b-171b).

midrashim, Abraham confronted Sarah, although not with the truth.

Abraham said (to himself): "What should I do? If I tell Sarah, women are light-headed with regard to a small matter, all the more so with regard to a matter as important as this one. But if I do not tell her, and I steal him from her at a moment she is not looking, she will kill herself (when she finds out that I sacrificed Isaac)." What did he do? He said to Sarah: "Prepare food and drink for us and we will eat and we will rejoice." She said to him: "Why is this day different from other days? What is the purpose of this rejoicing?" He said to them: "Old folks like us, a son is born to them in their old age in order to eat and to drink and to rejoice." She went and prepared the food. When they were eating he said to her: "You know that when I was three years old I recognized my Creator. This lad is grown and is not initiated. There is a place some distance from us where children are initiated. I will take him and I will initiate him there." She said to him: "Go in peace." Thereupon, "And Abraham arose early in the morning" (Genesis 22:3). And why in the early morning? (Abraham said:) "Lest Sarah change her mind and not let me leave, I will arise early, before she will arise."¹⁵

Another account of this incident adds more details.

Abraham said to himself: "What shall I do? How shall I separate Isaac my son from Sarah his mother to offer him before the Lord as a sacrifice?" And Abraham came to her tent and sat before Sarah his wife and said to her about these matters: "Our son Isaac is grown and has not studied serving his God. Now I will go tomorrow and I will bring him to Shem and to Eber his son, and there he will study the ways of the Lord. For (Shem) will teach him to know the Lord and to know that when he prays before the Lord in every season, (God) will answer him, and to know there the way of serving the Lord his God." And Sarah said: "You speak of good things. Go my lord and do to him as you spoke. But do not take my son far from me, and do not remain there many days because my life is very tied to his." And Abraham said to

¹⁵Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30a); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 98; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:3; Bereshit Rabbati 22:3 (p. 89).

Sarah: "My daughter, entreat the Lord our God so that He will do good with us." And Sarah took Isaac her son and he slept with her that night, and she kissed him and she hugged him and she attended to him until morning. And she said to him: "My son, how will my soul be able to be separated from you?" And she kissed and hugged him more. And she cried with him and she commanded Abraham his father concerning him. And Sarah said to Abraham: "For my sake, my lord, protect your son and watch over him, for I do not have another son or daughter but him. Do not abandon him. If he is hungry feed him bread and if he is thirsty give him water. And do not allow him to walk by foot or to sit in the sun. And also do not leave him to walk along the way alone, and do not be outraged at anything he says. But do for him everything he says to you." And Sarah cried again a great cry to Isaac in that night and she attended to him until morning. And in the morning Sarah took a very fine and pretty garment from the clothes which were with her in the house, clothes which Abimelech had given her. And she dressed Isaac her son. And she put a turban on his head, and she put a precious stone on the turban. And she gave them food for the way. And Isaac and Abraham his father went forth and some of their servants went with them to send them on their way. And Sarah also went out with them and she went along the way with them to send them off. And they said to her: "Return, go back to the tent." And Sarah heard the words of Isaac her son and she cried a great cry and also Abraham her husband cried with her. And also Isaac her son cried with her a very great cry. And also those who went to send them off cried an exceedingly great cry. And Sarah held Isaac her son and she held him between his arms and she hugged him and she kissed him and she again continued to cry with him. And Sarah said: "Who knows if I will see you again my son after this day." And Abraham, Sarah and Isaac again let out a great cry. And also those who went with them along the way to send them off cried a great cry with them. And afterward Sarah left Isaac with much crying. And all her male and female servants returned with her to her tent. And Abraham went with Isaac his son to offer him as a sacrifice before the Lord as He commanded.¹⁶

¹⁶Sefer Hayashar Vayera pp. 72-3.

According to these midrashim Abraham told Sarah that he wanted to take Isaac to a place where he would learn to serve the Lord. Sarah agrees that they should go, and prepares food for the journey, but in the latter account appears to have misgivings.¹⁷

The rabbis praise Abraham for his eagerness to obey God's command.¹⁸ He is cited as an example that the zealous ones perform their mitzvot early.¹⁹ Abraham shows his eagerness by arising early in the morning and by saddling his own donkey, though protocol would call for his servants to perform this task.²⁰

Abraham takes with him two of his young men, whom the midrash identifies as Ishmael and Eliezer. They immediately begin arguing about inheritance.

Contention arose between Eliezer and Ishmael. Ishmael said to Eliezer: "Now Abraham offers Isaac his son for a burnt-offering, kindled on the altar. I am his first-born, and I will inherit from Abraham." Eliezer responded to Ishmael and said to him: "He already drove you away like a woman divorced from her husband. And he sent you to the wilderness. But I am his servant, serving his family day and night. And I am Abraham's heir." And the Divine Spirit answered them and said to them: "Neither one will inherit."²¹

God's response to Eliezer and Ishmael is puzzling. God is apparently

¹⁷It is ironic that Sarah says that she may never see Isaac again because according to some rabbinic accounts of the akedah Sarah dies when she is told by Satan what happened.

¹⁸Tanchuma Shlach Lecha 14 (70a); Agadat Bereshit 31:3; Midrash on Psalms 112:2.

¹⁹Yoma 28b; Pesachim 4a.

²⁰Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30a); Tanchuma Buber Balak 11 (69a).

²¹Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29a); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 98; Midrash Vayosha p. 37; Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 73; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:3.

implying that Isaac will not be sacrificed. One midrash offers an alternative interpretation.

And the Divine Spirit cried out: "Neither one will inherit. Rather, the inheritance of (Sarah's) husband will remain."²²

This explanation, too, is ambiguous. It remains unclear whether God's response to Eliezer and Ishmael implies that Isaac will not be sacrificed.

After three days of traveling Abraham saw, from a distance, the place about which God had spoken to him. The rabbis ask: What did Abraham see that would indicate to him that the mountain he saw was the one about which God had spoken to him?

"And (Abraham) saw the place from afar" (Genesis 22:4). What did he see? He saw a cloud covering the mountain. He said: "It appears that it is the place where the Holy One blessed be He told me to sacrifice my son." He said to Isaac: "Isaac my son, do you see what I see?" (Isaac) said to him: "Yes." (Abraham) said to his two young men: "Do you see what I see?" They said to him: "No." He said: "Since you do not see, 'Remain here with the donkey' (Genesis 22:5), because you are like the donkey (which also does not see)."²³

Abraham and Isaac see the cloud-covered mountain. But Eliezer and Ishmael do not, so they must remain behind with the donkey.

According to other midrashim Abraham saw the Divine Presence, represented by a pillar of fire.

²²Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:3. Another version of this text reads: "The inheritance returns to her husband and remains."

²³Bereshit Rabbah 56:2 (pp. 595-6); see also Vayikra Rabbah 20:2; Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 26:3; Kohelet Rabbah 9:7:1; Tanchuma Vayera 23 (30b); Tanchuma Buber Acharei 3 (29b); Pesikta Rabbati 40 (170b); Yalkut Shimon I 99.

On the third day they arrived at Tsofim. And when they arrived at Tsofim (Abraham) saw the glory of the Divine Presence standing on the mountain, as it is said: "On the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar" (Genesis 22:4). What did he see? (He saw) a pillar of fire from the earth to heaven. He said to Isaac his son: "My son, do you see anything on one of these mountains?" (Isaac) said to him: "Yes." (Abraham) said to him: "What do you see?" (Isaac) said to him: I see a pillar of fire standing from the earth to heaven." And Abraham understood that the boy was desired for an offering.²⁴

Again, the message is clear. Abraham and Isaac see the same thing, as if they are approaching the mountain on equal footing. Abraham knows that his son Isaac is desired for a burnt-offering. Perhaps this text implies that Isaac knows too.

Abraham tells Eliezer and Ishmael to remain behind while he and Isaac go yonder (עד כה). This statement is interpreted as meaning that Abraham and Isaac will go and discover the outcome of the word "כה" used in God's promise to Abraham: "Thus (כה) will be your seed" (Genesis 15:5).²⁵ In context, this promise refers to the stars of heaven, prompting the rabbinic comment that God showed Abraham the star of Isaac whose name was "כה."²⁶

After telling Eliezer and Ishmael to remain behind, Abraham says to them: "(Isaac and I) will worship and we will return to you" (Genesis 22:5). What could Abraham mean? Certainly he does not know that Isaac will be returning alive with him. The midrash

²⁴Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29a); see also Agadat Bereshit 31:3; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:4; Yalkut Shimoni I 99.

²⁵Bereshit Rabbah 56:2 (p. 597); Pesikta Rabbati 40 (170b); Yalkut Shimoni I 100; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:5.

²⁶Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:5.

considers Abraham to be one of the biblical characters who prophesied, but did not know that he had prophesied.²⁷

R. Jochanan said: How does one know that a covenant may be made with the lips? Because it is said: "And Abraham said to his young men: 'Remain here with the donkey, and the boy and I will go yonder. We will worship and we will return to you'" (Genesis 22:5). And the matter occurred that the two of them returned.²⁸

According to some sources God was responsible for Abraham's prophecy.

What does "and we will return to you" (Genesis 22:5) mean? Abraham did not say "I will return." First you explain that he did not tell them that he was going to sacrifice (Isaac). Another interpretation of "and we will return to you" (is the verse): "The preparations of the heart are man's, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:1). (Abraham said "we") because (God) was giving him the good tidings that Isaac would return with him.²⁹

However, other midrashim state that Abraham's mouth predicted that they both would return in peace.³⁰

Satan, who according to some midrashim instigated the akedah, attempts to prevent its completion. First, Satan appears to Abraham.

Satan preceded him in the road and appeared to him in the image of an old man. (Satan) said to him: "Where are you going?" (Abraham) said to him: "To pray." (Satan) said to him: "And why does one who goes to pray have fire and a knife in his hand and wood on his shoulder?" (Abraham) said to him: "Perhaps we will spend a day or two and will slaughter and will bake and will eat." The old man said to him:

²⁷Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Schechter, 43.

²⁸Moed Katan 18a; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 100.

²⁹Pesikta Rabbati 40 (170b); see also Bereshit Rabbah 56:2 (p. 597); Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:5.

³⁰Tanchuma Vayera 23 (30b); Tanchuma Buber Vayera 46 (67b).

"Was I not there when the Holy One blessed be He said to you: 'Take your son?' And an old man as you are will go and will destroy a son that (God) gave him at 100 years of age. Have you not heard the saying: 'What was in his hand, he destroyed it and requested from others'? And if you say you will have another son, you listen to the seducer. You will destroy a soul for which you will be legally culpable." (Abraham) said to him: "It was not a seducer but the Holy One blessed be He, may He be blessed. I will not listen to you."³¹

Abraham's encounter with Satan differs in other versions of this midrash.

Satan preceded him on the way. (Satan) said to him: "If one ventures a word with you, will you be weary? [But who is able to stop from speaking?] Behold, you have taught many, and you have strengthened weak hands. Your words uphold one who falls, [and you have strengthened the feeble knees]. But now, it comes to you, and you are weary, [it touches you, and you are frightened]" (Job 4:2-5). (Abraham) said to him: "Remember, please, who was innocent and perished [and where were the upright cut off]?" (Job 4:7). When (Satan) saw that he was not listening to him, he said to him: "'A word was secretly brought to me' (Job 4:12). Thus I heard from behind the curtain:³² The lamb will be for a burnt-offering, and not Isaac for a burnt-offering." (Abraham) said to him: "Thus is the punishment of a liar that even if he told the truth, they would not listen to him."³³

The last statement is surprising because at this point in the story Abraham believes that he will sacrifice Isaac. From his perspective therefore, Satan's statement is a lie. Perhaps the statement should

³¹Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30a); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 90; Sefer Hayashar Vayera pp. 73-4; Midrash Vayosha p. 36; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:1.

³²The curtain behind which secrets of God are hidden.

³³Sanhedrin 89b; see also Midrash Vayosha p. 36.

be attributed to God or to the narrator. Or perhaps it should be understood as it is found in another source:

Abraham said: "Thus is the punishment of a liar that even if he tells the truth, they would not listen to him. And I do not believe you. Rather, the Holy One blessed be He will do what is good in His eyes."³⁴

According to Bereshit Rabbah Abraham encountered the wicked angel Samael.

Samael came to our father Abraham. (Samael) said to him: "What an old man. Have you lost your sense? A son whom (God) gave to you at 100 years of age, you are going to slaughter him?" (Abraham) said to him: "Despite this (I will)." (Samael) said to him: "And if He tests you more than this, are you able to withstand the test? 'If a matter is put to you as a trial, will you be wearied?'" (Job 4:2). (Abraham) said to him: "(I will do) even more than this." (Samael) said to him: "Tomorrow (God) will say to you: 'You are a shedder of blood,' and you will be guilty." (Abraham) said to him: "Despite this, (I will continue)."³⁵

Having failed in his appeal to Abraham, Samael approaches Isaac.

When (Samael) saw that he could not achieve anything from (Abraham), he came to Isaac and said to him: "Woe, son of a hapless one, he goes to slaughter you." (Isaac) said to him: "Despite this (I will go)." (Samael) said to him: "If so, all those tunics that your mother made will go to Ishmael; the hated of the house will be the heir." When a word does not succeed, it may do good in part. That is what is written: "And Isaac said to Abraham his father saying: 'Father.'...And (Isaac) said: 'Here is the fire and the wood, [but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering]?" (Genesis 22:7). Abraham said to him: "May that man be drowned who has incited him. In any case, 'God will see to the lamb'"

³⁴Midrash Vayosha p. 36.

³⁵Bereshit Rabbah 56:4 (pp. 598-9); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

(Genesis 22:8). And if not, 'the lamb for the burnt-offering will be my son'" (Genesis 22:8).³⁶
 "And the two of them walked on together"
 (Genesis 22:9). This one to slaughter, and this one to be slaughtered.³⁷

According to the Tanchuma Satan approached Isaac.

(Satan) went away from (Abraham) and appeared as a young boy and stood on the right of Isaac. (Satan) said to him: "Where are you going?" (Isaac) said to him: "To study Torah." (Satan) said to him: "When you are alive or when you are dead?" (Isaac) said to him: "Is there a person who can study after death?" (Satan) said to him: "Hapless one, son of a hapless one, how many fasts did your mother fast before you were born. And the old man, he is crazy and he is going to slaughter you." (Isaac) said: "Nevertheless, I will not transgress the will of my Creator or the command of my father." (Isaac) turned and said to his father: "Father, see what this one says to me." (Abraham) said to him: "Do not pay attention to him, because he only comes to annoy us." Thereupon, "And Isaac said [to Abraham... 'Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?']" (Genesis 22:7).... At that moment a great fear and trembling fell upon Isaac, for he did not see anything in (Abraham's) hand to be sacrificed. And he understood, by that fact, what was going to happen. He asked: "Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?" (Abraham) said to him: "Since you asked, the Holy One blessed be He has chosen you." (Isaac said:) "If He has chosen me, behold my soul is given to Him, but concerning my blood, it is very distressing to me." And nevertheless, "The two of them walked together" (Genesis 22:8), certainly this one to slaughter and this one to be slaughtered. And Isaac was 37 years old at the time of the akedah.³⁸

³⁶This interpretation prevents Abraham from lying. He answers Isaac: "God will see to the lamb for the offering; but if not the lamb, my offering will be my son."

³⁷Bereshit Rabbah 56:4 (p. 599); see also Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29a); Yalkut Shimoni I 101 which adds "this one to bind and this one to be bound."

³⁸Tanchuma Vayera 22-23 (30a-b); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 98; Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 74.

In both of these midrashim Isaac asks Abraham about the lamb as a result of the conversation with Satan (or Samael). In the first case Abraham answers that God will provide the lamb, but if not, then Isaac will be the burnt-offering. But in the second source Isaac knows that he is the offering --even before Abraham tells him-- when he notices that Abraham is not carrying anything to be sacrificed. Of further note is the fact that this source mentions his age at this point to emphasize that Isaac is acting willfully.

In another source the words "lamb for a burnt-offering (שה לעולה)" are interpreted as meaning "a living (human) being for the burnt-offering," understanding "שה" as a Greek word. Abraham thus tells Isaac that he is to be the offering. This midrash continues:

"And the two of them walked together" (Genesis 22:7) indicates that Isaac was not distressed by what his father told him. Rather, just as (Abraham) was happy to sacrifice, similarly (Isaac) was happy to be sacrificed. Abraham was happy to bind, and Isaac was happy to be bound. Abraham was happy to slaughter, and Isaac was happy to be slaughtered.³⁹

Isaac's reaction is recounted in another source.

Another interpretation of "But where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?" (Genesis 22:7). (Abraham) said to (Isaac): "You are the lamb!" Thereupon Isaac put his hands on his head and cried and said to his father: "This is that great midrash you told my mother."⁴⁰ Thereupon Abraham cried and tore out his hair. (Isaac) said to him: "Father, do not trouble yourself. Do with me the will of your Father in heaven. May it be the will that one-fourth of my blood will be an atonement for all Israel." "And the two of them walked together" (Genesis 22:8).

³⁹Pesikta Rabbati 40 (170b).

⁴⁰When Abraham told Sarah he was taking Isaac to study at the House of Midrash.

(Abraham) held (Isaac's) hand and they went as one. Abraham said: "Perhaps Isaac will lift his legs and run."⁴¹

In this account Isaac not only willingly accepts his fate, but also asks that one-fourth of his blood atone for Israel.

The dialogue between Abraham and Isaac is expanded in another source.

Isaac said to his father: "Father, where are we going alone?" (Abraham) said to him: "My son, yonder, to a near place...." Isaac said to his father: "Father, why are we going alone?" (Abraham) said to him: "To offer a sacrifice." (Isaac) said to him: "But are you a priest to offer a sacrifice?" (Abraham) said to him: "Behold Shem, who was a High Priest, he will offer the sacrifice." Immediately, great fear fell upon Isaac because he did not see anything in his father's hand to sacrifice.... Isaac shook and his limbs trembled because he recognized the thought of his father and he was not able to speak. But nevertheless he was strong and said to his father: "If it is true that the Holy One blessed be He has chosen me, behold, my soul is given to Him." And Isaac accepted his death in order to fulfill a commandment of his Creator. Abraham said: "I know you, my son, that you will not refuse a commandment of your Creator nor my command." Isaac responded to his father: "Father, hurry and do the will of your Possessor and He will do your will."⁴²

In this account Abraham and Isaac encounter Satan after this conversation. Because Isaac knows that he is to be the offering, he responds to Satan:

I myself know, and behold, my soul is delivered in the hand of the Holy One blessed be He and in

⁴¹Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:8; see also Bereshit Rabbati 22:7-8 (pp. 89-90).

⁴²Midrash Vayosha pp. 35-6.

the hand of my father. All that he wants to do, He will do.⁴³

In all of these midrashim Isaac is aware that he is to be the offering. He willfully obeys God's command. The rabbis clearly consider Isaac to be the hero of the akedah.

Having failed to dissuade both Abraham and Isaac, Satan approaches Sarah, perhaps hopeful that she will try to stop them.⁴⁴ This account appears only in late sources, however. Perhaps it was influenced by the midrashim that state that Satan approached Sarah after the akedah and told her what happened, causing her death.

Although he failed to convince either Abraham or Isaac to listen to him, Satan still is not prepared to give up.

"On the third day..." (Genesis 22:4). But since the way was near, why was he delayed three days? When (Satan) saw that (Abraham and Isaac) did not pay attention to him, he went and was made into a great river before them. Immediately Abraham entered the water and it reached his knees. He said to his young men: "Come after me." They entered after him. When he was half-way across the river, the water reached his neck. At that moment Abraham lifted his eyes to heaven. He said before Him: "Master of the Universe, You chose me and You caused me to vow and You were revealed to me, and You said to me: 'I am unique and you are unique; by you will My name be made known in My world. Offer Isaac your son before Me for a sacrifice.' And I did not hesitate. And behold, I am busy with your commandments. But now, water threatens my life. If Isaac my son or I drown who will fulfill your command? By whom will your name be unified?" The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "By your life, it is by your hand that My name will be unified in the world." Immediately, the Holy One blessed be He rebuked the source and the river dried up and they stood on dry land. What

⁴³Midrash Vayosha p. 36.

⁴⁴Ibid.; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 98.

did Satan do? He said to Abraham: "'A word was secretly brought to me' (Job 4:12). Thus I heard from behind the curtain: The lamb is to be for the offering, and Isaac is not to be for the offering." (Abraham) said to him: "This is the punishment of a liar, that even if he tells the truth, one does not listen to him."⁴⁵

Although the chronology varies, the midrashim in which Satan attempts to prevent Abraham from sacrificing Isaac present a consistent theme. Neither Abraham nor Isaac is convinced by Satan's arguments. His only success, if it can be called that, is getting Isaac to question his father about the sacrifice, during which time Isaac learns that he will be the burnt-offering. But even this achievement fails, because Isaac, like his father, is prepared to fulfill God's command.

When Abraham and Isaac reach the place of which God had spoken, Isaac tells his father to bind him well.

"And they came to the place of which God had told (Abraham).... And he bound Isaac his son" (Genesis 22:9). When (Abraham) was about to slaughter him, (Isaac) said to him: "Father, bind my hands and feet because the life force is strong. When I see the knife I might move and the sacrifice will be unfit. I beg you, do not make a blemish on me." Thereupon, "And Abraham lifted his hand and took the knife to slaughter [his son]" (Genesis 22:10).⁴⁶

Isaac is worried that his instincts might cause him to move which would make the sacrifice invalid, as an animal sacrifice would be if the incision were not made precisely as required. According to

⁴⁵Tanchuma Vayera 22 (30b); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 99; Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 74; Midrash Vayosha pp. 36-7; Bereshit Rabbati 22:4 (p. 89).

⁴⁶Tanchuma Vayera 23 (30b-31a); see also Pesikta Rabbati 40 (171a); Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29b); Sefer Hayashar Vayera p. 76; Yalkut Shimoni I 101; Midrash Vayosha p. 37.

another midrash Isaac is also concerned about harming his father.

Another interpretation [of "Behold, your time was a time of love" (Ezekiel 16:8)]. When Isaac said to his father: "Father, bind me well and place me on the wood, lest I kick you and I kill you and I am found be to responsible for two deaths before heaven." And he was a young man and stood willfully. He was 37 years old.⁴⁷

The rabbis emphasize that Isaac was old enough to refuse and strong enough to resist his old father, yet he willingly submitted himself to be bound. For example:

Why wasn't Isaac bound at ten or fifteen years of age? So that one could not say that his father forced him.⁴⁸

The Holy One blessed be He sat and watched a father who bound and a son who was bound willfully.⁴⁹

Other sources state that Isaac bound himself on the altar.⁵⁰

The concern that Isaac would become unfit for the sacrifice is expressed in other midrashim.

Thereupon, "And they came to the place of which God had told (Abraham). And Abraham built an altar there" (Genesis 22:9). And why didn't Isaac build with him? "Lest," Abraham said, "a rock or stone fall on him and make a blemish on him and he be unfit for the sacrifice."⁵¹

"And they came to the place.... And Abraham built an altar there" (Genesis 22:9). And Isaac, where was he? R. Levi said: (Abraham) took him

⁴⁷Seder Eliahu Rabbah 25 (p. 138); see also Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 56:8; Seder Eliahu Zuta 2 (p. 174); Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:9.

⁴⁸Midrash Chemdat Yamim 45a.

⁴⁹Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29b).

⁵⁰Sifre Devarim 32 (p. 58); Midrash on Psalms 116:6; Yalkut Shimoni II 875.

⁵¹Pesikta Rabbati 40 (170b).

and hid him. (Abraham) said: "Lest he who tried to seduce him throw a stone and make him unfit for the sacrifice."⁵²

According to another source Isaac helped build the altar.

Abraham built the altar and Isaac handed him the wood and the stones. Abraham was similar to a man who built the house of wedlock for his son. And Isaac was similar to a man who prepared himself for marriage, because he did it joyfully.⁵³

While bound on the altar Isaac expresses concern about his mother's finding out about the sacrifice.

(Isaac) said to (Abraham): "Father, do not tell mother when she is standing over a pit or when she is standing on the roof lest she throw herself down and die."⁵⁴

According to another midrash Isaac wants his father to take his ashes to Sarah.

(Isaac said:) "Please, Father, hurry and do the will of your Possessor. Do not delay. Roll up your clothes and bind your loins and burn me well and take my ashes and bring them to Sarah my mother and put them in a box in her room. Every time she enters her room they will remind her of Isaac her son with weeping." And further Isaac said to his father: "More than this, when you slaughter me and you are separated from me and you go to Sarah my mother and she will ask you: 'Where is Isaac my son?' what will you say to her and what will you do in your old age?" (Abraham) said to him: "We know that after you our days will be few. He who comforted us before you were born will comfort us from this day on."⁵⁵

⁵²Bereshit Rabbah 56:5 (p. 600).

⁵³Midrash Vayosha p. 37.

⁵⁴Tanchuma Vayera 23 (31a); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:9; Bereshit Rabbati 22:9 (p. 90).

⁵⁵Midrash Vayosha p. 37; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

This last statement is the only expression of doubt from Isaac, if it can be considered that.

While Abraham was binding Isaac on earth, God was busy doing a similar thing in heaven.

R. Chanina bar Isaac said: While Abraham was binding his son below, the Holy One blessed be He was binding the nations' princes above. But they did not remain (bound).⁵⁶

When Isaac was bound on the altar he saw the Divine Presence according to the rabbis.

R. Simeon says: When Isaac was bound he lifted his eyes toward heaven and saw the Divine Presence. But it is written: "No one shall see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). However, instead of death, his eyes grew dim when he became old, as it is said: "And when Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim from seeing (the Divine Presence)" (Genesis 27:1).⁵⁷

Isaac said to Moses: "I am greater than you because I stretched my neck upon the altar and I saw the face of the Divine Presence." Moses said to him: "I am far superior to you because you saw the face of the Divine Presence and your eyes became dim." How do we know this? Because it is written: "When Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim from seeing (מראות)" (Genesis 27:1). What does "מראות" mean? From seeing the Divine Presence face to face. (Moses said:) "But my eyes did not grow dim." How do we know this? As it is said: "[And Moses was 120 years old when he died.] His eye was not dim [nor his natural force abated]" (Deuteronomy 34:7).⁵⁸

Despite Moses' objection, one must not underestimate the significance of Isaac's seeing the Divine Presence. Who else, save Moses, merited

⁵⁶Bereshit Rabbah 56:5 (p. 600); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

⁵⁷Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (31a); see also Bereshit Rabbah 65:10 (pp. 719-20); Yalkut Shimoni I 114.

⁵⁸Devarim Rabbah 65:10; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 965.

privilege? Not even Abraham saw the Divine Presence as he prepared to sacrifice his son. This midrash indicates that the rabbis consider Isaac to be the hero of the akedah.

According to another opinion, Isaac's eyes grew dim because the ministering angels cried over him.

Another interpretation of "[When Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim] from seeing" (Genesis 27:1). From the power of that sight. When Abraham our father bound Isaac, the ministering angels cried, as it is said: "Behold, their valiant ones cry without, the angels of peace weep bitterly" (Isaiah 33:7). Tears dropped from their eyes into his eyes and left their mark on his eyes. And when he was old his eyes grew dim, as it is said: "When Isaac was old, [his eyes grew dim from seeing]." ⁵⁹

Abraham too cried.

"And Abraham stretched forth his hand..." (Genesis 22:10). He stretched forth his hand to take the knife while tears streamed from his eyes. And these tears, prompted by a father's compassion, dropped into Isaac's eyes. Yet even so, his heart rejoiced to obey the will of his Creator. ⁶⁰

At this point the ministering angels stand up to God.

The angels assembled in groups above. What did they cry? "The highways lie waste, the way-faring man ceases. He has broken the covenant; He has despised the cities" (Isaiah 33:8). Has He no pleasure in Jerusalem and the Temple, which He had intended giving as a possession to the descendants of Isaac? "He regards not man" (Isaiah 33:8). If no merit has stood in Abraham's favor, then no creature has any value before him. ⁶¹

⁵⁹Bereshit Rabbah 65:10 (p. 719); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:1.

⁶⁰Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 56:8; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

⁶¹Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 56:8; see also Bereshit Rabbah 56:5 (p. 601); Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29b).

"And Abraham lifted his hand" (Genesis 22:10). When the ministering angels saw that the father bound willfully and the son was bound willfully, Mattatron stood before the Holy One blessed be He and said before him: "Master of all Worlds, do not destroy Abraham's seed from the world." And the knife turned to lead. The Holy One blessed be He said to the ministering angels: "Was it not you who came upon him in deception and now you ask mercy upon him?" And He told Mattatron to call to him, as it is written: "And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven" (Genesis 22:11).⁶²

According to other rabbinic sources Isaac was saved because Abraham stopped to examine the knife.

Our sages said: If Abraham had not delayed to examine the knife Isaac would have been slaughtered. But he delayed to examine the knife. Immediately, God was moved to compassion on account of Isaac and the Holy One blessed be He said to His entourage: "See how this righteous man is eager to do My word and My command...." And how do we know that (Abraham) examined the knife? Because it is said: "And he took the knife (וַיִּקַּח אֶת הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת)" (Genesis 22:10). The number of letters is important. (In the phrase) "וַיִּקַּח אֶת הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת" you find twelve (letters) equal to the number of examinations that are made for a knife on the fleshy part of the finger and on the nail.⁶³ And how does one know (that twelve examinations are necessary)? Because it is said: "And slay them with this (זֶה)" (I Samuel 14:34). The word "זֶה" in gematria has the value twelve.⁶⁴

Other views, however, insist that God saved Isaac from the sword. God has the power to make His creations surrender to His creatures, as occurred when the sword surrendered to Isaac.⁶⁵

⁶²Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:10-11.

⁶³See Chullin 17b.

⁶⁴Tanchuma Tzav 13 (9a-b).

⁶⁵Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 1:3; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 3:11:1; Agadat Bereshit 66:2; Yalkut Shimoni II 438.

Another source describes the scene thusly:

Thereupon, the two of them built the altar. And (Abraham) bound (Isaac) on the altar and took the knife in order to slaughter him until one-fourth of his blood left him. And Satan came and pushed (Abraham's) hand and the knife fell from his hand. And when he reached to pick it up a Divine voice came forth and said to him from heaven: "Do not lift your hand against the boy" (Genesis 22:12). And if (the Divine voice) had not (spoken), (Isaac) would have already been slaughtered.⁶⁶

This final line, that had the angel not stopped Abraham, Isaac would have been killed, appears in many rabbinic sources.⁶⁷ Its message is crucial for understanding the akedah. Isaac would have been killed had God not stepped in. What is also significant is that the text refers to Isaac, not to Abraham. One might expect to read: "If the angel had not spoken, Abraham would have slaughtered Isaac." But the text reads: "(Isaac) would have been slaughtered." Once again, the focus is upon Isaac.

Abraham, upon being told not to lift his hand against Isaac, protests according to a midrash (which also offers another interpretation concerning the knife).

"And (the angel) said: 'Do not lift your hand against the boy'" (Genesis 22:12). Where was the knife? Tears fell from the ministering angels on it and desolved it. (Abraham) said to (the angel): "I will strangle him." (The angel) said to him: "Do not lift your hand against the boy." (Abraham) said to (the angel): "Let us bring forth a drop of blood from him." (The angel) said to him: "Do not do anything (מאומה) to him" (Genesis 22:12), (which means)

⁶⁶Tanchuma Vayera 23 (31a).

⁶⁷Tanchuma Buber Acharei 3 (29b); Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 26:3; Vayikra Rabbah 20:2; Kohelet Rabbah 9:7:1.

do not (even) make a blemish (מומה)⁶⁸ on him.⁶⁹

Even though Abraham was explicitly forbidden to do anything to Isaac, the midrash states that Isaac's soul fled.

Rabbi Judah said: When the sword reached his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed. When (the angel) spoke from between two Cherubs and said: "Do not lift your hand against the boy" (Genesis 22:12), the soul returned to his body. (Abraham) freed him and he stood on his feet and Isaac knew that (the doctrine) revival of the dead was from the Torah. For all the dead are destined to revive. At that moment Isaac said: "Blessed is the Lord, who revives the dead."⁷⁰

Isaac died and was revived on the altar according to this midrash.

One source makes an even bolder statement. According to the Mechilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai one-fourth of Isaac's blood, the quantity necessary for life,⁷¹ was shed.

R. Joshua says: "And God spoke to Moses [and said to him: 'I am the Lord']" (Exodus 6:2). The Holy One blessed be He said to Moses: "I can be trusted to reward Isaac son of Abraham, because a quarter of his blood went forth from him on the altar, and I said to him: 'According to the greatness of your power, I will set free your children who are appointed to die' (Psalms 79:11). And now, behold, the oath is confounded and you come before Me, which is improper, to bring forth the children of Israel from Egypt. But I want to bring them out, and you say to Me:

⁶⁸The midrash understands "מומה" which is usually translated "anything" as being related to "מומה" meaning "blemish."

⁶⁹Bereshit Rabbah 56:7 (p. 603); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:10-11.

⁷⁰Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29b); see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana supplement 1:20; Yalkut Shimoni I 101; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:12; Midrash Vayosha p. 38.

⁷¹See Tanchuma Vayera 23 (31a) quoted above. See also Shabbat 31b and Sota 5a.

'Send, I pray, by the hand of whom you shall send'" (Exodus 4:13).⁷²

Not only did Isaac's soul flee (which could have been caused by mere shock) but his blood was spilled. Perhaps these traditions are related, seeing that both imply that, at least temporarily, Isaac was actually sacrificed.

After listening to the angel, Abraham looks up and sees a ram, which he sacrifices in place of Isaac.

"And Abraham lifted his eyes, and saw, and behold a ram behind him (אֶרְאָה) [caught in the thicket by its horns]" (Genesis 22:13). What does "אֶרְאָה" mean? R. Judan said: After all the deeds, Israel (remains) caught by sin and has become the victim of persecutions. And it is her destiny to be redeemed by the horns of a ram: "And the Lord God will blow the horn... [and the Lord their God will save them in that day]" (Zechariah 9:14:16).... R. Chanina bar Isaac said: All the days of the year Israel is caught by sin and is the victim of persecutions, and on Rosh Hashanah she takes the shofar and blows. Her destiny is to be redeemed by the horn of the ram.... R. Abba bar Rav Pappi and R. Joshua of Sichnin in the name of R. Levi: Because our father Abraham saw the ram escape from one thicket, the Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Thus your children are destined to be entangled by kingdom after kingdom, from Babel to Media and from Media [to Greece and from Greece] to Rome. And their destiny is to be redeemed by the horns of a ram," as it is written: "And the Lord, God, will blow the horn...the Lord of Hosts will defend them" (Zechariah 9:14-15).⁷³

The ram foreshadows the future of Israel, while at the same time possessing the instrument (the shofar) by which Israel will be redeemed.

⁷²Mechilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai Vaerah 6:2; see also Midrash Hagadol Exodus 6:2.

⁷³Bereshit Rabbah 56:9 (pp. 605-6), the latter brackets are in the text; see also Vayikra Rabbah 29:10; Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 23:10; Y. Taanit ch. 2 hal. 4 (65d).

Abraham offered the ram in place of Isaac. The midrash tries to show that Abraham offered the ram as if it were Isaac.

"And Abraham went and he took the ram and offered it up for a burnt-offering instead of his son" (Genesis 22:13). R. Judan in the name of R. Banai: (Abraham) said before (God): "Master of all Worlds, see [the blood of this ram as if it were the blood of Isaac my son; the emurim⁷⁴ of this ram as if they were the emurim of Isaac my son." As we are taught:⁷⁵ Behold, this one instead of this one, in exchange for this one, a substitute for this one, behold it is a (valid) exchange. R. Pinchas in the name of R. Banai: (Abraham) said before (God): "Master of all Worlds, see] it as if I sacrificed Isaac my son first and then sacrificed the ram after him," as it is said: "And Jotham his son reigned after him" (II Kings 15:7).⁷⁶

What does "instead of his son" (Genesis 22:13) mean? Abraham said: "Master of all Worlds, consider it as if the blood of Isaac was thrown before you." (Abraham) took the ram and flayed it and said: "Thus consider it as if I had flayed Isaac's skin before you." (Abraham) took (the ram) and salted it. He said: "Thus consider it as if Isaac was salted before you." (Abraham) burned (the ram) and said: "Thus consider it as if the ashes of Isaac were piled on the altar."⁷⁷

Rabbi Berechiah said: The pleasing scent of the ram rose before the throne of glory and appeared to Him as if it were the pleasing scent of Isaac.⁷⁸

This concept of the ram in place of Isaac is taken one step further in another midrash.

⁷⁴Those parts of the sacrifice offered on the altar.

⁷⁵Temurah 26b.

⁷⁶Bereshit Rabbah 56:9 (pp. 606-7), brackets are in text; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

⁷⁷Bemidbar Rabbah 17:2.

⁷⁸Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31 (29b); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

(The ram) was the head of Abraham's flock and Isaac was his name. And (Abraham) did not recognize him. The Holy One blessed be He said: "Let Isaac come instead of Isaac."⁷⁹

The identity could not be any more explicit. The ram was sacrificed as if Isaac had been offered. The ram, by the way, is among those things which were created on the eve of the first Sabbath at dusk, according to some sages.⁸⁰ Thus, God never intended to allow Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

Because of these midrashim, specifically their insistence upon identifying the ram and every part of it with Isaac, the rabbis were able to speak of the ashes of Isaac and the blood of Isaac.

How did they know the (proper site) for the altar (of the Temple)? Rabbi Eliezer said: They saw the altar built, and Michael the great prince standing and offering upon it. But R. Isaac the smith said: They saw the ashes of Isaac which were resting in that place.⁸¹

"[And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it] and when He was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, and repented..." (1 Chronicles 21:15). What did (God) see? Rab said: He saw Jacob, our father, as it is written: "And Jacob said, when he saw (the angels): ['This is God's camp']" (Genesis 32:3). But Samuel said: (God) saw the ashes of Isaac, as it is said: "God will see to the ram" (Genesis 22:8).⁸²

R. Berechiah said: The Holy One blessed be He never unites His name with a person who is living, unless he is a master of suffering.

⁷⁹Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:13.

⁸⁰Mishnah Avot 5:6; Pesachim 54a; Tanchuma Tzav 13 (9a); Bemidbar Rabbah 17:2; Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 19 (17b), 31 (29b); Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

⁸¹Zebachim 62a.

⁸²Berachot 62b; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

And behold Isaac, who was a master of suffering. The rabbis said: One sees his ashes as if they were piled upon the altar.⁸³

Why are ashes placed on the head of each person (during a fast)? R. Levi bar Chama and R. Chanina disagree about it. One says: Behold, we are thought of as ashes before You. But the other says: In order that (God) will remember for our sake the ashes of Isaac.⁸⁴

Another interpretation of "[And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where you are.] And when I see the blood, [I will pass over you, and there shall be no plague upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt]" (Exodus 12:13). I see the blood of the binding of Isaac, as it is said: "And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-yireh..." (Genesis 22:14). And further on it says: "[And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it] and when He was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, and repented..." (I Chronicles 21:15). What did (God) see? He saw the blood of the binding of Isaac, as it is said: The Lord "God will see to the lamb" (Genesis 22:8).⁸⁵

These passages indicated that the rabbis view the akedah as if Isaac had been sacrificed on the altar. One may speak of the "blood of Isaac" and the "ashes of Isaac" because the ram which was slaughtered is identified with Isaac.

The midrash cited above which speaks of the blood of Isaac also shows how significant the akedah was upon other events in Jewish history. Because God saw the blood of the binding of Isaac, He saved the first-born of Israel in Egypt and He repented and refrained from destroying Jerusalem. According to another midrash, the Israelites

⁸³Bereshit Rabbah 94:5 (p. 1177); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 152.

⁸⁴Taanit 16a; see also Bereshit Rabbah 49:11 (p. 513).

⁸⁵Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bo pp. 24-5; see also Bo p. 39; Yalkut Shimoni I 200.

were saved when they entered the Red Sea due to the akedah.

R. Jose the Galilean says: When Israel entered the sea, Mount Moriah was uprooted from its place and the altar of Isaac that was built on it and the wood that was placed on it and Isaac as if he were bound and placed on the altar and Abraham as if he stretched forth his hand and held the knife to sacrifice his son.⁸⁶

God forgave the Israelites for the sin of the Golden Calf due in part to Isaac's role in the akedah.

Another interpretation of: "Remember Abraham, [Isaac and Israel...]" (Exodus 32:13). Why are the three Patriarchs mentioned here? Our rabbis say: Moses said: "If they are obligated for burning remember Abraham who gave himself to be burnt in the fiery furnace.... And if they are obligated for slaying, remember Isaac their father who stretched his neck upon the altar to be slain for the sake of Your name. And let his slaying fulfill the slaying of his children."⁸⁷

The atoning power of the akedah is expressed in the following midrashim.

"My beloved is to me as a cluster of henna (הכפר)" (Song of Songs 1:14). Cluster refers to Isaac who was bound on the altar as a cluster of henna in that he atones (מכפר) for the transgressions of Israel.⁸⁸

R. Abahu said: Why do they blow the horn of a ram (on Rosh Hashanah)? The Holy One blessed be He said: "They blow before me the horn of a ram in order that I will remember, for your sake, the binding of Isaac son of Abraham, and I will account it to you as if you bound yourselves before me."⁸⁹

⁸⁶Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Beshalach p. 100.

⁸⁷Shmot Rabbah 44:5.

⁸⁸Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:14:1.

⁸⁹Rosh Hashanah 16a.

As Geza Vermes has concluded:

In short, the Binding of Isaac was thought to have played a unique role in the whole economy of the salvation of Israel, and to have a permanent redemptive effect on behalf of its people. The merits of his sacrifice were experienced by the Chosen People in the past, invoked in the present and hoped for at the end of time.⁹⁰

One of the purposes of Temple sacrifices was to remind God of the akedah.

"And he shall kill the bullock [before the Lord]" (Leviticus 1:5). But of the ram it says: "[And he shall kill it on the side of the altar] northward (צפונה) before the Lord" (Leviticus 1:11). They said: When Abraham our father bound Isaac his son on the altar the Holy One blessed be He ordained (the sacrifice of) two lambs, one in the morning and one in the evening. Why? So that when Israel offers the perpetual sacrifice on the altar and reads this passage: "northward before the Lord" the Holy One blessed be He will remember the binding of Isaac.⁹¹

Many other midrashim relate the offering of the ram prescribed in the Torah to the akedah, specifically to Isaac's merit.⁹²

According to the Bible Abraham offers the ram and then the Lord gives His oath to Abraham. But the rabbis switch the order of these events and link them to each other.

When (Abraham) was about to slaughter, "The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said: 'Abraham, Abraham'" (Genesis 22:11). Why twice? Because he was hurrying and going to slaughter

⁹⁰Scripture and Tradition, p. 208.

⁹¹Vayikra Rabbah 2:11; see also Seder Eliahu Rabbah 7 p. 36. The commentator relates the word "צפונה" to the root "ר-פ-צ" meaning "to see." The offering causes God "to see" the ram testifying to Isaac's willingness to submit himself to God's will.

⁹²Vayikra Rabbah 21:11, 27:9; Bemidbar Rabbah 13:14; Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 9:9; Tanchuma Buber Emor 16 (47b); Tanchuma Emor 12 (39a); Yalkut Shimoni I 571, 643, 714.

him. "And (God) said: 'Do not lift your hand against the boy'" (Genesis 22:12). (Abraham) said to him: "Who are you?" He said to (Abraham): "an angel." (Abraham) said to him: "When (God) said to me: 'Take your son,' God Himself spoke to me. So now, if He wants, let Him tell me (to stop)." Thereupon, "And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time" (Genesis 22:15), because (Abraham) didn't want to pay attention to the first. At that moment Abraham said to God: "Master of the Universe, a man tests his friend because he does not know what is in his heart. But you, because you know what are the hearts and the deliberating kidneys, do you need to do this to me?" (God) said to him: "For now I make known (הַיְדַעְתִּי) that you are a fearer of God" (Genesis 22:12).⁹³ Thereupon, the Holy One blessed be He opened the firmament and the clouds and said: "I swear myself" (Genesis 22:16). (Abraham) said to him: "You swear, and I swear that I will not descend from the altar until I have said all that I need." (God) said to him: "Speak!" (Abraham said:) "Didn't You tell me to 'count the stars if you are able to count them.... Thus will be your seed'" (Genesis 15:5)? (God) said: "Yes." (Abraham) said: "From whom?" (God) said to him: "From Isaac." (Abraham) said to (God): "Just as it was in my heart what to respond, and say to you: Yesterday you said to me 'For through Isaac offspring will be named for you' (Genesis 21:12). Now you say to me: 'Offer him up as a sacrifice.' But I conquered my desire and did not respond to you. Thus when Isaac's children sin and get into trouble, remember for their sake the binding of Isaac and consider it as if his ashes were piled on the altar before you, and may you pardon them and redeem them from their woes." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "You said yours, and I will say mine. In the future the children of Isaac will sin before me and I will judge them on Rosh Hashanah, but if they request that I search for merit for them, I will recall for them the binding of Isaac. Let them blow before Me on the shofar of this." (Abraham) said to Him: "What's a shofar?" (God) said to him: "Go and look behind you." Thereupon, "And

⁹³The commentator understands the word "הַיְדַעְתִּי" as a hifil rather than qal, as it is vocalized.

Abraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold a
ram caught by its horns in the thicket"
(Genesis 22:13).⁹⁴

The contradiction between God's promise that seed will be called for
Abraham through Isaac, and the akedah is explained by a parable.

Another interpretation of "And after these
things" (Genesis 22:1). This is what Scripture
says: "I will not profane My covenant, nor
change what has gone out of My lips" (Psalms
89:35). R. Acha said: "I will not profane My
covenant" which I made with Abraham when I
said to him: "For through Isaac offspring
will be named for you" (Genesis 21:12). "Nor
change what has gone out of My lips" when I
said to him: "Please take [your son...]"
(Genesis 22:2). To what is this similar?
This is similar to a king who said to his
friend: "I want to see a small baby on my
table." Immediately, his friend went and
brought his son and placed him on the table
before the king. And he went and brought a
sword to slaughter him. Immediately the king
cried out and said to him: "What are you
doing?" He said to (the king): "Didn't you
say to me: 'I want to see a small baby on my
table'?" (The king) said to him: "A living
baby, I said to you, rather than a dead one."
Similarly, the Holy One blessed be He said to
Abraham: "Please take your son" (Genesis
22:2). Thereupon, "And Abraham built an altar
there.... And Abraham lifted his hand" (Genesis
22:9-10). The angel cried out to him: "Do not
lift your hand against the boy" (Genesis
22:12). Abraham said to him: "Didn't you say
to me: 'Please take...'?" He said to (Abraham):
"Did I tell you to slaughter him?" Therefore,
"I will not profane My covenant nor change
what has gone out of My lips."⁹⁵

⁹⁴Tanchuma Vayera 23 (31a); see also Bereshit Rabbah 56:10
(pp. 607-8); Y. Taanit ch. 2 hal. 4 (65d); Pesikta de-Rav Kahana
23:9; Midrash on Psalms 13:1, 29:1, 119:3; Agadat Bereshit 22:2,
38:2; Yalkut Shimoni I 101, 102, 766, 788. Tanchuma Shlach Lecha 14
(70a); Tanchuma Buber Shlach Lecha 27 (37a); and Bemidbar Rabbah
17:2 add that God swore that He would not test Abraham again, as had
been planned.

⁹⁵Tanchuma Buber Vayera 40 (54b-55a); see also Agadat Bereshit
31:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 101.

According to this midrash God never intended to ask Abraham to slaughter Isaac, only to bring him up the mountain.

After God's oath the biblical text continues: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beer-sheba. And Abraham dwelt in Beer-sheba" (Genesis 22:19). Isaac is not mentioned.

Where was Isaac? R. Berechiah in the name of the rabbis of the other place [Babylonia]: (Abraham) sent him with Shem to study Torah from him. This is like the woman who became rich from her spinning. She said: "Because I have become rich from this spinning, it will not move from my hand." Thus said Abraham: "All that has come to me is only because I engaged in Torah and good deeds. Therefore, I am unwilling that it should depart from my seed." R. Jose bar Chanina said: (Abraham) sent (Isaac) in the night because of the (evil) eye.⁹⁶

Another source offers other reasons that the text does not mention Isaac.

"And Abraham returned to his young men" (Genesis 22:19). Where was Isaac? R. Eliezer ben Parat said: Even though Isaac didn't die, it is accounted to him by Scripture as if he died and his ashes were piled on the altar. Therefore it says: "And Abraham returned to his young men." Another interpretation of "And Abraham returned...." Where was Isaac? The Holy One blessed be He brought him to the Garden of Eden and he sat in it three years. And when Abraham our father returned by himself, Sarah saw and said: "Now the word of Satan is the truth." For (Satan) said that Isaac was killed. And her soul fled and she died.⁹⁷

Other midrashim, however, state that Isaac himself told Sarah about the akedah, which explains why he is not mentioned at the end

⁹⁶Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 56:11; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 102; Sefer Hayashar Chayei Sarah p. 81; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:19.

⁹⁷Midrash Hagadol Genesis 22:19.

of the biblical account.

When Isaac returned to his mother, she said to him: "My son, what did your father do to you?" He said to her: "Father took me and brought me over mountains and down hills, and brought me up to the top of one mountain, and built an altar, and ordered the things, and arranged the wood, and bound me on the altar and took the knife in his hand to slaughter me. If God had not said to him: 'Do not lift your hand against the boy' (Genesis 22:12) I would have been slaughtered." She said to him: "Woe to you, son of a hapless mother. If God had not said: 'Do not lift your hand against the boy' you would have been killed." She didn't finish saying the words when she died. As it says: "And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to cry for her" (Genesis 23:2). From where did he come? (He came) from Mount Moriah.⁹⁸

According to the Tanchuma Satan appeared before Sarah in the likeness of Isaac.⁹⁹ Other sources say that Samael appeared before Sarah and told her what Abraham did to Isaac, causing her death.¹⁰⁰

What is particularly significant about Sarah's death immediately following the akedah is that it most likely formed the basis for concluding that Isaac was 37 years old when the akedah occurred.¹⁰¹ Isaac's age is important because the rabbis consider him to be the hero of the akedah. He had to be grown and able to escape from his father to be the hero. Although the age 37 is found in most sources in the literature,¹⁰² two sources also suggest that he was 26 years

⁹⁸Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 26:3; see also Bereshit Rabbah 58:5 (p. 623); Vayikra Rabbah 20:2; Tanchuma Buber Acharei 3 (29b); Kohelet Rabbah 9:7:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 101, II 811.

⁹⁹Tanchuma Vayera 23 (31a).

¹⁰⁰Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (30b); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 102; Sefer Hayashar Vayera pp. 77-8.

¹⁰¹According to Genesis 23:1 Sarah was 127 years old when she died. Subtracting ninety, her age at Isaac's birth, leaves 37.

¹⁰²For example: Tanchuma Vayera 22-23; Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 56:8; Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31; Seder Olam Rabbah 1 p. 5.

old during the akedah.¹⁰³ In either case, Isaac was certainly old enough to be able to escape from his father had he wanted to escape.

The rabbis consider Isaac to be the hero of the akedah. He brings on the challenge himself, by boasting to Ishmael that He is prepared to offer his life if God wants it. He carries the wood as one would carry a cross on the way to his crucifixion.¹⁰⁴

Isaac is confronted by Satan, which prompts him to ask his father where the lamb for the sacrifice is. His father reveals that Isaac will be the lamb. According to another source, Isaac realizes that he is to be the sacrifice even before his father tells him. Isaac responds by accepting his role willfully, although at 37 years of age he could overpower his father and escape. Isaac assists Abraham in building the altar. He asks his father to tie him so as to assure that he will be a ritually fit offering. He is spoken of as stretching his neck upon the altar. And although God's angel stops Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac's soul flees from his body. According to one source one-fourth of his blood, enough to kill him, was spilled on the altar. Isaac's act is spoken of as "קדוש השם", sanctification of the Divine Name," a phrase referring to the willingness to offer one's life for God's sake.

The rabbis, however, cannot ignore that, according to the Bible, God tests Abraham. The rabbis develop this point, considering the akedah the tenth and final time that God tested Abraham.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³Bereshit Rabbah Vilna 56:8; Seder Olam Rabbah 1 p. 5.

¹⁰⁴Bereshit Rabbah 56:3 (p. 598); Pesikta Rabbati 31 (143b); Yalkut Shimoni I 101. However, Isaac is not a "Jesus figure." See Vermes, op. cit.

¹⁰⁵Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 29b.

The rabbis point out that the akedah verifies the psalmist's statement that "The Lord tries the righteous" (Psalms 11:5).¹⁰⁶ According to this reasoning the akedah was instigated to show both Satan and the nations of the world that Abraham would obey God's command, even if it meant sacrificing his son. Abraham, too, was confronted by Satan, both as an old man and as a river, yet continued his journey. When the angel tells him not to sacrifice his son, Abraham questions his authority and asks to harm his son in some way. Finally, Abraham forces God to swear that He would not test Abraham again and that He would remember the akedah for the sake of Isaac's descendants.

However, this rabbinic attitude remains secondary to the major thrust of opinion that considers Isaac to be the hero. While God tests Abraham, his son Isaac emerges as the hero of the akedah due to his willingness to offer his life as God commands.

¹⁰⁶Bereshit Rabbah 55:2 (pp. 585-6); Tanchuma Vayera 20 (29b); Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:16:2; Yalkut Shimoni I 95.

IV

Isaac and Rebecca

Following the akedah the Bible lists the offspring whom Milcah bore to Abraham's brother Nachor. One of these children is Bethuel, who --the Bible records-- fathered Rebecca (Genesis 22:23). The midrash explains why this information follows the akedah.

"And after these things it was told to Abraham saying: 'Behold Milcah has borne [children to your brother Nachor]'" (Genesis 22:20). "A tranquil heart is the life of the flesh (בשריט) (Proverbs 14:30). For while (Abraham) was standing on Mount Moriah he was told (נחנשר)¹ that his son's mate was born. "Behold, Milcah has borne...." "It shall be health to your navel (רפאות תהי לשרך) and marrow to your bones" (Proverbs 3:8). R. Berechiah in the name of R. Isaac: If you heal, it will be for you. What is the proof? "Healing shall be for yourself (רפאות תהי לשרך),"² for while he was standing on Mount Moriah he was told that his son's mate was born. "Behold, Milcah has borne...."³

"As cold water over a faint soul, so is good news from a distant land" (Proverbs 25:25). Just as for good news (one says) "Blessed is the good and the One who makes good," so too for cold water (one says) "Blessed is the good and the One who makes good." And like "cold water over a faint soul" so is "good news from a distant land." For while he was standing on Mount Moriah he was told that his son's mate was born. "Behold, Milcah has borne..." (Genesis 22:20).⁴

¹The root "נ-ח-ש" in the verse from Proverbs is identified with the same root meaning "to bring good tidings."

²R. Berechiah reinterprets the first phrase of Proverbs 3:8, reading "לשרך" as "לשארך," meaning "for your flesh," rather than "לשךך," meaning "to your navel." The word is problematic because the resh contains a dagesh.

³Bereshit Rabbah 57:1 (pp. 612-3).

⁴Ibid., 57:2 (p. 613).

Why do the rabbis consider it to be so important that Abraham learned this information on Mount Moriah?

"And after these things [it was told to Abraham saying: 'Behold Milcah has borne children to your brother Nachor']" (Genesis 22:20). Misgivings were there. Who had misgivings? Abraham (had them). He said: "If (Isaac) had died on Mount Moriah wouldn't he have died without children? Now, I will take a wife for him from the daughters of Aner, Eshcol or Mamre, for they are righteous. Furthermore, what does family lineage matter to them?" The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "You don't need (to do this). A mate for your son was already born." "Behold, Milcah has borne..."⁵

Abraham is concerned that his lineage will continue. He almost saw it halted once, so he now wants to assure that Isaac will marry and produce an heir to God's covenant. One difficulty with this interpretation exists, however. According to the rabbis Isaac was 37 years of age at the akedah. According to Genesis 25:20 he was forty years old when he married Rebecca. Only three years had passed since the akedah (during which time Isaac mourned for his mother⁶). If Rebecca was born near the time of the akedah, she was three years old when she married Isaac.⁷ This fact does not appear to bother the rabbis. One alternative opinion concerning her age is that she was fourteen when she married, being born at the time of the akedah.⁸ This calculation is based upon the opinion that Isaac was 26 years old during the akedah.

The rabbis wondered why Isaac married relatively late in life.

⁵Bereshit Rabbah 57:3 (p. 614); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 102.

⁶Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (30b); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:20.

⁷Seder Olam Rabbah 1 pp. 5-6; Yalkut Shimoni I 110.

⁸Seder Olam Rabbah 1 p. 6; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:20.

And why did he wait to marry until now? Because the Holy One blessed be He did not help him (to marry) until the shame of Ishmael was removed.⁹

This midrash is referring to Ishmael's boasting that he was circumcized at age thirteen, boasting which led to the akedah.

What kind of a person was Rebecca? The rabbis derived their description of her from Genesis 25:20: "And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebecca the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean (הארמי) of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean (הארמי), for his wife."

"And Isaac was forty years old..." (Genesis 25:20). R. Isaac said: If (the purpose of this verse) is to teach us that (Bethuel) was from Paddan-aram, why does Scripture say "the sister of Laban the Aramean?" Rather, (the purpose of this verse is) to teach you that his father was a deceiver (רמאי)¹⁰ and also that the people of her place were deceivers. And this righteous woman who came from among them, to what was she similar? (She was similar to) "a lily among thorns" (Song of Songs 2:2). R. Pinchas in the name of R. Simon: It is written: "And Isaac sent Jacob and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean" (Genesis 28:5). It teaches that all of them are included among the deceivers.¹¹

Another midrash, however, says that Rebecca and Isaac were "perfect and the children of kings."¹²

Abraham sent his servant Eliezer to take a wife for Isaac.

There are those (men) who go to their mate, and there are those whose mate comes to them.

⁹Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:20.

¹⁰Rearranging the letters of "ארמי" to "רמאי."

¹¹Bereshit Rabbah 63:4 (pp. 680-1); see also Vayikra Rabbah 23:1; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:2:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 110.

¹²Bemidbar Rabbah 14:11.

Isaac, his mate came to him, as it is said:
 "And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold,
 camels were coming..." (Genesis 24:63).¹³

Isaac is one of three biblical characters whose marriage partners were first encountered at a well. Eliezer met Rebecca at a well. Also, when Isaac and Rebecca meet the text says "And Isaac came from the way of the well of Lahai-roi (בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי)" (Genesis 24:62).¹⁴

This verse is interpreted differently, in order to answer the question: Where had Isaac gone?

"And Isaac came from bringing (מְבִיא)..."
 (Genesis 24:62).¹⁵ And where had he gone? (He had gone) to the well of Lahai-roi. He went to bring Hagar, who sat by the well and said to the Living One of the universe: "See my misery."¹⁶

Another midrash helps to clarify the matter.

"And Abraham took another wife" (Genesis 25:1). What is written above the matter? "And Isaac brought (Rebecca) into the tent of Sarah his mother" (Genesis 24:67). From here you learn that if a man's wife dies and he has sons, he does not remarry until he has married off his sons. Then he marries. For thusly Abraham did after the death of Sarah. He married off Isaac and then he, himself, married. How does one know? From what is written: "And Isaac brought her...." And afterward it is written: "And Abraham took another wife...." Isaac said: "I took a wife, but Father stands without a wife." What did he do? He went and he brought a wife for him. Rabbi says: Keturah (קְטוּרָה) was really Hagar. And why is

¹³Bereshit Rabbah 68:3 (p. 771); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 117, II 70.

¹⁴Shmot Rabbah 1:32. The word "בְּאֵר" is understood in this comment as meaning "well" rather than being part of the name of the place. See also Tanchuma Shmot 10 (65b).

¹⁵Reading "מְבִיא" as "מְבִיא" in binyan hifil.

¹⁶Bereshit Rabbah 60:14 (p. 654); see also Baba Kamma 92b; Yalkut Shimoni II 166.

she called Keturah? Because she was tied (קטורה) as a leather skin.¹⁷ But our rabbis say (Abraham) took another wife. And why does Rabbi say that Keturah was Hagar? Because it is written of Isaac: "And Isaac came from bringing at the well of Lahai-roi" (Genesis 24:62). That is what is written of (Hagar): "And she called the name of the Lord that spoke to her: 'You are El-roi'" (Genesis 16:13).¹⁸ From here you learn that (Keturah) is Hagar.¹⁸

When Isaac realized that he was married but his father was not, he went to the well of Lahai-roi and brought back a woman for Abraham. Her name, according to Genesis 25:1 is Keturah, but according to Rabbi she is actually Hagar. This conclusion is reached because Hagar referred to God as "El-roi," which is similar to the name of the well from which Isaac brought a wife for his father.

After Isaac came from the well of Lahai-roi, he went out to meditate in the field.

"And Isaac went out to meditate (לשוח) in the field at the turn of evening" (Genesis 24:63). And the word "שיחה" can only mean prayer (as in the verse) "A prayer of the afflicted when he faints, and pours out his prayer (שיחו) before the Lord" (Psalms 102:1). And also it says: "Evening and morning and noon I will pray (אשיחה) and moan..." (Psalms 55:18).¹⁹

Isaac was praying according to this midrash, which interprets the word "לשוח" from the use of its root in other biblical verses.

¹⁷Note the similarity between the words "קטורה" and "קטורה." They only differ by one letter. Perhaps these letters were at one time pronounced similarly, allowing for them to be identified with each other. The image "tied like a leather skin" probably means that no one could hear her cries of anguish until this point.

¹⁸Tanchuma Chayei Sarah 8 (34a); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:62.

¹⁹Bereshit Rabbah 60:14 (pp. 654-5); see also Mechilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai Beshalach 14:10; Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 16 (14a-b); Agadat Bereshit 76:1; Midrash on Psalms 102:2; Yalkut Shimoni II 855.

In fact, based on this verse, Isaac is considered to have established the afternoon prayer.

R. Joshua ben Levi said: The early Patriarchs established the three prayers. Abraham established the morning prayer.... Isaac established the afternoon prayer, as it is said: "And Isaac went out to meditate (לטהור) in the field" (Genesis 24:63). And the word "טיחה" can only mean prayer, as it is said: "I pour out my prayer (טיחי) before Him" (Psalms 142:3). And also it says: "I will pray (אטיחה) and moan, and He has heard my voice" (Psalms 55:18). Jacob established the evening prayer....²⁰

The rabbis recognize that the three prayers correspond to the daily offerings at the Temple,²¹ but they insist that the origin of the prayers can be traced to the Patriarchs.

The midrash describes the meeting of Isaac and Rebecca thusly:

"And (Isaac) lifted his eyes, and saw, and behold, camels were coming. And Rebecca lifted her eyes and saw Isaac. And she descended from the camel" (Genesis 24:63-4). R. Huna said: She saw that his hand was outstretched "and she descended from the camel." She let herself down, as it is said: "For he let himself down; he was not cast down" (Psalms 37:24).²² "And she said to the servant: 'Who is this (הלזה) man who comes to meet us in the field?'" (Genesis 24:65). R. Berechiah in the name of R. Chiya, his father: She saw that he was good-looking, as it says: "Behold, this (הלזה) dreamer comes" (Genesis 37:19).²³ Our rabbis

²⁰Bereshit Rabbah 68:9 (pp. 778-9); see also Berachot 26b; Y. Berachot ch. 4 hal. 1 (7a-b); Tanchuma Chayei Sarah 5 (33b), Beshalach 9 (85b), Miketz 9 (15a); Tanchuma Buber Miketz 11 (98a-b); Bemidbar Rabbah 2:1; Midrash on Psalms 55:2; Midrash Mishle 22:28; Yalkut Shimoni I 86 II 771; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:63.

²¹Bereshit Rabbah 68:9 (pp. 779-80); Berachot 26b.

²²The midrash is apparently saying that although Isaac offered her his hand, she alighted from the camel by herself. The verb "נפל" usually means "fall," which necessitates a clarifying comment.

²³The word "הלזה" is a rare form. It is used referring to Joseph who was "of beautiful form and fair to look upon" (Genesis 39:6). Therefore, Isaac must have been handsome too.

said: It is his guardian angel. The word "הלזה" (should be read) "אליו זה" meaning "this one is to him." "And the servant said: 'It is my master.' And she took her veil and covered herself" (Genesis 24:65). There are two who covered themselves with a veil and they gave birth to twins: Rebecca and Tamar. (Scripture says of) Rebecca: "And she took her veil and covered herself." (Scripture says of) Tamar: "And she covered herself with her veil" (Genesis 38:14).²⁴

Another midrash offers a different account of this meeting.

"And Isaac went out to meditate in the field" (Genesis 24:63). And Rebecca came with Eliezer. And when Rebecca saw him, she saw him exceedingly glorious, clothed and wrapped in tzitzit, and his image was like an angel of God. She said to Eliezer: "Who is this (הלזה) man?" (Genesis 24:65). What does "הלזה" mean? (It means) glorious like the "ליוז", the hazel tree. And why? By the merit of his father and of himself, as it is said: "Your work appears in Your servants, and Your glory (והדר) upon their children" (Psalms 90:16). And "הדר" means a glorious prayer shawl. "For you are clothed with glory and a prayer shawl (הדר)" (Psalms 104:1).²⁵

Because Isaac was praying, he must have been wearing a prayer shawl.

According to another source Rebecca saw a light joined to Isaac's head, which prompted her to ask Eliezer who he was.²⁶

The camel upon which Rebecca rode foreshadowed her children's characters.

And the rabbis said: Just as the camel has a sign of impurity and purity, so too Rebecca will bear a righteous son and a wicked son.²⁷

²⁴Bereshit Rabbah 60:15 (pp. 655-6); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 109.

²⁵Midrash on Psalms 90:18.

²⁶Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:63.

²⁷Bereshit Rabbah 60:14 (pp. 655-6). The camel chews its cud, a sign of purity, but does not have a split hoof.

According to some sources Rebecca actually fell from her camel.

"And Isaac went out to meditate in the field" (Genesis 24:63). From where did he go out? (He went out) from the Garden of Eden.²⁸ "And she fell from her camel" (Genesis 24:64). Because she saw, by the Divine Spirit, that wicked Esau was destined to come from him. She was shaken and she became a mukat etz [one who has lost her hymen through an accidental lesion], and virgin blood went forth from her. Thereupon, the Holy One blessed be He said to Gabriel: "Go down and guard the blood, that it not decay and that no blemish will be in it." Isaac slept with her and did not find her a virgin. He suspected Eliezer. He said to her: "Where is your virginity?" She said to him: "When I fell from the camel I became a mukat etz." He said to her: "You are lying. Eliezer attacked you." And she swore to him that he did not touch her. They went and they found that the tree was blood-colored. Thereupon, Isaac knew that she was a virgin. The Holy One blessed be He said: "What shall I do to this servant who was suspect?" (God) said to the ministering angels: "Bring him also to the Garden of Eden." He was Eliezer son of Nimrod and he was greatly astonished. Isaac left the Garden of Eden alive. And Eliezer entered the Garden of Eden alive.²⁹

According to another source Abraham warned Isaac that Eliezer was suspected of sexual transgressions.

Rabbi Ishmael said: Abraham said to Isaac his son: "This servant is suspect of sexual transgressions, and deceit is in his hand, as it is said: 'He is a Canaanite, the balances of deceit are in his hand; he loves to defraud' (Hosea 12:8). See whether he defiled her. Bring the young woman to the tent and check her virginity with a finger. If she is undefiled in her virginity, behold, she is to you from the mouth of the Almighty." He brought her

²⁸According to a midrash Isaac went to the Garden of Eden following the akedah (see chapter three). Because this verse is the first time he is mentioned since then, he must have come from there.

²⁹Yalkut Shimoni I 109; see also Bereshit Rabbati 24:64-5 (pp. 101-2).

into the tent and examined her virginity with a finger, and showed it to Abraham his father. And afterward he took her, as it is said: "And Isaac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother" (Genesis 24:67). And she was found to be perfect like Sarah his mother.³⁰

The rabbis stress that Rebecca was indeed a virgin.

R. Jochanan said: No woman had been intimate with a man circumcized at eight days until Rebecca. Resh Lakish said: The daughters of the nations guarded themselves from the place of their evidence but abandoned themselves from another place. But this virgin is from the place of virginity, and "no man had known her" (Genesis 24:16) from another place. R. Jochanan said: From understanding that "virgin" is written, doesn't one know that "no man had known her?" Rather, (this phrase teaches that) no man had even demanded her, in accordance with (the verse): "The rod of wickedness shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous" (Psalms 124:3).³¹

Eliezer is suspected of deceit in another matter.

"And the servant said to (Abraham): 'Perhaps (אולי) [the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land]'" (Genesis 24:5). That is what is written: "He is a Canaanite, the balances of deceit are in his hand [to rob the beloved one]" (Hosea 12:8). "He is a Canaanite" refers to Eliezer. "The balances of deceit are in his hand" (means) that he sat and weighed his daughter, whether or not she was worthy (to marry Isaac). "To rob the beloved one" (means) to rob the beloved one of the world. This is Isaac. (Eliezer) spoke to (Abraham) until the word "אלי"³² (implying) "and I will give him my daughter." (Abraham) said to him: "You are

³⁰Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 16 (14a); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 109; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:67.

³¹Bereshit Rabbah 60:5 (p. 645).

³²The midrash understands the word "אולי" in Genesis 24:5 as if it were written defectively (אלי) as in Genesis 24:39. The word would mean "to me," implying that Ishmael is thinking about marrying one of his daughters to Isaac.

cursed and my son is blessed, and the cursed cannot be united with the blessed."³³

The rabbis attempt to show that Rebecca took Sarah's place in the Matriarchal lineage.

"And Isaac brought (Rebecca) to the tent of Sarah his mother" (Genesis 24:67). You find that while Sarah lived, a cloud rested upon her tent. And when she died, the cloud ceased. When Rebecca came, the cloud returned. While Sarah lived, doors were open for hospitality. When Sarah died, the hospitality ceased. When Rebecca came, the hospitality resumed. When Sarah lived, a blessing was upon her dough, and a light was lit in her tent from one Shabbat evening to the next Shabbat evening. And when she died they ceased. When Rebecca came, they returned. When (Isaac) saw that she did as his mother, separating her dough in purity and handling her dough in cleanliness, immediately: "Isaac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother."³⁴

From this midrash the rabbis derive an important lesson.

Before the Holy One blessed be He causes to set the shining of a righteous person, He raises the shining of another righteous person.... Before the Holy One blessed be He caused to set the shining of Sarah, He raised the shining of Rebecca, as it is said: "And Isaac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother" (Genesis 24:67).³⁵

Following the meeting of Isaac and Rebecca, Abraham dies.

Before his death, however, he gave Isaac a final charge.

"And Abraham gave all he had to Isaac" (Genesis 25:5) his son, and also all his precious gifts he gave him. And he commanded him saying: "Haven't you known and heard that the Lord is God in heaven and earth and there is none else

³³Bereshit Rabbah 59:9 (p. 637).

³⁴Ibid., 60:16 (pp. 656-7); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 109.

³⁵Midrash Shmuel 8:9; see also Bereshit Rabbah 58:2 (p. 621); Kohelet Rabbah 1:5:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 102.

beside Him. And it was He who took me from the house of my father and from my birthplace and saved me from Ur of the Chaldeans and from evil advice because I trusted Him. And He brought me to this place and gave me all the possessions of this land; I lack nothing. And He promised me and said to me: 'To your seed I will give all this land. They will inherit who keep My commandments and My statutes and My laws and My ordinances which I command you, and which I will command them.' And now my son, listen to my voice and hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God as I command you. Do not stray from the correct path, left or right so that (God) will do well for you and for your descendants after you forever. And remember the wonders of the Lord and His mercy which He did with us, and that He saved us from the hand of our enemies, whom the Lord God delivered into our hands. And now, all that I command you, you shall observe, and from the commandments of your God you shall not turn away. And you shall not serve another (God) beside Him so that He will do well for you and for your seed after you. And you shall teach your children and your seed the tradition of the Lord and His commandments. And you shall lead them in a correct path so that they follow it, so that He will do well for them forever." And Isaac answered his father and said to him: "What my lord commands I will do, and from the commandments of the Lord my God I will not turn away; all that you command me I will keep." And Abraham blessed Isaac his son, and (Isaac's) sons and Abraham taught Jacob the tradition of the Lord and His ways.³⁶

This midrash places the death of Abraham after the birth of Jacob and Esau, rather than before their birth, as in the biblical text.

This chronology is also found in the Talmud.

It has been taught: That day (when Esau came in from the field and was faint) Abraham died and Jacob made a broth of lentils to comfort Isaac. Why lentils? In the West (Palestine) they say in the name of Raba bar Mari: Just as a lentil has no mouth, so too a mourner does not have a mouth. Another interpretation: Just as a

³⁶Sefer Hayashar Toledot p. 85.

lentil is rounded, so too does mourning go around to all the places of the world.³⁷

The rabbis express different opinions concerning what Abraham gave Isaac before his death.

"And Abraham gave all he had to Isaac" (Genesis 25:5). R. Judah, R. Nechemiah and our rabbis (differed). R. Judah said: (Abraham gave him) the birthright. R. Nechemiah said: (Abraham gave him) the blessing. Our rabbis said: (Abraham gave him) a burial place and a will. R. Judah bar Simon and R. Berechiah and R. Levi said in the name of R. Chama bar Chanina: He did not bless him, but he gave him gifts. It is like the story of a king who had a field and gave it to a steward. In (the field) were two trees intertwined with each other. One contained a drug of life, and one a drug of death. (The steward) said: "If I water the tree containing the drug of life, the one containing the drug of death will live with it. But if I don't water the tree containing the drug of death, how will the one containing the drug of life live?" He said: "I am a steward. I will work, and what the owner of the field wants to do with it he will do." Similarly, Abraham said: "If I bless Isaac now, the children of Ishmael and the children of Keturah are included. But if I don't bless the children of Ishmael and the children of Keturah, how will I bless Isaac?" He said: "I am human. I will do my duty. Whatever the Holy One blessed be He wants to do in His world, let Him do." When our father Abraham died, the Holy One blessed be He appeared to Isaac and blessed him, as it is said: "After the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11).³⁸

Abraham did not want to bless Isaac because the children of Ishmael and of Keturah would be included. So he did not bless Isaac, leaving it to God, who blessed Isaac following Abraham's death.

³⁷Baba Batra 16b.

³⁸Bereshit Rabbah 61:6 (pp. 664-5); see also Tanchuma Naso 9 (56a-b); Tanchuma Buber Naso 17 (17a), Vezot Haberachah 1 (26b-27a); Bemidbar Rabbah 11:21; Yalkut Shimoni I 64, 110, 710.

Also before he died, Abraham sent the children of his concubines away from Isaac his son.

"And (Abraham) sent them away from Isaac [his son eastward, to the east country]" (Genesis 25:6). He said to them: "Go as far as you are able to go toward the rising sun, so that you will not be burnt by the burning coal of Isaac."³⁹

According to the Bible both Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham. The midrash comments on this fact.

R. Jochanan said: Ishmael repented in the lifetime of his father, as it is said: "Isaac and Ishmael (Abraham's) sons buried him" (Genesis 25:9). But perhaps (Isaac is listed first because) they are listed in the order of their wisdom. If so, why (in the verse) "And Esau and Jacob (Isaac's) sons buried him" (Genesis 35:29) are they not listed in the order of their wisdom? Rather, (Isaac) is placed first because (Ishmael) made way for him. And because he made way for him, learn from it that (Ishmael) repented during (Abraham's) lifetime.⁴⁰

Following Abraham's death God blessed Isaac, which according to the midrashim means that God comforted him.

The Holy One blessed be He comforted mourners, as it is written: "And after the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11). So you too comfort mourners.⁴¹

According to another source God comforted Isaac with the mourner's blessing.⁴²

Others also comforted Isaac.

³⁹Bereshit Rabbah 61:7 (p. 669); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 110; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:6.

⁴⁰Baba Batra 16b; see also Bereshit Rabbah 62:3 (p. 674); Yalkut Shimoni I 110.

⁴¹Sota 14a; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 33, 886.

⁴²Kohelet Rabbah 7:2:2.

And when all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan heard that Abraham died they all came with their kings and their princes and all their people to bury Abraham. And all the inhabitants of the land of Haran came and all the families of the house of Abraham and all the princes, and the great ones, and all the children of Abraham's concubines, when they heard that Abraham had died. They sought mercy for Abraham and all of them comforted Isaac his son.⁴³

After his father died, Isaac expressed concern about his future.

We learn from Isaac, who from the beginning of his deeds feared the Holy One blessed be He. Isaac was 75 years old when Abraham died. He said: "Woe is me. Perhaps I have not done as many good deeds as my father did. What will the Holy One blessed be He demand of me?" Thereupon, the mercy of the Holy One blessed be He was stirred and He spoke with him that night, as it is said: "And after the death of Abraham [God blessed Isaac his son]" (Genesis 25:11).⁴⁴

According to the rabbis Isaac was responsible for intercalating the year following Abraham's death.

Abraham delivered to Isaac and he was initiated in the principle of intercalation. And he intercalated the year after the death of Abraham, as it is said: "And after the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11), because he had been initiated in the principle of intercalation. Isaac delivered to Jacob and he was initiated in the principle of intercalation and he intercalated the year. Jacob went outside of the land and wanted to intercalate the year outside of the land. The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Jacob, you have no authority to intercalate the year outside of the land. Behold, Isaac your father, he will intercalate the year in the land."⁴⁵

⁴³Sefer Hayashar Toledot pp. 85-6.

⁴⁴Yalkut Shimoni I 76.

⁴⁵Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 8 (7a-b); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 41.

Rebecca was one of seven women in the Bible who were barren.⁴⁶ She was barren for twenty years before she gave birth.⁴⁷ This figure is arrived at by subtracting forty, Isaac's age at his marriage to Rebecca, from sixty, Isaac's age at the birth of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:26). The rabbis explain why Rebecca was barren.

[Laban and Bethuel blessed Rebecca saying:]
 "Our sister, may you be the mother of thousands and ten thousands..." (Genesis 24:60). R. Berechiah and R. Levi in the name of R. Chama bar Chanina: Why wasn't Rebecca remembered until Isaac prayed on her account? So that the nations of the world would not say: "Our prayers bore fruit." Rather, "And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife" (Genesis 25:21).⁴⁸

R. Azariah in the name of R. Chanina bar Papa said: Why were the Matriarchs barren? So that they would not put on airs toward their husbands on account of their beauty. R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Chiya bar Abba said: Why were the Matriarchs barren? So that most of their lives would be without servitude. R. Chunai in the name of R. Meir: Why were the Matriarchs barren? So their husbands would enjoy their beauty. For when a woman is pregnant she is clumsy and stout. You should know that it is so because all the years that Sarah our mother was barren she sat in her house like a bride in her bridal chamber. When she was pregnant, her charm faded, as it is said: "In gloom (לַיִל) you shall bear children" (Genesis 3:16).⁴⁹ R. Levi in the name of R. Shelah of Kfar Temarta and R. Chelbo in the name of R. Jochanan: Why were the Matriarchs barren? Because the Holy One blessed be He desired to hear their prayer. He said to them: "My dove,

⁴⁶Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 20:1; Agadat Bereshit 52:3.

⁴⁷Pesikta Rabbati 43 (181a); Yalkut Shimoni I 78; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:60.

⁴⁸Bereshit Rabbah 60:13 (pp. 653-4); see also Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:14:8; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:60.

⁴⁹The word "לַיִל" is usually translated "pain" in this context, but it can also mean "gloom."

I will tell you why I have made you childless. Because I have a desire to hear your prayer," as it is written: "For sweet is your voice and your countenance is comely" (Song of Songs 2:14).⁵⁰

The rabbis question whether Isaac or Rebecca is responsible for their barrenness.

Our rabbis taught: If a man married a woman and lived with her for ten years, and she did not bear a child, he shall divorce her and pay her ketubah since it is possible that he was unworthy to have children from her.... Rava said to Rav Nachman: Let us learn from Isaac, for it is written: "Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebecca" (Genesis 25:20). (Rav Nachman) said to (Rava): Isaac was barren. If so, then Abraham was also barren. That text [Genesis 25:20] is necessary according to R. Chiya bar Abba, for R. Chiya bar Abba said in the name of R. Jochanan: Why are the years of Ishmael calculated [in Genesis 25:17]? In order to figure, by them, the years of Jacob. Rabbi Isaac said: Isaac our father was barren, as it is said: "And Isaac entreated the Lord opposite (לנוכח) his wife" (Genesis 25:2). "On account of (על) his wife" is not said, rather "opposite (לנוכח) his wife," teaching that the two of them were barren. If so, why does it say "And the Lord was entreated for him" (Genesis 25:21)? "And the Lord was entreated for them" is necessary. (The former is written) because the prayer of a righteous one the son of a righteous one is not similar to the prayer of a righteous one the child of a wicked one.⁵¹

According to other sources they were barren because Rebecca lacked a womb.

"And Isaac entreated (וימתר) [the Lord opposite his wife for she was barren. And the Lord was entreated for him]" (Genesis 25:21). R. Jochanan and Resh Lakish (interpreted the verse differently. R. Jochanan said that (Isaac)

⁵⁰Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:14:8; see also Yebamot 64a; Yalkut Shimoni II 78, 110.

⁵¹Yebamot 64a; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 79, 110.

poured out prayer in abundance (בעושר).⁵² But Resh Lakish said that (Isaac) changed (הפך) the decree (that Rebecca would be barren), and therefore it is called a pitchfork (עתרה) because it turns the grain.⁵³ "Opposite his wife" teaches that Isaac was bowed down here and Rebecca was bowed down here. (Isaac) said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, all the children that you will give me, may they be from this righteous one." She also said this. "For she was barren (עקרה)." R. Judan in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: She lacked (עקר) a womb and the Holy One blessed be He made one for her. "And the Lord was entreated." R. Berechiah in the name of R. Levi: This is like a prince who was digging to his father to get a pound of gold. One was digging from within and the other from without.⁵⁴

Sefer Hayashar describes the event differently.

And in the fifty-ninth year of the life of Isaac son of Abraham, Rebecca his wife was still barren. And Rebecca said to Isaac: "Didn't I hear, my lord, that also Sarah your mother was barren in her days, until my lord Abraham your father prayed on her account and she became pregnant for him? Now, stand and pray to God, also you, and He will hear your prayer and He will remember us for the sake of His mercy." And Isaac answered Rebecca his wife saying: "Abraham my father has already prayed to our God on my behalf, to multiply my seed. Now, this barrenness of ours is due to you." And Rebecca said to him: "But now arise and pray on my behalf, also you, and the Lord will hear your prayer and give me children." And Isaac hearkened to the words of his wife. Isaac and Rebecca arose and went to the land of Moriah to pray and to seek the Lord there. And they arrived at that place. And Isaac stood and

⁵²R. Jochanan identifies the root "עתר" with the root "עשר." The letters tav and shin may have been pronounced similar to each other, allowing for this interpretation.

⁵³Resh Lakish interprets the root "עתר" in line with its use as a noun, meaning "pitchfork."

⁵⁴Bereshit Rabbah 63:5 (pp. 681-2); see also Ruth Rabbah 7:14; Midrash Shmuel 6:3; Yalkut Shimoni I 110.

prayed to the Lord opposite his wife, for she was barren. And Isaac said: "Lord, God of heaven and earth whose goodness and mercy fills all the land; You, Who took my father from the land of his birth, and You brought him to this land and You said to him: 'To you and to your seed I will give the land.' And You promised him and said to him: 'I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand of the sea.' Now, confirm Your words which You spoke to my father. For You are the Lord, our God. Our eyes are upon You to give us the seed of men as You promised him, for You are our God and our eyes are upon You." And the Lord hearkened to the prayer of Isaac son of Abraham. "And the Lord was entreated for him, and Rebecca his wife conceived" (Genesis 25:21).⁵⁵

Because Isaac's prayer was answered, he is credited with making a barren woman give birth.

"Blessed is one who delights greatly in His commandments" (Psalms 112:1). And what is his reward? "His seed shall be mighty upon the earth" (Psalms 112:2). This verse refers to Isaac, as it is said: "For through Isaac seed will be named for you" (Genesis 21:12). And what is his strength? "And Isaac entreated the Lord..." (Genesis 25:21). Isn't one who makes a barren woman give birth mighty?⁵⁶

Rebecca had a difficult pregnancy, as recounted by the midrash.

"And the children struggled [within her, and she said: 'If it be so, why am I thus.' And she went to inquire of the Lord]" (Genesis 25:22). R. Jochanan and Resh Lakish (interpreted the verse differently). R. Jochanan said: They ran to murder each other. R. Simeon ben Lakish said: They each annulled the commands of the other. R. Berechiah said in the name of R. Levi that you should not say (only) after (Esau) went forth from his mother's womb, he was antagonistic to (Jacob). Rather, while he was in his mother's womb, his fist was stretched out against him, as it is written: "The wicked stretch forth (fists) from the womb..."

⁵⁵Sefer Hayashar Toledot pp. 83-4.

⁵⁶Midrash on Psalms 112:2; see also Yalkut Shimoni II 871.

(Psalms 58:4). "And the children struggled within her" (means that) they ran within her. She walked by houses of idol worship and Esau struggled to come forth, as it is written: "The wicked struggle from the womb..." (Psalms 58:4). She walked by synagogues and houses of study, and Jacob struggled to come forth, as it is written: "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). "And she said: 'If it be so, why am I thus?'" R. Chaggai in the name of R. Isaac said: It teaches that our mother Rebecca visited the houses of women and said to them: "When you were pregnant, did you have this trouble? If this is the pain of (bearing) children I wish that I would not have conceived." R. Huna said: (Rebecca said:) "If I am destined to bear the (heads of) the twelve tribes, I wish I would not have conceived." It was taught in the name of R. Nechemiah: Rebecca was worthy of bearing (the heads of) the twelve tribes, as it is written: "And the Lord said to her: 'Two nations are in your womb [and two peoples will be separated from your belly. One people will be stronger than the other and the elder will serve the younger]'" (Genesis 25:23). "Two nations" makes two. "And two peoples" makes four. "One people will be stronger than the other" makes six. "And the elder will serve the younger" makes eight. "And when her days were filled to give birth, behold, twins were in her womb" (Genesis 25:24) makes ten. "And the first came forth ruddy" (Genesis 25:25) makes eleven. "And after that his brother came forth" (Genesis 25:26) makes twelve. And there are those who say (the proof is) from this verse: "And she said: 'If it be so, why am I thus (הֲיִי)?" The letter zayin has the value seven; the letter he has the value five, which totals twelve.⁵⁷

According to this midrash Rebecca deserved to bear twelve children, who would become the leaders of the twelve tribes, but she complained that the pain of childbirth was too great. According to other sources, however, Esau caused Rebecca not to bring forth the heads

⁵⁷Bereshit Rabbah 63:6 (pp. 682-3); see also Tanchuma Buber Vayechi 16 (111a); Yalkut Shimoni I 110.

of the twelve tribes.⁵⁸ Isaac and Rebecca thus become the parents of twins, Jacob and Esau.

⁵⁸Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 3:1; Pesikta Rabbati 12 (48a).

V

Isaac in Gerar

The famine which took place in the days of Isaac (Genesis 26:1) was one of ten famines which visited the world, according to the rabbis.¹ These famines occurred not during the days of weak people, but during the days of strong people who could withstand them.

R. Chiya said: It is similar to a glass-worker with a basket filled with glasses and cut glass. When he wanted to hang the basket he brought a nail, drove it in, hanged himself on it, and then hanged his basket. Therefore, all of (the famines) came not in the days of weak people, but in the days of strong people who could withstand them.²

The famine during Isaac's days came to test him and to fulfill the verse: "The Lord tests the righteous" (Psalms 11:5).³ According to another source the Patriarchs were tried with famine in order that their descendants would merit the Torah.⁴ The rabbis use verses from Psalms and Proverbs to illustrate Isaac's situation.

"And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine..." (Genesis 26:1). It is written: "The Lord knows the days of those who are wholehearted, [and their inheritance shall be forever. They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil; and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied]" (Psalms 37:18-9). "The Lord knows the days of those who are wholehearted" refers

¹Bereshit Rabbah 25:3 (pp. 241-2), 40:3 (pp. 382-3), 64:2 (pp. 700-2); Ruth Rabbah 1:4; Midrash Shmuel 28:3; Yalkut Shimoni I 43, II 153.

²Bereshit Rabbah 25:3 (pp. 241-2); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 43.

³Bereshit Rabbati 26:1 (p. 106).

⁴Midrash Shmuel 28:2.

to Isaac. "And their inheritance shall be forever" [refers to God's command] "Dwell in this land" (Genesis 26:3). "They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil" [refers to] the period of Abimelech's evil. "And in the days of famine they shall be satisfied" [refers to] "And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine...."⁵

"The Lord will not starve the soul of the righteous to famish" (Proverbs 10:3) refers to Isaac, as it is said: "Dwell in this land..." (Genesis 26:3). "But He trusts away the desire of the wicked" (Proverbs 10:3) refers to Abimelech.⁶

The rabbis want to show that Isaac trusted in the Lord to sustain him during the famine, and therefore obeyed God's command to remain in the land rather than go to Egypt.⁷ But they also wonder why Isaac was forbidden to leave the land, whereas Abraham had not been forbidden.

"And Isaac went to Abimelech..." (Genesis 26:1). He wanted to go down to Egypt. Thereupon, the Holy One blessed be He appeared to him, and said to him: "Do not go down to Egypt" (Genesis 26:2). Abraham went down, but Isaac did not go down. Why did (God) not say to Abraham, but to Isaac "Do not go down to Egypt?" R. Hoshaya said: The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Isaac, your father, who came from outside of the land, went down to Egypt. But you, who were born in the land of Israel, you were a pure offering; you will go down in impurity. Therefore, do not go down to Egypt." "Dwell in this land" (Genesis 26:3). R. Chanan said in the name of R. Samuel bar Isaac: Why did God not want him to become impure outside of the land? Because he had decreed, as it is said: "And

⁵Bereshit Rabbah 64:1 (p. 700); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 111, II 730.

⁶Bereshit Rabbah 64:2 (pp. 700-2); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 111, II 731, 945.

⁷Yalkut Shimoni II 720.

there was a famine." Therefore He says: "Dwell in this land."⁸

Another midrash clarifies R. Hoshaya's statement that Isaac should not go to Egypt because he was a pure offering.

"Dwell in this land" (Genesis 26:3). R. Hoshaya said: You are a fit burnt-offering. Just as a fit burnt-offering, if it goes out of the curtains of the Temple becomes unfit, so too if you go outside of the land, you will be unfit.⁹

The rabbis interpret God's charge to Isaac to dwell in the land in another way.

"And the Lord appeared to him and said: 'Do not go down to Egypt. Dwell (שכון) in the land [which I will tell you]'" (Genesis 26:2). Make a dwelling place (שכונה) of the land. Sow and plow. Another interpretation of "Dwell (שכון) in the land." Cause the Divine Presence (שכינה) to dwell (שכן)¹⁰ in the land.¹¹

Like his father had done, Isaac tried to pass off his wife as his sister.

"And the people of the place asked about his wife, and he said: 'She is my sister'" (Genesis 26:6). The people of the place began to be jealous of his wife. He clung to the behavior of his father and he said: "She is my sister." From here it is said: One should always hang on to the merit of his fathers.¹²

Abimelech, however, observes Isaac being intimate with Rebecca.

⁸Tanchuma Buber Toledot 6 (64b); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:2, 37:1.

⁹Bereshit Rabbah 64:3 (p. 702); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 111.

¹⁰Because "שכן" is written defectively, it can be read as a piel imperative, rather than a qal imperative.

¹¹Bereshit Rabbah 64:3 (p. 702); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 111.

¹²Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:7.

"When he had spent (אָרונ) many days there [Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looked through a window and saw, and behold Isaac was playing with Rebecca his wife]" (Genesis 26:8). R. Jochanan said: A bad dream, harsh prophecy and unreasonable mourning are canceled by the passing of time.... The passing of time cancels unreasonable mourning refers to (Isaac in the incident involving) Abimelech: "When (Isaac) had spent many days...." R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Chiya bar Abba: Because the passing of time brought healing (אָרונ) he did this thing. Did not R. Jochanan say: Sexual intercourse during the day is indecent? For R. Jochanan said: One only engages in sexual intercourse at night. "In the evening she came (בֹּאָה)"¹³ (Esther 2:14).¹⁴

The rabbis are concerned that Isaac would violate this principle and engage in intercourse during the daytime, when Abimelech saw him. They conclude that Isaac had still been mourning for Abraham, and the passing of time brought him healing (אָרונ) from his grief over his father's death.

Another account of this incident adds more details.

And when Isaac came to Gerar the people of the land appeared to Rebecca his wife, for she was of good appearance. And all the people of Gerar asked Isaac of his wife. And he said: "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say his wife lest the people of the land kill him on her account. And the princes of Abimelech went and they praised the woman to Abimelech, but he did not answer them at all, and did not pay attention to their words. But he heard when they told him that the man said "She is my sister," and the king knew this matter in his heart. And at the end of three months of Isaac's dwelling in the land, Abimelech was looking out the window and he saw, and behold Isaac was fondling Rebecca his wife. For Isaac dwelt in the house of the king, the outer one, and the house of Isaac was across from the house

¹³The word "בֹּאָה" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

¹⁴Bereshit Rabbah 64:5 (pp. 704-5); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 111.

of the king. And the king said to Isaac: "What is this thing that you have done to us when you said of your wife: 'She is my sister?' If one of the people from their great ones lay with your wife, you would bring on us guilt." And Isaac said to Abimelech: "But I feared lest I die on account of my wife. Therefore I said: She is my sister." Then Abimelech commanded all his princes and his leaders and they took Isaac and Rebecca his wife and they brought them before the king. And the king commanded, and they dressed the two of them in royal clothes and they led them through the public square of the city. And they called before them in all the land saying: "This is the man and this is his wife; all who touch this man or his wife shall surely die." And Isaac and his wife dwelt in the house of the king and the Lord was with Isaac and he went on his way and grew and did not lack a thing. And the Lord made Isaac gain favor in the eyes of all his servants and Abimelech did well with Isaac. For Abimelech remembered the oath and the covenant which was between his father and between Abraham. And Abimelech said to Isaac: "Behold, all the land is before you in goodness in your eyes. Dwell until you will return to your land." And Abimelech gave Isaac fields and vineyards and the land of Gerar was good to sow and to harvest and to eat the fruit of the land until the days of the famine ended.¹⁵

During this period of his life Isaac became successful at agriculture, increasing his crop one hundred fold.

R. Dostai bar Janai says in the name of R. Meir: Behold, [God] says of Isaac: "And I will bless you and I will multiply your seed" (Genesis 26:24).¹⁶ Isaac interpreted and said: "Since there is no blessing which comes down except with the work of one's hands," he stood and sowed, as it is said: "And Isaac sowed in that land, and during that year he found 100 portions..." (Genesis 26:12). What does 100 mean?

¹⁵Sefer Hayashar Toledot pp. 88-9.

¹⁶Perhaps the rabbinic text means to quote Genesis 26:4 which says "and I will multiply your seed" rather than verse 24 which occurs after the account of Isaac's agricultural success.

(It means) 100 portions for they measured 100 times more than what they estimated.¹⁷

"And Isaac sowed in that land [and he found in that year one hundred portions]" (Genesis 26:12). R. Chelbo said: "that land" and "in that year" (are written to teach that) the land was hard and the year was difficult. But if each had been pleasant, how much the more (would Isaac have produced). "And he found in that year 100 portions." One hundred khors. "One hundred portions" teaches that they estimated, and it produced 100 times what they estimated. But isn't it true that a blessing does not rest on a thing that is weighed, measured or counted? Why did he measure it? Because of the tithes.¹⁸

According to the rabbis Isaac separated the second tithe, which was consumed by the owner in Jerusalem.

R. Huna said: The early Patriarchs separated the heave-offerings and the tithes. Abraham separated the great heave-offering.... Isaac separated the second tithe, as it is said: "And Isaac sowed..." (Genesis 26:12).... Jacob separated the first tithe....¹⁹

According to another source Isaac separated the great heave-offering, the first portion owed to the priests.

Isaac separated the great heave-offering. "And Isaac sowed in that land and found in that year one hundred portions [and the Lord blessed him]" (Genesis 26:12). Rabbi [Isaac] said: Wherever there is a blessing, there is no measuring. But it says "one hundred portions and He blessed him."

¹⁷Tosephta Berachot 7:8.

¹⁸Bereshit Rabbah 64:6 (pp. 705-6); see also Ketubot 112a; Tanchuma Reeh 14 (109a); Yalkut Shimoni I 111, II 983; Bemidbar Rabbah 12:11; Midrash Mishle 30:4.

¹⁹Tanchuma Reeh 14 (109a); see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 10:6; Yalkut Shimoni I 75, 892; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:7; Bereshit Rabbati 14:20 (pp. 70-1).

Rather, from here (one learns) that he measured in order to separate the heave-offering.²⁰

The great heave-offering, which equals one-fiftieth of the crop, is measured in hundredths. Therefore, the rabbis conclude that Isaac must have set apart this portion for the priests.

Another source considers the statement that Isaac sowed to be a metaphor.

It is written: "And Isaac sowed in that land..." (Genesis 26:12). Rabbi Eliezer says: But did Isaac sow corn? God forbid! Rather, he took a full tenth of his possessions and sowed righteousness for the poor, as it says: "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap according to love" (Hosea 10:12). And everything that he tithed, the Holy One blessed be He brought to him one hundred times in wealth and blessed him. Therefore it is said: "And the Lord blessed him" (Genesis 26:12).²¹

The concept of sowing is identified with righteousness.

Isaac's successful endeavor is used as an example that wherever righteous persons go a blessing goes with them. Isaac went to Gerar and was blessed.²²

Isaac's success, however, alienates Abimelech and the Philistines.

"And the man grew [and grew more until he became very great]" (Genesis 26:13). R. Chanan said: Until people would say the dung of Isaac's mule rather than the gold or silver of Abimelech.

²⁰Pesikta Rabbati 25 (124b); first set of brackets is in the text. Rabbi Isaac is from Parma manuscript. See Pesikta Rabbati, Braude, p. 519.

²¹Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 33 (31a-b); see also Seder Eliahu Zuta 1 (p. 170); Yalkut Shimoni I 111; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:7; Bereshit Rabbati 49:33 (p. 257).

²²Bereshit Rabbah 73:8 (pp. 851-2); Sifre Devarim 38 (p. 75); Yalkut Shimoni I 857, II 143.

"And he had possessions of flocks and possessions of herds and a great household (עֲנֹדָה)" (Genesis 26:14). Daniel the tailor said: The word "עֲנֹדָה" is written defectively. Unless a person makes himself a servant to his slave, he cannot acquire him. "And Abimelech said to Isaac: 'Go from among us, for you have become very much stronger (חֲזָקָה) than us'" (Genesis 26:16). (Abimelech) said to (Isaac): "All the progress (עֲצֻמָּוֹת) that you have made (חֲזָקָה), wasn't it from us to you? Once you had only one sheep. Now you have many."²³

Because Isaac obeys Abimelech's request and leaves, the end turns out well.

It is written: "Come, my people, enter into your chambers and shut [your doors] about you; hide yourself for a short moment, until the indignation has passed" (Isaiah 26:20). When you see the hour unstoppable, do not stand against it. Rather, give it room. As it is said: "Come, my people, enter into your chambers." Look at me, so to speak, for when I see the hour unstoppable because of your sins, I just give it room, as it is said: "(The Lord) has drawn back His right hand..." (Lamentations 2:3). You too, "Come my people." For whoever stands against the hour, falls in its hand, but whoever gives the hour room, the hour falls in his hand.... Isaac gave room to the moment when the Philistines said to him: "Go from among us" (Genesis 26:16). Thereupon, "And Isaac went from there" (Genesis 26:17). And the moment returned and fell in his hand, as it is said: "And Abimelech went to him from Gerar.... And Isaac said to them: 'Why do you come to me...?' And they said: 'We surely see that the Lord is with you...'" (Genesis 26:26-8).²⁴

Isaac departed from the presence of the Philistines when he was told to do so by Abimelech. He waited patiently until the Philistines approached him and said they had seen that God was with him. Isaac

²³Bereshit Rabbah 64:7 (p. 707); brackets are in text.

²⁴Tanchuma Buber Vayetzei 5 (74a-b); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 168.

did not force things to happen, but let them fall into place.

This same set of circumstances is used as an example that God seeks the pursued.

"God seeks the pursued" (Ecclesiastes 3:15). Rav Huna in the name of Rav Joseph: The Holy One blessed be He will demand the blood of the pursued from the hand of their pursuers. If a righteous person pursues a righteous person, "God seeks the pursued." If a wicked person pursues a wicked person, "God seeks the pursued." If a wicked person pursues a righteous person, "God seeks the pursued." Even if you turn it around and say a righteous person pursues a wicked person, nevertheless, "God seeks the pursued."... Isaac was pursued by the Philistines. "God seeks the pursued." "And they said: 'We surely saw that the Lord was with you...'" (Genesis 26:28).²⁵

Another theme which this episode illustrates is that those who suffer at first, rest at the end.

It is written: "And at the end of days the mountain of the Lord's house shall be [at the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills and all nations shall flow to it]" (Isaiah 2:2). This is what Scripture says: "Although your beginning was small (תַּעֲרָא), [your end shall greatly increase]" (Job 8:7). To teach you that all who are troubled (הַמַּצְטָעֵר) from their start receive rest at the end.... Isaac was troubled in his youth, and the Philistines became jealous of him, [as it is said]: "And Abimelech said to Isaac: 'Go from among us, for you are much stronger than we are'" (Genesis 26:16). At the end they sought him: "And Isaac said to them: 'Why do you come to me...?'" (Genesis 26:27).²⁶

A similar point is made about another aspect of this encounter.

²⁵Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 9:4; see also Vayikra Rabbah 27:5 (manuscript 7); Tanchuma Emor 9 (38a); Tanchuma Buber Emor 12 (46a); Kohelet Rabbah 3:15:1; Yalkut Shimoni II 968; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:28.

²⁶Tanchuma Buber Ekev 5 (9b); see also Tanchuma Ekev 3 (104a); Yalkut Shimoni II 904.

From where do we know that with regard to the righteous ones, their beginning is quarrelsome and their end happy?... Isaac was involved in a quarrel in his youth, but his end was happy. In his youth what does it say? "And the shepherds of Gerar quarreled [with Isaac's shepherds saying: 'The water belongs to us']" (Genesis 26:20). And later what does it say? "And he made a feast for them" (Genesis 26:30).²⁷

A number of other verses are also applied to the conflict between Isaac and Abimelech.

Another interpretation of "But the way of the wicked shall perish" (Psalms 1:6). You find that God caused Nimrod to perish before Abraham, Abimelech before Isaac, Esau before Jacob.²⁸

"The wicked are like the troubled sea" (Isaiah 57:20).... You find that Nimrod and his men fought Abraham, and they fell before him.... Abimelech (fell) before Isaac. Esau and Laban (fell) before Jacob....²⁹

"The Lord is for me, I will not fear; What can man do to me?" (Psalms 118:6).... Isaac said: "The Lord is for me, I will not fear. What can Abimelech do to me?"³⁰

"You did thrust sore at me that I might fall, [but the Lord helped me]" (Psalms 118:13).... Isaac said: "You did thrust sore at me in the days of the Philistines, but the Lord helped me."³¹

In all of these midrashim Isaac's encounter with Abimelech and the Philistines is used to illustrate a biblical verse. The rabbis use examples from the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and occasionally

²⁷Seder Eliahu Zuta 11 (p. 192).

²⁸Midrash on Psalms 1:22.

²⁹Ibid. 2:2.

³⁰Ibid. 118:9.

³¹Ibid. 118:14.

other important figures to show that statements made in Psalms and other biblical books correspond to the experience of Jewish history.

This incident also serves as an example that a person should only reprove someone near the end of the person's life.

Because of four things one only reproves someone near death: in order that it does not occur that one reproves a person, he repents, and one reproves him again; in order that his friend will not see him and he will be embarrassed; in order that he will not be against him in his heart; and in order that he will leave him in peace, for the reproof brings peace.... And thus it says of Isaac: "And Isaac said to them: 'Why do you come to me when you hate me and sent me away from you?'" (Genesis 26:27). What does it say? "And Isaac sent them, and they went from him in peace" (Genesis 26:31).³²

According to one source Isaac's encounter with Abimelech is considered to be a test.

This is what Scripture says: "The Lord tests the righteous" (Psalms 11:5). The Holy One blessed be He does not promote a person to authority until He tests and examines him first, and if he stands up to the test, he is promoted to authority.... And thus Isaac, (God) tested him in the days of Abimelech and he stood up to the test. And afterward He blessed him, as it is said: "And Isaac sowed in that land and found in that year 100 portions and the Lord blessed him" (Genesis 26:12).³³

After Isaac was sent from Gerar he and his followers dug those wells that Abraham had dug and that the Philistines had stopped up.

³²Sifre Devarim 2 (p. 10); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 800, II 34.

³³Tanchuma Bechaalotcha 8 (63a).

"And Isaac again digged wells of water..." (Genesis 26:18). How many wells did our father Isaac dig in Beer-sheba? R. Judah bar Simon said: (He dug) four, corresponding to the four standards his descendants were disposed under in the wilderness [Numbers 12]. But our rabbis said: (He dug) five, corresponding to the five books of the Torah.³⁴

This passage goes on to show how each of the names of the wells corresponds to one of the books of the Torah. As pointed out in chapter one, one of the reasons that Isaac's name was not changed is to reward him for calling the wells by the names which Abraham called them.

The wells which Isaac dug are considered to have followed the Patriarchs wherever they went.

"And the servants of Isaac digged in the valley..." (Genesis 26:19). R. Akiba says: Wherever the Patriarchs went, the well went with them. Abraham digged in the land three times and found it before him, as it is said: "which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father" (Genesis 26:18). And Isaac digged in the land four times and found it before him, as it is said: "And the servants of Isaac digged in the valley and they found there a well of living water" (Genesis 26:19).³⁵

In the end, the Philistines realized that the Lord was with Isaac.

"And (Abimelech, Ahuzzath and Phicol) said: 'We surely saw (וַיֵּרְאוּ) that the Lord was with you'" (Genesis 26:28). We saw your deeds and the deeds of your fathers, and it is said: "Let there be an oath between us..." (Genesis 26:28).³⁶

³⁴Bereshit Rabbah 64:8 (pp. 707-8); see also Yalkut Shimon I 111.

³⁵Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:19; see also Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 35 (34b).

³⁶Bereshit Rabbah 64:10 (p. 710); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:28. Because the verb "וַיֵּרְאוּ" is written twice, it is interpreted as the seeing of both Isaac's deeds and those of his father.

So Isaac made a covenant with them.

And Isaac made a covenant with the people of the land where he lived, in the land of the Philistines. He saw them, that they turned their faces from him, and he went away from them in peace. And Abimelech and all his leaders went after him. (Isaac) said to them: "You turned your faces from me and now you come to me," as it is said: "And Isaac said to them: 'Why [do you come to me]?' " (Genesis 26:27). "And they said: 'We surely saw that the Lord was with you'" (Genesis 26:28). They said: "We know that the Holy One blessed be He will give all these lands to your seed. Make a covenant with us that Israel will not inherit the land of the Philistines." What did Isaac do? He cut off one cubit of the bridle of the ass on which he was riding and he gave it to (Abimelech) as a sign that there was a covenant of oath between them. And when David wanted to enter the land of the Philistines he was not able to enter because of Isaac's covenant, until he took from them the sign of the covenant of Isaac's oath, as it is said: "And David took the bridle of the cubit from the hand of the Philistines" (II Samuel 8:1). And it is written: "So the Philistines were subdued, and they did not come within the border of Israel anymore" (I Samuel 7:13).³⁷

The oath into which Isaac entered remained intact until the time of David, when it was nullified.

³⁷Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 36 (36b-37a); see also Yalkut Shimoni II 146.

VI

Isaac and His Sons

One of the responsibilities of a Jewish father is to circumcize his sons. As noted in chapter one, Isaac was the first person to be circumcized at eight days old. The Torah, however, does not mention whether Jacob and Esau were circumcized. Conflicting opinions are found in the rabbinic literature. According to Rabbi Judah the Prince, Isaac circumcized Jacob, but Esau despised circumcision just as he despised his birthright.¹ However, according to Rabbi Berechiah, Jacob was born circumcized, based on the phrase "and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels" (Genesis 25:23).² This verse means that when Jacob and Esau leave the womb, they will be distinguished from each other because Jacob will be circumcized. In another source the phrase "Jacob was a perfect (DN) man" (Genesis 25:27) is cited.³ The rabbis interpret the word "DN" to mean that Jacob was born perfect, i.e., already circumcized.

According to the Torah Isaac loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob (Genesis 25:28). In general the rabbis accept this statement and attempt to explain why it is true. However, the rabbis suggest that parental love alone does not assure the type of character an offspring will develop. They discuss Isaac's role in raising his sons, and conclude that he raised Jacob properly.

¹Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 29 (26b).

²Bereshit Rabbah 63:7 (p. 685); see also Bemidbar Rabbah 14:5; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:23; Lekach Tov Genesis 25:23.

³Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 18b; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 17, 110.

Everyone who chastens his son, the son loves his father more and he honors him, as it is said: "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; [and he will give delight to your soul]" (Proverbs 29:17). And it says: "Chasten your son for there is hope" (Proverbs 19:18). And (the son) increases his love for him, as it is said: "But one who loves him, chastens him diligently" (Proverbs 13:24). Because (the father) chastens him diligently, (the son) loves him.... Isaac diligently chastened Jacob, for Isaac taught him Torah, and rebuked him in the school house, as it is said: "Jacob was a simple man..." (Genesis 25:27). And he studied what his father taught him. And later he left his father and secluded himself in the house of Eber to study Torah. Therefore, he merited the blessing and the inheritance of the land, as it is said: "And Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan" (Genesis 37:1).⁴

However, according to the rabbis Esau was wicked because Isaac failed to chasten him.

"One who spares his rod hates his son, but one who loves him chastens him diligently" (Proverbs 13:24). In the custom of the world, if one's friend says to him: "A certain person hit your son," one is ready to deprive him of his livelihood. So why does Scripture say: "One who spares his rod hates his son?" To teach you that one who refrains from chastening his son causes him to come to an evil life and to hate him.... "And Isaac loved Esau" (Genesis 25:28). Therefore, he went to an evil life because (Isaac) did not chasten him. As we learned:⁵ Esau transgressed five sins on the same day. He raped a betrothed woman, he murdered a person, he denied the resurrection of the dead, he denied the essence (God's existence), and he despised the birthright. And also, he longed for the death of his father, and he wanted to kill his brother, as it is said: "Let the days of mourning for my father draw near; [then will I slay my brother Jacob]" (Genesis 27:41). (Esau) caused Jacob to flee from his father. And (Esau) went with Ishmael to learn from him

⁴Shmot Rabbah 1:1.

⁵Baba Batra 16b.

an evil life and to add wives, as it is said:
 "So Esau went to Ishmael..." (Genesis 28:9).⁶

Unlike his brother, Esau did not go to study Torah.

At that time Isaac sent Jacob, his younger son, to the house of Shem and Eber to study the tradition of the Lord and His Torah, to know the Lord. And Jacob went to the house of Shem and Eber, and he studied the tradition of the Lord. And Jacob lived in the house of Shem and Eber 32 years. But Esau did not want to go. So he lived in the house of his father in the land of Canaan.⁷

According to one source, however, Isaac taught Esau most of the precepts contained in the Torah.

"Feed me from the red pottage (החמץ החמץ)" (Genesis 25:30). Both words are written defectively. It teaches that Esau learned from his father all the wisdom and laws of Torah except two: blood of niddah and blood of virginity. For he wanted to learn, but his father did not want to teach him because he is one who destroys.⁸

When Esau grew up, he went to the house of idol worship.

During their first thirteen years (Jacob and Esau) went to school and came from school. After thirteen years, one went to the house of study, while the other went to the house of idol worship.⁹

In the Torah both Isaac and Rebecca refer to Esau as their elder (גדול) son (Genesis 27:1, 15). The rabbis, however, interpret the word "גדול" to mean "great," implying a judgment of his stature.

⁶Shmot Rabbah 1:1.

⁷Sefer Hayashar Toledot p. 89.

⁸Midrash Chaserot Veyitrot p. 243. The root "ד-ת-נ" means "red." Each word is written defectively corresponding to each law pertaining to blood that Isaac failed to teach Esau.

⁹Bereshit Rabbah 63:10 (p. 614).

"And (Isaac) called Esau [his great son (בְּנוֹ הַגָּדוֹל)]"¹⁰ (Genesis 27:1). R. Leazar bar Simeon said: This can be compared to a country that was selecting a bodyguard for a king. There was a woman who had a son, a dwarf, whom she called Tallswift. She said: "My son is Tallswift, and you do not select him?" They said to her: "Though in your eyes he is Tallswift, in our eyes he is a dwarf." Similarly, (Esau's) father called him great: "And he called Esau his great son." His mother called him great: "[And Rebecca took] the clothes of Esau, her great son (בְּנוֹ הַגָּדוֹל)"¹¹ (Genesis 27:15). The Holy One blessed be He said to them: "Though in your eyes he is great, in my eyes he is small, as it is said: "[Thus said the Lord God concerning Edom]... 'Behold, I make you small among the nations'" (Obadiah 1:2).¹²

Although Isaac considered Esau his first-born and loved him, God canceled these.

Isaac called Esau "my first-born" but I called Jacob "my son, my first-born" and canceled the first-born of Isaac and established the first-born of Jacob. Isaac loved Esau, as it is said: "And Isaac loved Esau" (Genesis 25:28), but I loved Jacob. I canceled the love of Isaac and established the love of Jacob.¹³

Why did Isaac love Esau? The rabbis emphasize that Esau honored Isaac.

R. Simeon ben Gamliel said: No son ever honored his father more than I honored my father, but I find that Esau honored his father more than I did. How? R. Simeon ben Gamliel said: I would serve my father in soiled clothes, but when I

¹⁰This phrase is usually translated: "And (Isaac) called Esau, his elder son."

¹¹This phrase is usually translated: "And Rebecca took the clothes of Esau, her elder son."

¹²Bereshit Rabbah 65:11 (pp. 720-1); see also Tanchuma Toledot 8 (36a); Agadat Bereshit 40:3; Pesikta Rabbati 15 (79a); Yalkut Shimoni I 114, II 332.

¹³Agadat Bereshit 83:3.

went to the market I would discard those clothes and put on nice clothes and go out in them. But Esau did not do this. Rather, the clothes that he wore when serving his father were superior.¹⁴

The rabbis comment upon the biblical statement which says that Isaac loved Esau because meat was in his mouth.

"And Isaac loved Esau because meat was in his mouth" (Genesis 25:28). Choice meat and choice wine (was reserved) for his mouth. "But Rebecca loved Jacob" (Genesis 25:28). The more that she heard his voice, the more her love increased for him.¹⁵

"And when Isaac was old..." (Genesis 27:1). This is what Scripture says: "A bribe is as precious as a stone in the eyes of one who has it. Wherever he turns he prospers" (Proverbs 17:8). To what is a bribe similar? It is similar to a stone. Wherever it falls, it breaks. Speaking of Isaac, it is said: "And Isaac loved Esau because meat was in his mouth (כִּי צִיד בְּפִיו)" (Genesis 25:28). What does "כִּי צִיד בְּפִיו" mean? He would put meat in the mouth of Isaac the righteous one. You find that every sin that the Holy One blessed be He hates, all of them were in Esau. "There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue and hands that shed innocent blood. A heart that devises wicked thoughts, feet that are swift in running to evil..." (Proverbs 6:16-18). When Esau came from outside he said to his father: "Father, are you obligated to tithe salt?" And Isaac was surprised and said: "See how diligent this son is in fulfilling the mitzvot." And his father said to him: "My son, where were you today?" And he said to him: "(I was) at the house of study. Isn't this the law with regard to such and such? Isn't this its prohibition? Isn't this its permission? And by these words he was hunting with his mouth. Therefore, (Isaac) loved him. And the Spirit

¹⁴Devarim Rabbah 1:15; see also Bereshit Rabbah 65:16 (p. 728); Pesikta Rabbati 23-24 (124a); Yalkut Shimoni I 115, II 808.

¹⁵Bereshit Rabbah 63:10 (p. 694); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 110; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:28.

of God cried out: "When he speaks fair, believe him not; for seven abominations are in his heart" (Proverbs 26:25).¹⁶

Isaac believed that Esau kept the mitzvot because Esau asked his father about tithing salt. Isaac reasoned that if Esau was concerned about tithing salt, which one is not required to tithe, he must surely be careful to tithe all of his other possessions and fulfill other more important mitzvot.

Another source denies that Esau bribed Isaac.

Another interpretation of "[And Isaac loved Esau] because food was in his mouth" (Genesis 25:28). God forbid that he bribed Isaac our father, who took mercy on Esau because of food. Rather, (Isaac) foresaw, by the Divine Spirit, that in the future Obadiah would come from him. For Obadiah hid 100 men from the prophets of the Lord, fifty in each cave and fed them bread and water. And therefore it says: "because food was in his mouth." The value of "י" in gematria equals 104. For (Obadiah) sustained 100 men and gave four loaves to each one. And Obadiah was one of (Esau's) descendants, as it is written: "The house of Obed is Edom" (II Samuel 6:12).¹⁷

The fact that Isaac loved Esau, while God hated him, causes a problem for Israel at Mount Sinai when God asks the people for an assurance that they will keep the Torah.

"Draw me (יִצְחָק), we will run after you" (Song of Songs 1:4). R. Meir said: When Israel stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the Holy One blessed be He said to them: "By God, shall I give to you the Torah? Rather, bring me good sureties that you will keep it and I will give it to you." They said before Him:

¹⁶Tanchuma Toledot 8 (35b-36a); see also Bereshit Rabbah 63:10 (p. 693); Pesikta de-Rav Kahana supplement 1:11; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:28.

¹⁷Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:28. Obed is identified with Obadiah, and Edom with Esau.

"Master of the Universe, our ancestors are our sureties." (God) said to them: "Your ancestors need sureties." To what is the matter similar? It is similar to one who went to borrow from the king. (The king) said to him: "Bring me a surety and I will lend to you." He went and brought him one surety. (The king) said to him: "Your surety requires a surety." When he brought him a third surety, (the king) said: "Know that because of this, I lend you." Similarly, when Israel stood to receive the Torah, (God) said to them: "I will give you my Torah. Bring me good sureties that you will keep it, and I will give it to you." They said: "Our ancestors are our sureties." The Holy One blessed be He said to them: "I have something against your ancestors. I have something against Abraham who said: 'How shall I know that I will inherit it?' (Genesis 15:8). I have something against Isaac who loved Esau, although I hated him, as it is said: 'But Esau I hated' (Malachi 1:3). (I have something against) Jacob who said: '[Why do you say, Jacob, and speak, Israel] My ways are hidden from the Lord?' (Isaiah 40:27). Rather, bring me good sureties and I will give it to you."¹⁸

Isaac's love for Esau is therefore considered quite a serious offense. One source expresses surprise that Isaac did not know that Esau's deeds were bad, offering an alternative explanation of Isaac's love for Esau.

"And Isaac loved Esau" (Genesis 25:28). But didn't Isaac our father know that Esau's deeds were repulsive? And doesn't Scripture say: "Lord, do not I hate those who hate You?" (Psalms 137:21)? So why did (Isaac) love him? Rather, he loved him only in order to get close to him and to lead him. For behold (one must draw an inference between) a light act and a serious one. If, when he loves him, his deeds are upsetting, if he hated him and kept at a distance, how much the more so. And our rabbis

¹⁸Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:4:1. This midrash is related to the verse from Song of Songs because R. Meir relates "משכני" to "משכן," meaning "a pledge." See also Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:7:1, 8:6:4; Bereshit Rabbah 99:5 (pp. 1276-7); Tanchuma Vayigash 2 (52a-b); Midrash on Psalms 8:4; Midrash Aseret Hadibrot p. 68; Yalkut Shimoni II 267, 981.

said:¹⁹ "Always let your right hand draw near, and your left hand push away." Therefore it is said: "And Isaac loved Esau."²⁰

Viewed from this perspective, Isaac is praiseworthy because he tried to do all he could to help Esau. According to another source Isaac even asked God to show favor to Esau.

R. Isaac said: What is the meaning of what is written: "Let favor be shown to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness; [in the land of uprightness he will deal wrongfully, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord]" (Isaiah 26:10)? Isaac said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, let favor be shown to Esau." (God) said to him: "He is wicked." (Isaac) said to (God): "Yet will he not learn righteousness?" (God) said to him: "In the land of uprightness he will deal wrongfully." (Isaac) said to (God): "If so, let him not behold the majesty of the Lord."²¹

The midrash deals with the problem that two righteous parents produced such a wicked son.

"[Then drew near the daughters of Zelophechad] son of Chepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh" (Numbers 27:1).... R. Nathan says: Scripture comes to teach you that every righteous person who grows up in the lap of a wicked person and does not follow his deeds, how great is his righteousness, for he grew up in the lap of a wicked person and did not follow his deeds. And every wicked person who grows up in the lap of a righteous person and does not follow his deeds, how great is his wickedness, for he grew up in the lap of a righteous person and did not follow his deeds. Esau grew up between two righteous ones, between Isaac and Rebecca and did not follow their deeds.²²

¹⁹Sota 47a; Sanhedrin 107b.

²⁰Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:28.

²¹Megillah 6a.

²²Sifre Bemidbar 133 (p. 176); see also Agadat Bereshit 58:3; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 25:28.

"Remember what (Amalek) did to you" (Deuteronomy 25:17). (Scripture says): "Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered to the Lord; [and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out]" (Psalms 109:14). But were the fathers of Esau wicked? Certainly Abraham his grandfather and Isaac his father were completely righteous. But you say: "Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered...." Rather, Esau sinned against his fathers. What sin did he commit against his fathers? You find that Isaac lived longer than Abraham. Isaac lived 180 years; Abraham lived 175 years. R. Judan in the name of R. Aybo and R. Pinchas in the name of R. Levi: During those five years that were withheld from Abraham's life wicked Esau committed two serious sins. He raped a betrothed woman and he murdered a person.... And what sin did he commit against his father? He caused that his eyes would become dim. From here it is said: Everyone who raises a wicked son or a wicked student his eyes will become dim.²³

Although some midrashim consider Isaac responsible for rearing a wicked son, he is not blamed for, nor held accountable for, Esau's actions. According to the preceding midrash losing his sight is not a punishment for rearing Esau, but a result of rearing him. While the rabbis point out that Esau became wicked because Isaac failed to chasten him, they do not consider him to be blameworthy.

The rabbis offer specific reasons why the wives of Esau made Isaac and Rebecca bitter.

"And (Esau's wives) were a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and to Rebecca" (Genesis 26:33). Why is "to Isaac" (written) first? Because, since Rebecca was the daughter of idolatrous priests she did not object to the practice of idol worship. But he was the son of holy people and objected. Therefore "to Isaac" (is written) first. Another explanation: Why is "to Isaac" (written) first? (Because she knew first) for

²³Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 3:1; see also Tanchuma Ki Tetzei 4 (116a-b); Tanchuma Buber Ki Tetzei 4 (17b-18a); Bereshit Rabbah 63:12 (pp. 694-7); Yalkut Shimoni I 110, 135, 938, II 868.

the matter depended upon her, as it is said: "And the Lord said to her: 'Two nations are in your belly...'" (Genesis 25:23). Therefore "to Isaac" (is written) first. Another explanation: Why is "to Isaac" (written) first? Because it is the way of a woman to sit in her house and it is the way of a man to be outside in the market and learn knowledge from people. But Isaac, because his eyes were dim, sat at home. Therefore "to Isaac" (is written) first. R. Joshua ben Levi said: (Esau) is responsible for the Divine Spirit departing from (Isaac).²⁴

Esau arose and took wives from the daughters of Canaan and his wives burned incense and fires for their idol worship.²⁵

And the wives of Esau angered and incited Isaac and Rebecca with their deeds. For they did not walk in the ways of the Lord, but served the gods of their fathers, tree and stone, which their father taught them. And they were more wicked than their fathers. And they went after perversity of their wicked heart, and they sacrificed and burned incense to idols. And Isaac and Rebecca were angry because of them. And Rebecca said to Isaac: "I want to end my life because of the children of Heth."²⁶

The rabbis also comment on the fact that Esau married at forty years of age.

"And when Esau was forty years old he took for a wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite..." (Genesis 26:34).... For forty years Esau used to ensnare married women and rape them, yet when he reached forty years of age, he compared himself to his father, saying: "As my father was forty years old when he married, so will I marry at the age of forty."²⁷

²⁴Bereshit Rabbah 65:4 (p. 715); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 113.

²⁵Tanchuma Toledot 8 (36a); see also Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 49 (52b-53a); Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:35.

²⁶Sefer Hayashar Toledot p. 91.

²⁷Bereshit Rabbah 65:1 (p. 713); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 112, II 830; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:34.

The rabbis offer many reasons why Isaac lost his sight in his old age. In chapter three two causes of Isaac's blindness related to the akedah were cited:

--when Isaac was bound on the altar, the ministering angels cried over him. Their tears fell into his eyes, causing them to grow dim.

--when Isaac was bound, he looked toward heaven and saw the Divine Presence. Rather than requiring Isaac's death, God caused his eyes to grow dim.

Another explanation links Isaac's blindness to a curse which Abimelech directed at Sarah.

And Rabbi Isaac said: Never let the curse of an ordinary man be light in your eyes. For behold, Abimelech cursed Sarah, and it was fulfilled in her seed, as it is said: "Behold, it is for you a covering (כסות) of the eyes" (Genesis 20:16). He said to her: "Since you hid it from me and did not reveal that he was your husband, and caused me this trouble, may it be the will that you shall have children of covered eyes." And it was fulfilled in her seed, as it is written: "And when Isaac was old, his eyes grew too dim to see" (Genesis 27:1).²⁸

Another talmudic passage clarifies this point. It explains that Genesis 20:16 should be read: "Behold, it is for you a blinding of the eyes," suggesting that "כס'יית" be read, rather than "כסות."²⁹

Some midrashim suggest that Isaac brought on the blindness himself.

"And when Isaac was old [his eyes grew too dim to see]" (Genesis 27:1).... Isaac demanded suffering. He said before (God): "Master of the Universe, when a person dies without

²⁸Baba Kamma 93a; see also Megillah 15a, 28a; Yalkut Shimoni I 91.

²⁹Megillah 28a.

suffering, the measure of justice is stretched out against him. [If you would bring suffering upon him, the measure of justice would not be stretched out against him.] The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "By your life, you demand a good thing, and from you it will begin." From the beginning of the book until here, suffering is not written about, but when Isaac arose (God) gave him suffering. "And his eyes grew dim...."³⁰

Some sources suggest that Isaac brought the blindness upon himself because he loved Esau.

"And when Isaac was old [his eyes grew too dim to see]" (Genesis 27:1). R. Isaac began: "[Woe to them...] that justify the wicked for a reward, [and remove the righteousness of the righteous from him]" (Isaiah 5:22-23). R. Isaac said: All who accept a bribe eventually consider the wicked righteous, "and remove the righteousness of the righteous from him." "The righteousness of the righteous" refers to Moses. "Remove from him" refers to Isaac. Because he considered righteous the wicked his eyes grew dim, as it is said: "And when Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim...." "One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous, both of them are an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 17:15). R. Joshua ben Levi said: Not because Rebecca loved Jacob more than Esau did she do this thing. Rather, she said: "Let (Jacob) enter and mislead that old man," as it says: "Both of them are an abomination to the Lord." And because (Isaac) made righteous the wicked his eyes grew dim, as it is said: "When Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim...."³¹

This midrash suggests that Isaac considered Esau righteous because Isaac accepted a bribe from him. Other sources consider accepting the bribe to be the reason Isaac lost his vision.

³⁰Bereshit Rabbah 65:9 (p. 717); see also Tanchuma Buber Chayei Sarah 5 (60a); Yalkut Shimoni I 105, II 243; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 26:34.

³¹Bereshit Rabbah 65:5-6 (pp. 715-6); see also Pesikta Rabbati 47 (190a); Yalkut Shimoni I 113, II 404, 908; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:1.

Another interpretation of "And when Isaac was old" (Genesis 27:1). This is what Scripture says: "A bribe is as a precious stone in the eyes of one who has it. Wherever he turns, he prospers" (Proverbs 17:8). Do not say this, rather the precious stone is the bribe in the eyes of one who has it. Come and see what the burnt-offering of the Holy One blessed be He, who did not deserve that his eyes grow dim, said: "A person who offers his life for the sake of the Holy One blessed be He, and is bound on the altar, is it necessary that his eyes grow dim?" Rather, the Holy One blessed be He said: "Didn't I write in my Torah: 'You shall not take a bribe' (Exodus 23:8). Why? 'Because the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise' (Deuteronomy 16:19). And (Isaac) took a bribe from Esau and I caused his eyes to grow dim. And if righteous Isaac, because he took a bribe from his son, his eyes grew dim, one who takes a bribe from others, how much the more so." Therefore it is said: "A bribe is as a precious stone." Therefore, "And when Isaac was old (his eyes) grew dim...."³²

Other midrashim state that Isaac lost his sight so that Jacob would receive his father's blessing. Left to his own initiative, Isaac would have bestowed the blessing of the first-born upon Esau.

"[God] removes speech of men of trust, and takes away the sense of the elders" (Job 12:12).... "And takes away the sense of the elders" refers to Isaac and Jacob. Isaac loved Esau whom God hated. (Isaac) said to (Esau): "And make me savory food" (Genesis 27:4), and wanted to bless him and reveal the end to him. What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He deprived him of his sense, so that he did not know (who he blessed), but began to tremble, as it says: "And Isaac trembled..." (Genesis 27:33). Being at a loss what to say, he exclaimed: "Still, he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33).³³

"And his eyes grew dim" (Genesis 27:1). And why did his eyes grow dim? Because it was seen before the Holy One blessed be He that Isaac

³²Tanchuma Buber Toledot 8 (65b); see also Bereshit Rabbah 65:7 (p. 716); Tanchuma Toledot 8 (35b-36a).

³³Bereshit Rabbah 99:5 (pp. 1276-7); see also Tanchuma Buber Vayechi 9 (108b); Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:1.

would bless Esau. The Holy One blessed be He said: "Let his eyes grow dim." And (God) brought Jacob and he took the blessings and Isaac did not know whom he blessed. And David cried: "Many things have you done, O Lord my God, even Your wondrous works and Your thoughts are toward us. There is none to be compared to You" (Psalms 40:6). All your wonders and your thoughts were toward us, for our benefit.³⁴

Still other midrashim relate Isaac's loss of sight to Esau. Rather than imply that Isaac is responsible or blameworthy, these midrashim consider that Isaac was fortunate to lose his sight. One source, cited above, stated that Esau caused Isaac's eyes to grow dim. Other sources indicate that Isaac went blind from seeing the evil of Esau.

"[And when Isaac was old] his eyes grew dim from seeing" (Genesis 27:1). R. Eliezer ben Azariah said (His eyes grew dim) from seeing the evil of Esau. The Holy One blessed be He said: "Shall Isaac go out to the market and people will say: 'There is the father of that wicked one?' Rather, I will make dim his eyes and he will not be able to go out," as it is said: "When the wicked rise, men hide themselves" (Proverbs 28:28). From here it is said: One who raises an evil son or an evil student, his eyes grow dim.... A wicked son (is learned) from Isaac.³⁵

In this case Isaac's blindness can be considered a reward, because, being confined to his house, he will no longer suffer the indignity of being constantly pointed out as the father of wicked Esau.

Some sources suggest that simply looking at the image of wicked Esau caused Isaac's blindness.

³⁴Tanchuma Toledot 8 (35b-36a); see also Bereshit Rabbah 65:8 (p. 716); Agadat Bereshit 40:2; Yalkut Shimoni I 114, II 737; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:1.

³⁵Bereshit Rabbah 65:10 (pp. 718-9); see also Tanchuma Toledot 7 (35b); Midrash Shmuel 8:8; Yalkut Shimoni I 114, II 202, 906, 962; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:1.

Rabbi asked R. Joshua ben Korchah: Why have your days been long? He said to him: You would end my life? Rabbi said to him: It is Torah, and I need to learn it. He said to him: I have never looked at the image of a wicked man. For R. Jochanan said: It is forbidden for a person to look at the image of a wicked man, as it is said: "Were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward you, nor see you" (II Kings 3:14). R. Eliezer said: His eyes were dim, as it is said: "And when Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim from seeing" (Genesis 27:1). Because he looked at wicked Esau.³⁶

This source continues by offering another reason that Isaac went blind, Abimelech's curse, and concludes that both the curse and looking at Esau caused Isaac's eyes to grow dim.

One source attributes not only Isaac's growing blind, but also his growing old quickly, to Esau.

Another interpretation of "And Eli was very old" (I Samuel 2:22). Three became old quickly because of the evil of their children. First, Isaac, because of the troubles of Esau his son, who worshipped idols and burned incense and offered a sacrifice. And because of this, Isaac's eyes grew dim. Therefore it is written: "And when Isaac was old [his eyes grew dim]" (Genesis 27:1).³⁷

Isaac's going blind is also attributed to Esau's wives.

What is written above? "And (Esau's wives) were (אִתּוֹ) a bitterness of spirit to Isaac" (Genesis 26:35). And afterward (it is written): "And his eyes grew dim (אִתּוֹ)" (Genesis 27:1). Because of the anger, for (Esau) made (Isaac) angry because the Divine Presence was dwelling in Isaac's house. Esau arose and took wives from the daughters of Canaan, and his wives burned incense and fires for their idol worship and the Divine Presence departed from Isaac. And Isaac saw and was angry. The Holy One

³⁶Megillah 28a; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 91, II 226.

³⁷Agadat Bereshit 41:4.

blessed be He said: "Behold, I will cause his eyes to grow dim, so that he will not see, and grief will increase." Therefore: "And his eyes grew dim."³⁸

According to another source Isaac's eyes grew dim because he smelled the incense which Esau's wives burned.³⁹

One source attributes Isaac's blindness to his age.

Isaac, son of Abraham, was old, along in years.
And his eyes were heavy from his old age, and were dim, and he was not able to see.⁴⁰

Another midrash says that Job, who according to the rabbis lived during the time of the Patriarchs, blinded Isaac.⁴¹

In the Talmud the phrase "When Isaac was old (זקן)" (Genesis 27:1) is interpreted to mean that he was a member of the scholars council.⁴² This conclusion is based on understanding "זקן" as an abbreviated form of "זה שקנה חכמה" meaning "one who acquired wisdom."⁴³

The rabbis wonder why Isaac wanted to bless his son, when many years would pass before Isaac's death.

Another interpretation: "And he said to him: 'My son'" (Genesis 27:1). R. Joshua ben Korchah said: When a person arrives to the age of his parents, five years before and five years after, he should fear death. For thus Isaac said:

³⁸Tanchuma Toledot 8 (36a). The rabbis relate the word "ותכין" in Genesis 27:1 to "ותהיין" in Genesis 26:35. See also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:1.

³⁹Pesikta Rabbati 12 (47b).

⁴⁰Sefer Hayashar Toledot p. 90.

⁴¹Shmot Rabbah 30:11.

⁴²Yoma 28b.

⁴³Sifra Kedoshim 3:7.

"If I am to reach the age of my father, I still have time. If I am to reach the age of my mother, 'Behold, I am old'" (Genesis 27:2).⁴⁴

Since Sarah died at 127 years of age, Isaac must have been at least 122 years old. This corresponds to sources which say that Jacob was 63 years old when he received his father's blessing.⁴⁵ Isaac would be 123, since he was sixty years old when Jacob and Esau were born.

The rabbis comment on Isaac's charge to Esau.

"Now, if you please, take your weapons [your quiver (תליך) and your bow]" (Genesis 27:3). Take your weapons, so that you will not feed me (flesh of) animals that have died a natural death or (flesh of) animals torn by a beast of prey. Take your weapons so that you will not feed me (food obtained by) robbery or violence. (Take) "your quiver (תליך)." (Isaac) said to him: "Behold, the blessings are in suspense (תלויות).⁴⁶ The one who deserves to be blessed will be blessed."⁴⁷

Isaac's concern that Esau not bring him food obtained by violence indicates that Isaac is aware of Esau's wicked character. By interpreting "תליך" to mean that the blessing is in suspense, the rabbis imply that Isaac is aware either that Esau does not deserve to receive the blessings, or that Jacob will receive them.

Another interpretation of Isaac's charge to Esau is offered.

Another interpretation of "[Now], if you please, take your weapons (כליך), [your quiver (תליך) and your bow (וקשתך) and go out to the field (השדה)]" (Genesis 27:3). ("כליך") refers to Babylon, as it is said: "(Nebuchadnezzar)

⁴⁴Bereshit Rabbah 65:12 (pp. 722-3).

⁴⁵Seder Olam Rabbah 2 p. 7; Bereshit Rabbah 65:19 (p. 731).

⁴⁶The midrash relates the word "תליך" to the root "ת-ל-י" meaning "to hang."

⁴⁷Bereshit Rabbah 65:13 (pp. 723-4).

brought the vessels (הכלים) to the treasury-house of his god" (Daniel 1:2). "תליך" refers to Media, as it is said: "And they hanged (ויתלו) Haman..." (Esther 7:10).⁴⁸ "וקשתך" refers to Greece as it is said: "For I bend Judah for Me, I fill my bow (קשת) with Ephraim and I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece (יוון)"⁴⁹ (Zechariah 9:13). "And go out to the field (השדה)" refers to Edom, as it is said: "To the land of Seir the field (שדה) of Edom" (Genesis 32:4)⁵⁰.... "And make tasty dishes for me" (Genesis 27:4). (Isaac) said to him: "I used to get enjoyment from seeing. Now I can only get enjoyment from taste."⁵¹

The scenario is described differently in another source.

The evening of Pesach arrived and Isaac called to his elder son Esau and said to him: "My son, this is a night on which all the world says Hallel, and the treasuries of the dews are opened.⁵² Tonight, make for me tasty dishes; while I still live I will bless you. And the Divine Spirit responded and said: "Eat not the bread of one who has an evil eye, [neither desire his dainties]" (Proverbs 23:6).⁵³

Isaac sends Esau to hunt game and prepare tasty dishes for him.

In return Isaac plans to bestow the blessing of the first-born upon Esau. Rebecca, having overheard Isaac, summons Jacob and initiates a scheme which will enable him to receive his father's blessing.

⁴⁸The word "תליך" is again related to the root "נ-ל-י."

⁴⁹The rabbis identify Javan (יוון) with Greece.

⁵⁰Since Isaac intended to bless Esau with dominion over Jacob, the rabbis read an allusion to the four kingdoms that wielded dominion over Jacob's descendants. Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, vol. II, p. 589, note 4.

⁵¹Bereshit Rabbah 65:13 (p. 724); see also Kohelet Rabbah 5:10:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 114, II 972.

⁵²The prayer for dew is part of the liturgy of the first day of Passover.

⁵³Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (31a); see also Shmot Rabbah 15:11; Yalkut Shimoni I 114.

Although Isaac is not directly involved in the plot, a few details are worth noting.

So as not to imply that Rebecca was an eavesdropper, and to indicate Divine sanction for her plan, the midrash says that "Rebecca heard what Isaac said to Esau" (Genesis 27:5) means that she was told by the Divine Spirit.⁵⁴

Rebecca tells Jacob to go and bring "two good kid-goats" (Genesis 27:9), from which she will prepare tasty dishes for Isaac.

He went and brought two kid-goats. But were two kid-goats for Isaac's food? Wouldn't one be enough, as it is said: "A righteous one eats to satisfy his soul" (Proverbs 13:25)? Rather, one was for the paschal offering, and one to make tasty dishes for (Isaac) to eat.⁵⁵

Perhaps this midrash is the source for the conclusion that Isaac blessed his sons on Pesach.

The rabbis also wonder why Rebecca called them "good" kid-goats.

"And take for me two good kid-goats from there" (Genesis 27:9). R. Chelbo said: (Rebecca said:) "If you find (any) behold it is good; if not, bring for me from my dowry." For R. Chelbo said that it was written for her that (Isaac) would give her two goats every day. R. Berechiah in the name of R. Chelbo: They are good for you and they will be good for your descendants. They are good for you because on account of them you will take the blessings. And they are good for your descendants because on account of them, it will atone for them on Yom Kippur, as it is written: "For on this day atonement shall be made for you" (Leviticus 16:30).⁵⁶

⁵⁴Tanchuma Toledot 10 (36b).

⁵⁵Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (31a); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:9.

⁵⁶Bereshit Rabbah 65:14 (pp. 725-6); see also Tanchuma Toledot 10 (36b); Yalkut Shimoni I 114.

Jacob expressed fear that Isaac would discover his true identity.

At that moment Jacob said to (Rebecca): "'Don't you know that Esau my brother is a hairy man, but I am a smooth man?' (Genesis 27:11). Won't my father feel that I am not Esau and I will be put to shame before him?" From where do we know this? Because it is said: "Perhaps my father will feel me..." (Genesis 27:12). She said to him: "My son, your father's eyes are dim. I will dress you in the fine clothes your brother wears when he serves your father, and you will enter and he will hold your hand and think that you are Esau and bless you." From where do we know this? Because it is said: "And Rebecca took Esau's clothes..." (Genesis 27:15).⁵⁷

The garments in which Rebecca clothed Jacob originally belonged to Adam and more recently to Nimrod.

"And Rebecca took the coveted (החמודות)⁵⁸ clothes of Esau her elder son" (Genesis 27:15). Those that he coveted from Nimrod. That is what is written: "The wicked covet the prey of evil men" (Proverbs 12:12).⁵⁹

R. (Meir) said: Esau, Jacob's brother, saw the garment that the Holy One blessed be He made for Adam and Eve on Nimrod. He coveted it in his heart and murdered him and took it from him.⁶⁰

Covered with kid-skins and laden with tasty dishes his mother prepared, Jacob entered to deceive Isaac.

"And he came to his father.... And Jacob said to his father: 'I (אנכי) am Esau, your first-born..." (Genesis 27:18). R. Levi said:

⁵⁷Devarim Rabbah 1:15.

⁵⁸"החמודות" is usually translated as "choicest," but this midrash understands it as "coveted."

⁵⁹Bereshit Rabbah 65:16 (p. 727); see also Vayikra Rabbah 18:2; Yalkut Shimon I 115; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:15.

⁶⁰Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 24 (22b).

(Jacob said:) "I (אנכי) will receive the Ten Commandments, but Esau is your first-born."⁶¹
 "Arise if you please, sit (קום נא שבה)..."
 (Genesis 27:19). R. Jochanan: The Holy One blessed be He said to Jacob: "You said 'קום נא שבה.' By your life, by those words I will seek revenge for you." "Arise (קומה) O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered" (Numbers 10:35).⁶²

The midrash also interprets another of Jacob's statements to prevent him from lying.

"'Are you my son Esau?' And he said: 'I am (אני)'" (Genesis 27:24). I am not (אני) Esau, but Jacob.⁶³

However, in other sources the rabbis recognize that Jacob is acting deceitfully.

"How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?" (Numbers 23:8). When they deserved to be cursed, they were not cursed. When Jacob entered to receive the blessings, he entered in deceit, as it is written: "[She put on his arm] the skins of kid-goats" (Genesis 27:16). His father said: "Who are you?" (Genesis 27:18). He said to him: "I am Esau, your first-born" (Genesis 27:19). Doesn't a person who lies deserve to be cursed? Not only (was he not cursed), but he was blessed, as it is written: "Still, he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33). "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?" (Isaac said).⁶⁴

Isaac expresses immediate suspicion that the person before him may not be Esau.

⁶¹The midrash identifies the rare form "אנכי" with its use at the beginning of the Ten Commandments: "אנכי יהוה אלהיך" (Exodus 20:2). The midrash reinterprets the verse so as to prevent Jacob from lying.

⁶²Bereshit Rabbah 65:18 (pp. 730-1); 66:7 (pp. 751-2); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

⁶³Bemidbar Rabbah 10:6.

⁶⁴Bemidbar Rabbah 20:19; see also Tanchuma Buber Balak 18 (71b); Yalkut Shimoni I 766.

"And Isaac said to his son: 'How were you able to find it so quickly, my son?'" (Genesis 27:20). How were you able to find the blessing so quickly, my son? Your father was blessed at 75 years of age, but you are 63 years old. ["And he said: 'Because the Lord God granted me good speed'" (Genesis 27:20). R. Jochanan and R. Simeon ben Lakish (commented). One of them said: Just as (God) provided you with your sacrifice, as it is written: "And Abraham lifted his eyes, and saw, and behold a ram" (Genesis 22:13), all the more so (will God provide) your food. And the other said: Just as (God) provided you with your mate, as it is written: "And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, camels were coming" (Genesis 24:63), how much the more so (will God provide) your food.] "And he said: 'Because the Lord God granted me good speed.'" R. Jochanan said: (Esau) was like a raven that brings fire to his nest. When he said: "Because the Lord God granted me good speed," Isaac said: "I know that Esau would not mention the name of the Holy One blessed be He. But this one mentioned it. He is not Esau, but Jacob." When Jacob said this, (Isaac) said: "Draw near that I may feel you, my son" (Genesis 27:21). R. Hoshaya said: When Isaac said "Draw near that I may feel you," sweat poured from Jacob's legs and his heart melted like wax. So the Holy One blessed be He appointed for him two angels, one on his right and one on his left, and they held his elbows so that he would not fall. That is what is written: "Do not be dismayed (תַּחֲתֵּי)" (Isaiah 41:10). Do not be like wax (חֲמוֹץ).⁶⁵

Isaac was listening carefully. He heard his son mention God's name, something Esau would not do. So he concluded that Jacob was standing before him. Apparently, though, Isaac was not entirely certain, because he asked his son to draw near in order to touch him.

"And Jacob approached Isaac his father who touched him and said: 'The voice is the voice of Jacob [but the hands are the hands of Esau]'" (Genesis 27:22). This voice is the voice of a wise man, but the hands are those that strip the

⁶⁵Bereshit Rabbah 65:19 (pp. 731-3); see also 44:3 (p. 426); Tanchuma Buber Toledot 15 (67b-68a); Yalkut Shimoni I 115, II 449; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:21.

dead. "The voice is the voice of Jacob" (means) Jacob will only rule by his voice. "But the hands are the hands of Esau" (means) Esau will only rule by his hands. "The voice is the voice of Jacob." R. Pinchas said: When the voice of Jacob is stored up, "the hands are the hands of Esau." He calls and he comes.⁶⁶ "The voice is the voice of Jacob." R. Berechiah said: When Jacob incites with his voice, the hands of Esau rule, but when he speaks clearly with his voice, the hands of Esau do not rule. R. Abba bar Kahana said: Never has there existed a philosopher in the world as Balaam ben Beor and Abnomos of Gadara. All the nations of the world entered before Abnomos of Gadara and said to him: "Do you think that we can conquer this nation?" He said: "Go around to their synagogues and schools. If you find there children whose voices are uplifted, you are not able (to conquer this nation). If (you do not find this) you will be able (to conquer this nation). For thus their ancestor promised them: 'The voice is the voice of Jacob.' When Jacob's voice rings out in synagogues, Esau does not have hands."⁶⁷ "The voice (הקול) is the voice of Jacob" with regard to the concubine at Gibeah, as it is said: "Cursed is he who gives a wife to Benjamin" (Judges 21:18).⁶⁸ "The voice is the voice of Jacob" in the days of Jeroboam. "Neither did Jeroboam recover strength again in the days of Abijah. And the Lord smote him, and he died" (II Chronicles 13:20).⁶⁹

In many of these interpretations the voice is considered to be prayer or study, whereas the hand symbolizes bloodshed. As long as

⁶⁶This comment is difficult to understand. Perhaps R. Pinchas is saying that when the voice of Jacob, i.e., prayer and study, ceases to be heard, Jacob's enemies will come and attack. This understanding is similar to R. Abba bar Kahana's statement later in this midrash.

⁶⁷As long as Israel prays to God, Rome has no power over her.

⁶⁸The word "קול," which has been rendered as "voice" is now understood as being related to the root "קל-ל-קל" meaning "curse."

⁶⁹Bereshit Rabbah 65:20 (pp. 733-5). Perhaps the implication is that during this period the voice of Jacob ceased and Israel therefore suffered. See also Eichah Rabbah 16; Yalkut Shimoni I 115, II 282.

Israel uses its voice, Rome cannot do harm.

Other interpretations of this verse are also significant.

"The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22). "The voice" refers to (the cry caused by) Emperor Hadrian who killed in Alexandria Egypt 1,200,000 people, twice as many as left Egypt. "The voice of Jacob" refers to (the cry caused by) Emperor Vespasian who killed in the city of Bethar four million people and some say forty million people. "And the hands are the hands of Esau" refers to the evil kingdom [Rome] which has destroyed our houses and burned the temples and exiled us from our land. Another interpretation of "the voice is the voice of Jacob." No prayer is effective unless the seed of Jacob is in it. "And the hands are the hands of Esau." No war will succeed unless the seed of Esau is in it.⁷⁰

Some sources say "the voice is the voice of Jacob" indicates that Isaac knew it was Jacob's voice because he mentioned God's name.⁷¹

Isaac's comment to his son is considered as prophecy of the future of Israel.

"And the Lord said to Moses: 'Why do you cry to me?'" (Exodus 14:15). That is what is written: "They cried, and the Lord heard" (Psalms 34:18). Why is it so? Because Isaac left two inheritances for his sons. He left for Jacob the voice, as it is said: "And the voice is the voice of Jacob" (Genesis 27:22). And for Esau he left the hands, as it is said: "But the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22). And Esau was proud of his inheritance, as it is said: "And Edom said to (Moses): 'You shall not pass through me, lest I come out against you with the sword'" (Numbers 20:18). And Jacob was proud of his inheritance, as it is said: "And we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice" (Deuteronomy 26:7). In the world to come both

⁷⁰Gittin 57b; see also Bereshit Rabbah 65:21 (p. 740); Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

⁷¹Tanchuma Buber Toledot 15 (67b); Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32 (31a).

will get their rewards. Esau will get his reward, as it is said: "For my sword has drunk its fill in heaven; behold it shall come down upon Edom" (Isaiah 34:5). And Jacob will get his reward, as it is said: "[Then I will cause to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem] the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness" (Jeremiah 7:34). Therefore it is written: "They cried and the Lord heard." Because the Israelites cried out near the sea, as it is said: "And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord" (Exodus 14:10). The Holy One blessed be He heard their prayer and said to Moses: "Why do you cry to me? I have already heard their cry. Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward" (Exodus 14:15).⁷²

After commenting that the voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's, Isaac wants to examine his son more closely to determine his identity.

"And he did not recognize him, because his hands [were hairy like his brother Esau's hands]" (Genesis 27:23). When evil ones arose from him, he did not recognize him. "And [Isaac his father] said [to him]: 'If you please, draw near and kiss me, my son'" (Genesis 27:26). He said to him: "You and not others will kiss me at my burial." "And he drew near and kissed him, and (Isaac) smelled the odor of his clothes and he blessed him" (Genesis 27:27). R. Jochanan said: There is not a worse odor than the skins of goats, but you say: "And he smelled the odor of his clothes and he blessed him." Rather, when Jacob entered to his father, the Garden of Eden entered with him, as it is written: "[The odor of my son is] like the odor of a field the Lord has blessed" (Genesis 27:27).⁷³

According to another source, Isaac's son smelled like a field of

⁷¹Shmot Rabbah 21:1; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 231.

⁷²Bereshit Rabbah 65:22 (pp. 740-1); see also Tanchuma Buber Toledot 16 (68a); Shir Hashirim Rabbah 4:11:2; Yalkut Shimoni I 115; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:22.

apple trees.⁷⁴ Still another midrash says that God showed Isaac the Temple built and destroyed.

Another interpretation [of "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed" (Genesis 27:27)]. It teaches that the Holy One blessed be He showed him the Temple built and destroyed and rebuilt, as it is said: "See, the smell of my son" (refers to it) built, as it is said: "A sweet smell to me you shall observe" (Numbers 28:20). "Field" refers to it destroyed, as it is said: "Zion shall be ploughed as a field" (Micah 3:12). "Which the Lord has blessed" (refers to it) rebuilt and completed in the world to come, as it is said: "For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forever" (Psalms 133:3).⁷⁵

Isaac then begins to bless his son. The midrash does not reconsider whether Isaac knows which son he is blessing. The reader remains unsure whether or not the rabbis believe that Isaac knows he is actually blessing Jacob.

"And may God give you from the dew of heaven..." (Genesis 27:28). It is written: "My root was spread out (פְּתוּחָה) to the waters..." (Job 29:19). Job said: "Because my doors were wide open (פְּתוּחוֹת), all of them reaped withered ears, but I reaped full ears." What is the proof? "My root was spread out to the waters, and the dew lay all night on my branch" (Job 29:19). Jacob said: "Because I am busy with Torah, which is compared to water⁷⁶ I merit to be blessed with dew, as it is said: "May God give you from the dew of heaven...."⁷⁷

R. Berechiah began: "Return, return, O Shulamite, return, return that we may look upon you" (Song of Songs 7:1).... R. Joshua of Sichnin in the

⁷⁴Taanit 29b.

⁷⁵Bereshit Rabbah 65:23 (p. 744); see also Sifre Devarim 352 (p. 410); Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

⁷⁶Isaiah 55:1.

⁷⁷Bereshit Rabbah 66:1 (p. 744); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

name of R. Levi: the nation that all good in the world comes only for its sake. The rain does not fall but for its sake. The dew does not fall but for its sake. "For you" (Genesis 27:28) means for your sake. "May God give for your sake..." (Genesis 27:28).⁷⁸

[And may God give (וְיִתֵּן) you...] (Genesis 27:28).] And may (God) give you again and again. May He give you blessings and May He give you their reapings. May He give you yours and may He give you your father's. May He give you yours and may He give you your brother's.⁷⁹ R. Acha: "May He give you" means may He give you godliness. When? When you need it, as it is written: "And Samson called to the Lord and said: 'O Lord, God, remember me, if you please, and strengthen me only this once, O God...'" (Judges 16:28). (Isaac) said before Him: "Master of all Worlds, remember for me that blessing which my father blessed me;" may He give you godliness. "From the dew of heaven" (Genesis 27:28) refers to manna, as it is said: "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you'" (Exodus 16:4). "And from the fat of the earth" (Genesis 27:28) refers to the well which brings up extremely fat fish. "Plenty of corn" (Genesis 27:28) refers to the young men, as it is said: "Corn shall make the young men flourish" (Zechariah 9:17). "And wine" (Genesis 27:28) refers to the young women, as it is said: "And new wine shall make the young women flourish" (Zechariah 9:17). Another interpretation: "From the dew of heaven" refers to Zion, as it is said: "Like the dew of Hermon, that comes down upon the mountains of Zion" (Psalms 133:3). "And the fat of the earth" refers to the sacrifices. "Plenty of corn" refers to the first-fruits. "And wine" refers to the libations. Another interpretation: "From the dew of heaven" refers to Scripture. "Fat of the earth" refers to Mishnah. "Plenty of corn" refers to Talmud. "And wine" refers to agadah.⁸⁰

⁷⁸Bereshit Rabbah 66:2 (pp. 745-6).

⁷⁹All of these comments are based on the prefix vay meaning "and" of the word "וְיִתֵּן."

⁸⁰Bereshit Rabbah 66:3 (pp. 747-8); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

"Let peoples serve you" (Genesis 27:29) refers to the seventy nations. "And nations bow down to you" (Genesis 27:29) refers to the children of Ishmael and the children of Keturah, as it is said: "And the sons of Dedan were Ashurim and Letushin and Leumim" (Genesis 25:3). "Be Lord over your brothers" (Genesis 27:29) refers to Esau and his chiefs. "And the sons of your mother shall bow down to you" (Genesis 27:29). Here you say: "And the sons of your mother shall bow down to you." But further (it is written): "And the sons of your father will bow down" (Genesis 49:8). Since Jacob took four (wives) he said: "And the sons of your father..." Isaac, since he took only one, said: "the sons of your mother." "Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you" (Genesis 27:29). But further it says: "Blessed be those who bless you and cursed be those who curse you" (Numbers 24:9). Balaam, because he is hated, began with blessing and concluded with cursing, [but Isaac, because he is loved, began with cursing and concluded with blessing. R. Isaac bar Chiya said: The wicked ones, since their beginning is tranquil and their end suffering, begin with blessing, and end with cursing.] But the righteous, because their beginning is suffering and their end is tranquility, begin with cursing and end with blessing.⁸¹

The rabbis thus greatly elaborate on the blessing which Isaac bestowed upon his son.

Corresponding to each blessing which Isaac bestowed, God also bestowed a blessing upon Jacob, according to the rabbis.

Happy are the righteous who are blessed in the earth and in heaven. And thus is the nature (of God), "that one blessed in the earth will be blessed by the God of truth" (Isaiah 65:16). (This verse) tells you that for every blessing with which Isaac blessed Jacob, corresponding to them the Holy One blessed be He blessed him above. Isaac blessed him: "And may God give you from the dew of heaven" (Genesis 27:28). And the Holy One blessed be He (blessed him with dew): "And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples as dew" (Micah 5:6). Isaac said:

⁸¹Bereshit Rabbah 66:4 (pp. 748-9); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

"[And may God give you...] from the fat of the earth" (Genesis 27:28). And the Holy One blessed be He blessed him with produce, as it says: "And he will give the rain for your seed, by which you sow the ground, and the bread of the increase of the ground, and it shall be fat and plenteous" (Isaiah 30:23). Isaac said: "[And may God give you...] plenty of corn and wine" (Genesis 27:28). And the Holy One blessed be He said to him: "And the Lord answered and said to His people: 'Behold, I will send you corn and wine and oil'" (Joel 2:19). Isaac said to him: "Let peoples serve you" (Genesis 27:29). And the Holy One blessed be He said to him: "And kings shall be your foster-fathers [and their queens your nursing mothers. They shall bow down to you with their face to the earth...]" (Isaiah 49:23). Isaac said to him: "Be Lord over your brothers" (Genesis 27:29). And the Holy One blessed be He said to him by way of Moses our teacher: "And to make you high above all the nations" (Deuteronomy 26:19). [Thus you learn that all the blessings that Isaac blessed him from below, the Holy One blessed be He blessed him from above.] And also Rebecca his mother blessed him corresponding to them, as it is said: "O you who dwells in the covert of the most high" (Psalms 91:1). "For He will give His angels charge over you to keep you in all your ways" (Psalms 91:11). And the Divine Spirit answered: "He shall call on Me, and I will answer him" (Psalms 91:15). And why, after the Holy One blessed be He had blessed him, did his father and his mother come and bless him, as it is said: "And Isaac called to Jacob and blessed him..." (Genesis 28:1)? Simply because Isaac saw by the Divine Spirit that it was the destiny of his children to be exiled. He said to Jacob: "Come and I will bless you with a blessing of the exile." And how did he bless him? "He will deliver you in six troubles" (Job 5:19). [Therefore it is said: "Blessings are upon the head of the righteous" (Proverbs 10:6).]⁸²

Just as Isaac is finishing to bless Jacob, Esau enters.

"And when Isaac finished [to bless Jacob, Jacob had just left before Isaac, when Esau his

⁸²Bereshit Rabbah 75:8 (pp. 885-7); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 116, II 473, 553.

brother came from hunting]" (Genesis 27:30).
 R. Aybo said: The tent of our father Isaac was open at both ends.⁸³ The rabbis said: The doors were hinged and could be folded backwards. Jacob stood behind the door until Esau entered and then he left. That is what is written: "Jacob had just left from before Isaac...." [It appeared that he had gone out, but he had not gone out.]⁸⁴

When Isaac realized that Esau was before him, and that Jacob had received the blessing of the first-born, he trembled.

"And Isaac trembled [an exceedingly great tremble]" (Genesis 27:33). It is written: "The trembling of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be set up on high" (Proverbs 29:25).... (This verse refers to) the trembling which Jacob caused Isaac. He could have justly cursed him. However, "Whoever trusts in the Lord shall be set up on high." (God) put it in his heart and he blessed him, as it is said: "Still, he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33).⁸⁵

This midrash states that when Isaac learned of Jacob's ruse, he could have justly cursed him. However, Isaac now understood that Jacob deserved to receive the blessing and that Jacob's deceptive plan must have been sanctioned by God. Therefore, Isaac affirmed that Jacob should remain blessed.

Another midrash offers a different explanation of this incident.

R. Isaac said: (Isaac) was about to curse (Jacob). The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Take heed, for if you curse him, you curse yourself. For thus you said to him: 'Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be

⁸³Esau entered from one end, as Jacob left from the other.

⁸⁴Bereshit Rabbah 66:5 (p. 750), latter brackets are in the text; see also Tanchuma Toledot 11 (36b); Yalkut Shimoni I 115; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:30.

⁸⁵Bereshit Rabbah 67:1 (p. 752); see also Tanchuma Toledot 13 (37b); Ruth Rabbah 6:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 115, II 606, 962.

those who bless you'" (Genesis 27:29). R. Levi said: Six organs serve a person. Three he controls and three he does not. He does not control the eye, the ear and the nose. He sees what he does not want to see, hears and smells what he does not want. He controls the mouth, the hand and the foot. If he wishes, he studies Torah. If he wishes, he slanders. If he wishes, he blasphemes and reviles.... But when one merits it, the Holy One blessed be He takes those which he controls out of his control. The mouth: "Still, he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33).⁸⁶

According to the rabbis Isaac was prepared to retract the blessing and perhaps even curse Jacob, but God prevents him from doing this.

This incident was not the first time that Isaac had trembled.

"And Isaac trembled..." (Genesis 27:33). R. Chama bar Chanina said: (This tremble) was exceedingly greater than when he trembled on the altar.⁸⁷

Isaac expresses misgivings about having given Jacob the blessing.

["And (Isaac) said: 'Who was it then (מי אפוא הוא) who hunted game and brought it to me?'" (Genesis 27:33).] (Isaac) said: "Who (מי הוא)⁸⁸ has been made an intermediary between myself and God, that Jacob should receive the blessings?" referring to Rebecca, (Jacob's) mother. R. Jochanan said: Whoever has two sons, does he tremble when one enters and the other leaves? Rather, when Esau entered, Gehenna entered with him. Rav Nathan in the name of R. Acha: The walls of the house began to seethe, as it is written: "Who was it then (מי אפוא הוא)..." (Isaac said:) "Who is it

⁸⁶Bereshit Rabbah 67:3 (p. 756); see also 99:5 (pp. 1276-7); Tanchuma Toledot 12 (37a); Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

⁸⁷Bereshit Rabbah 67:2 (p. 752); see also Tanchuma Toledot 13 (37b); Midrash Hagadol Genesis 27:33.

⁸⁸Probably taken from the text: "Who was it then (מי אפוא הוא) who hunted game..."

who will be baked (ליאפוח)⁸⁹ here, I or my son?" The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Neither you nor your son, but 'he who hunts game'" (Genesis 27:33).⁹⁰ He has deceived the deceiver (הוא צד הציד).⁹¹ R. Leazar bar Simeon said: Deceiver, have you been deceived! Breaker of gates, your gates have been broken and destroyed, as it is written: "The deceitful man shall not roast his prey" (Proverbs 12:27). The rabbis said: The Holy One blessed be He will not allow the deceiver to lengthen or to delay his prey. R. Leazar son of R. Jose the Galilean: Shall not the Holy One blessed be He make long and delay for the deceiver his prey? For R. Joshua ben Levi said: All that day Esau was hunting deer and trussing them, but an angel came and freed them. (He hunted) birds and tied them, but an angel came and freed them. Why? "For the substance of the man of glory (יקר) is determined" (Proverbs 12:27). In order that Jacob will come and receive the blessings that belong to him, for he is the essence (עקר) of the world. R. Chanina bar Papa asked R. Acha, saying to him: What does the verse "For the substance of the man of glory (יקר) is determined" mean? He said to him: It is determined in the hand of the righteous that they will not receive anything from the glory (יקר) of the world to come in this world. "And I have eaten of all" (Genesis 27:33). R. Judah and R. Nechemiah (disagreed). R. Judah said: from all that was created during the six days of creation. R. Nechemiah said: from all the goodness that is prepared for the righteous in the world to come. (Esau) said to (Isaac): "What did he actually feed you?" He said to him: "I don't know, but its taste was the taste of bread, the taste of meat, the taste of fish, the taste of locusts and the taste of all the delicacies in the world." R. Berechiah said: When he mentioned the taste of meat, (Esau) cried. He said: "Me, he fed the plate of lentils and took my birthright. You,

⁸⁹The midrash is playing on the word "ליאפוח," relating it to the root "ל-פ-ח," meaning "to bake."

⁹⁰The midrash thus puts this phrase in God's mouth, as a response to Isaac, rather than a part of Isaac's question.

⁹¹Another interpretation of the phrase "he who hunts game (הוא הצד ציד)" (Genesis 27:33).

whom he fed meat, how much more (did he take from me)." R. Levi said: Our father Isaac was afraid and said: "Perhaps you say that I did not do the right thing, that I made the one not first-born to be first-born." When (Esau) said: "He took away my birthright" (Genesis 27:36), (Isaac) said: "Rightly did I bless." R. Eliezer said: The establishment of a document is only with its signatures, that you should not say, if our father Jacob had not deceived his father, he would not have received the blessings. Scripture says: "Still, he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33).⁹²

Esau responds to learning that Jacob received the blessing with a loud cry.

"When Esau heard [the words of his father, he cried an exceedingly great and bitter cry]" (Genesis 27:34). R. Chanina said: All who say the Holy One blessed be He is lax, may his bowels be lax. Rather, He is long-suffering and collects His due. Jacob caused Esau to cry out once. And when is he punished for it? In Shushan, the capital city, as it is said: "And he cried with a loud and bitter cry" (Esther 4:1). "And (Isaac) said: 'Your brother came with guile'" (Genesis 27:35). R. Jochanan said: (He came) with the wisdom of (God's) Torah. "And (Esau) said: 'Is he not correctly named Jacob (יעקב)? For he has supplanted me (ויעקבני)'" (Genesis 27:36). He took my birthright and I was silent for him. Behold, now he has taken my blessing. "And (Esau) said: 'Haven't you saved (אצלת) a blessing for me?'" (Genesis 27:36), an inferior one (הנצולת).⁹³

Thus, Jacob suffers for having deceived his brother, even though the deception allowed him to receive the blessing.

Another midrash offers an explanation of the success of Rome, represented by Esau, in this world.

⁹²Bereshit Rabbah 67:2-3 (pp. 752-5); see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana supplement 1:11; Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

⁹³Bereshit Rabbah 67:4 (pp. 757-9); the midrash relates "הנצולת" to "אצלת." See also Esther Rabbah 8:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

"You have fed them with the bread of tears [yea, given them three tears (בִּרְמֵעוֹת שְׁלִישׁ) to drink]"⁹⁴ (Psalms 80:6). R. Eliezer says: Esau shed three (שְׁלֹשׁ) tears from his eyes: one from the left, one from the right, and the third hung in his eye, as it is said: "You have given them three tears to drink." "Three (שְׁלֹשׁ)" is not written, but "one-third (שְׁלִישׁ)." R. Berechiah said: He shed one-third of a tear. "בִּרְמֵעוֹת שְׁלִישׁ" means "one-third of a tear." R. Abin says, and some say in the name of Rav Simlai: The assembly of Israel said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, by the merit of three tears that (Esau) shed, you caused him to rule from one end of the world to the other, and you gave him tranquility in the world. When you come to see that we are humiliated and we pour out our souls, how much the more so (will you give us tranquility)." ⁹⁵

Esau, representing Rome, is therefore rewarded for shedding tears, even though Jacob deserved to receive the blessing. Because Esau suffered, he merited a reward.

Isaac responds to Esau's lament.

"And Isaac answered and said [to Esau: 'Behold, I have made him your lord']" (Genesis 27:37). R. Berechiah said: "Behold, I have made him your lord" was the seventh blessing.⁹⁶ Why did he mention it first? Because he said to him: "I made him king over you, and your blessings are his. A servant and his possessions belong to his master." "And all his brothers have I given to him for servants, and with corn and wine I sustained him. And for you, then (אָפּוּא) [what shall I do my son]?" (Genesis 27:37). But for you, the bread is baked (אָפּוּיָהּ).⁹⁷ R. Jochanan said: Do not importune [me, for wherever he is, his bread is baked (אָפּוּיָהּ)].⁹⁷

⁹⁴The midrash understands this verse thusly.

⁹⁵Midrash on Psalms 80:4; see also Tanchuma Kedoshim 15 (34a).

⁹⁶The rabbis divide Isaac's blessing upon Jacob into ten parts. "Be lord over your brother" is considered to be the seventh part.

⁹⁷Playing on the word "אָפּוּא." This metaphor means that Esau's future has been decided.

R. Simeon ben Lakish said: Do not importune me for anger (אָר) ⁹⁸ and fury are in his power. R. Simlai, and some say in the name of R. Abahu: The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Thus have you said: 'And what [shall I do] for you [my son]?' " (Genesis 27:37). He said to him: "He is wicked" (Isaiah 26:10). He said to him: "Has he not learned righteousness?" (Isaiah 26:10). Has he not honored his parents? He said to him: "In the land of uprightness he will deal wrongfully" (Isaiah 26:10). In the future he will stretch his hand against the Temple. He said to him: "If so, give him tranquility in this world, 'And let him not behold the majesty of the Lord' (Isaiah 26:10) in the word to come." ⁹⁹

Again, Esau is rewarded in this world for honoring his parents, but will suffer in the world to come.

However, the rabbis are not completely sympathetic to Esau's situation.

Our rabbis taught: Three people came with pretention: They are Cain, Esau and Manasseh.... Esau (came with pretention), for it is written: "Have you but one blessing, my father?" (Genesis 27:38). ¹⁰⁰

R. Simon said: When wicked Esau begged his father and said: "Also bless me, father" (Genesis 27:38), (Isaac) wanted to bless him more than (he had blessed) Jacob his brother. Thereupon, a Divine Spirit diverted him. It said to him: "Isaac, Isaac, don't believe the supplications of a wicked one, as it is said: "When he speaks fair believe him not, for seven abominations are in his heart" (Proverbs 26:25). What does "for seven abominations are in his heart" mean? R. Jochanan said: It

⁹⁸In this comment the word "אָר" is interpreted as anger, based on the word "אָר."

⁹⁹Bereshit Rabbah 67:5 (pp. 759-60); see also Devarim Rabbah 1:19; Yalkut Shimoni I 115, II 429.

¹⁰⁰Sanhedrin 101b. Esau is pretentious because he implies that he deserves a blessing. See also Yalkut Shimoni I 38, II 246; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 4:13.

teaches that the Divine Presence responded to Isaac and said to him: "It is revealed and known before me that he is destined to destroy the Temple and to enslave the twelve tribes."¹⁰¹

Just as the blessing which Isaac bestowed upon Jacob is interpreted by the rabbis as foreshadowing the future of Israel, so too the blessing Isaac bestowed upon Esau is considered to foretell the future of Esau and his descendants. For example, because of the blessing, the children of Esau cannot accept the Torah.

R. Tarphon said: The Holy One blessed be He arose from Mount Seir and was revealed to the children of Esau, as it is said: "And (Moses) said: 'The Lord came from Sinai and arose from Seir to them'" (Deuteronomy 33:2). And Seir refers to the descendants of Esau, as it is said: "And Esau dwelt in Mount Seir" (Genesis 36:8). The Holy One blessed be He said to them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They said to Him: "What is written in it?" He said to them: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). They said to Him: "Go away from us, for we cannot abandon the blessing with which Isaac blessed Esau our father." For (Isaac) said to him: "By your sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40).¹⁰²

The children of Esau must fulfill the destiny which Isaac proclaimed to their father. Until they do so, Israel will remain under their yoke.

"[I adjure you, O daughter of Jerusalem...] that you neither awaken, nor stir up [my love, until you wish (יְפַחֵם לִי)]" (Song of Songs 2:7).... R. Judan said: the love that Isaac loved Esau, as it is said: "And Isaac loved Esau" (Genesis 25:28). What does "יְפַחֵם לִי" mean? (It means) until the desire of Isaac is done.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹Midrash Mishle 26:24-5; see also Midrash on Psalms 14:3.

¹⁰²Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 41 (42b); see also Midrash Aseret Hadibrot p. 60; Yalkut Shimoni I 286, 951.

¹⁰³Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:7:1.

This midrash means that Israel must wait until the children of Esau have exhausted the blessings which Isaac bestowed upon Esau before Israel will be redeemed from the yoke of Rome.

Another interpretation: What does "[You have encompassed this mountain] long enough" (Deuteronomy 2:3) mean? R. Acha said: If you touch him, you touch yourselves. How? (Esau's) father blessed him once: "By the sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40). But to Jacob he gave ten blessings. How do we know? For thus it is written: "May God give you from the dew of heaven..." (Genesis 27:28-9). If his blessing is canceled, your ten will also be canceled. "You have encompassed long enough."¹⁰⁴

Although one might think that Isaac acted wrongly in blessing Esau, the midrash implies that Isaac blessed Esau with God's approval.

It is written: "You have seen, for You behold trouble and vexation, to requite them with Your hand; to you the helpless commits himself. You have been the helper of the fatherless" (Psalms 10:14). The assembly of Israel said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, You saw that wicked Esau comes and is destined to destroy the Temple and exile the people Israel from their land and hold them down with chains." "To requite them with Your hand." (The assembly of Israel continued:) "And You caused Your presence to rest upon Isaac and he said to (Esau): 'Behold, from the fat of the earth shall be your dwelling...and by your sword you shall live'" (Genesis 27:39-40).¹⁰⁵

Isaac's blessing has other effects. One midrash identifies leprosy with Edom "which came from the strength of the old man," i.e., Isaac.¹⁰⁶ Edom received its power due to Isaac's blessing. According to another source the Euphrates River increased due to

¹⁰⁴Devarim Rabbah 1:18.

¹⁰⁵Esther Rabbah 3:5; see also Midrash on Psalms 10:6, 80:8; Yalkut Shimoni II 651.

¹⁰⁶Vayikra Rabbah 15:9.

Isaac's blessing.¹⁰⁷

With regard to this blessing too, the rabbis note that Israel's fate depends on accepting the yoke of Torah.

"And by your sword shall you live" (Genesis 27:40). R. Levi said: Raise up your sword and you will live. "And you shall serve your brother" (Genesis 27:40). R. Huna said: If he is worthy, you will serve, but if not, you will destroy. "And when you will break loose (תריד) [you shall shake his yoke off your neck]" (Genesis 27:40). (God) said to (Esau): "You have fairs (יְרִידִים) and he has fairs; you have laws and he has laws." R. Jose bar Chalafta said: If you see your brother Jacob throw off the yoke of Torah from upon his neck, destruction is decreed upon him, and you will rule him, as it is written: "For you are our father: for Abraham knows us not, and Israel does not acknowledge us" (Isaiah 63:16). And Isaac, where is he? One who says to him, destruction is decreed upon him, you associate him with the Patriarchs?¹⁰⁸

This midrash represents the strongest condemnation of Isaac in the literature.

After Isaac blesses Esau, the text describes Esau's anger.

He vows to himself that after Isaac dies, he will kill Jacob.

What does "And Esau said in his heart" (Genesis 27:41) mean? He said: "Cain slew his brother, and the Holy One blessed be He did not do anything to him. And in the end Adam fathered other children and they inherited the world with him. So I will murder my father first, and then my brother, and I will inherit the world alone," as it is said: "Let the days of mourning for my father draw near" (Genesis 27:41). "Let my father die" is not said, but "Let the days of mourning for my father draw near." For (Esau) said: "I will bring near the mourning for father first, and then I will murder Jacob." But the Holy One blessed be He did not allow

¹⁰⁷Bereshit Rabbah 16:4 (p. 148).

¹⁰⁸Bereshit Rabbah 67:7 (pp. 762-3); see also Midrash Mishle 26:25; Yalkut Shimoni I 115.

him. Therefore it is said: "Grant not, O Lord, the desires of the wicked" (Psalms 140:9).¹⁰⁹

According to another midrash Esau wanted Ishmael to kill Isaac, so that Esau could kill Jacob. Then Esau would avenge his father's murder by killing Ishmael, thereby being the lone heir of Isaac's possessions.¹¹⁰

At this point of the biblical narrative, Rebecca takes control. Having been told of Esau's wish to kill Jacob (by the Divine Spirit according to the rabbis¹¹¹), Rebecca tells Jacob to flee to Haran where her brother Laban lives. However, rather than telling Isaac of Esau's desire, Rebecca tells him that her life will be worthless if Jacob marries one of the daughters of Heth.

So, just as Abraham his father did for him, Isaac sought to insure that his son Jacob take a proper wife.

Know that Abraham endeavored to take a wife for Isaac his son. "And Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his house...['Go to my country, and to my birthland and take a wife for my son Isaac']" (Genesis 24:2, 4).... And so too Isaac said to Jacob: "Arise, go to Paddan-aram..." (Genesis 28:2), to take a wife fitting for him.¹¹²

Before sending him off, Isaac gave Jacob another blessing.

"And Isaac called to Jacob and blessed him..." (Genesis 28:1). R. Abahu said: Because (the blessings) were weakly held in his hands, where

¹⁰⁹Bereshit Rabbah 75:9 (p. 888).

¹¹⁰Bereshit Rabbah 67:8 (pp. 763-5); Tanchuma Emor 13 (39b); Tanchuma Buber Emor (48a); Midrash on Psalms 2:4, 14:2; Esther Rabbah 7:23, 10:3; Kohelet Rabbah 5:2:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 116, II 78, 583, 662, 1054; Agadat Bereshit 2:2, 46:2.

¹¹¹Midrash on Psalms 105:4.

¹¹²Tanchuma Noach 12 (16b); see also Tanchuma Buber Noach 18 (23a).

was it strengthened? "And Isaac called to Jacob and blessed him." R. Eliezer said: A document is only established by its signitures. (Isaac blessed Jacob again) that you should not say that had Jacob not deceived his father, he would not have received the blessings. Scripture says: "And Isaac called to Jacob and blessed him." R. Berechiah said: This is like a prince that was digging to his father for a pound of gold. (His father) said to him: "Why (dig) in secret? Take it openly." Thus it is said: "And Isaac called to Jacob...."¹¹³

Whereas the former blessings concerned material success and sustenance, this blessing is more substantial.

"Better is the end of a thing than its beginning" (Ecclesiastes 7:8). The first blessings that Isaac bestowed upon Jacob concerned the dew of heaven and the corn of earth, as it is said: "And may God [bless you with the dew of heaven...]" (Genesis 27:28-9). The last blessing was a blessing of the foundation of the world, and in them there is not interruption in this world or the world to come, as it is said: "And God Almighty bless you" (Genesis 28:3). And (Isaac) added for (Jacob) the blessing of Abraham as it is said: "And may He give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your seed with you" (Genesis 28:4). Therefore, "Better is the end of a thing than its beginning."¹¹⁴

The rabbis express differing views regarding what Isaac sent with Jacob when sending him off.

Of Eliezer, when he went to bring Rebecca, it is written of it: "And the servant took ten camels..." (Genesis 24:10). (Jacob said:) "But I have not one ring nor one bracelet." R. Chanina said: He sent him away empty-handed. R. Joshua ben Levi said: He sent things with him, but Esau arose and took them from him.¹¹⁵

¹¹³Bereshit Rabbah 67:12 (pp. 767-8); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 116.

¹¹⁴Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 35 (34b).

¹¹⁵Bereshit Rabbah 68:2 (pp. 770-1); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 117.

R. Levi said: The rod created in the twilight (before the first Shabbat) was delivered to the first man in the Garden of Eden. Adam delivered it to Chanoch.... Abraham delivered it to Isaac. Isaac delivered it to Jacob.... "For with my staff I passed over the Jordan" (Genesis 32:10).¹¹⁶

Sefer Hayashar offers a different account of the events which follow Isaac's blessing of Esau. Jacob goes to the house of Eber to study Torah.

And at the end of fourteen years that Jacob dwelt in the house of Eber, Jacob desired the face of his father and his mother and Jacob came to the house of his father and his mother, to Hebron. And Esau had forgotten during those days what Jacob had done to him regarding the blessing which he took from him. And when Esau saw that Jacob returned to his father and to his mother, he remembered what Jacob did to him and he was angry and he sought to kill him. And Isaac was very old, on in years, and Esau said: "Now, behold, the days of my father approach to die. When he dies, I will murder Jacob my brother." And this matter was told to Rebecca and she hurried and she sent and called to Jacob her son and said to him: "Arise, flee, go to Haran to Laban my brother. And dwell with him a number of days until the anger of your brother subsides. After that you shall return." And Isaac called to Jacob and commanded him, saying: "Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. For thus Abraham our father commanded us, with regard to the matter which the Lord commanded him saying: 'To your seed I give this land. If your sons keep my covenant which I made with you, I will keep, also me, for your children what I said to you and I will not forsake them.' And now, my son, hearken to my voice, to all that I command you. It is forbidden for you to take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Haran, to the house of Bethuel, the father of your mother, and take for yourself from there a wife from the

¹¹⁶Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 40 (41b); see also Tanchuma Buber Vayetzei 3 (73a-b); Yalkut Shimoni I 117; Agadat Bereshit 45:4; Bereshit Rabbati 48:22 (pp. 229-30).

daughters of Laban, the brother of your mother. And therefore, be wary, lest you forget the Lord your God and all His ways in the land to which you go. And you might be joined to the people of the land and pursue after waste and forsake the Lord your God. But when you come to the land, you shall serve there the Lord; you shall not turn away to stray left or right from the path which I command you and which you studied. And God Almighty shall be merciful to you before the people of the land. And you shall take a wife as you wish there, good and correct in the ways of the Lord. And God will give you the blessing of Abraham your father, to you and to your seed. And He will make you fruitful and will multiply you and you shall be for an assembly of peoples in the land where you go. And the Lord will return you to this land, the land of the sojournings of your fathers, with children, with wealth and with happiness and with goodness." And Isaac finished to command Jacob and to bless him. And he gave him many presents and silver and gold. And he sent him off.¹¹⁷

Jacob thus obeys his parents and sets out for Paddan-aram.

¹¹⁷Sefer Hayashar Toledot pp. 91-2.

VII

The Death of Isaac

After Jacob leaves his parents' house, the biblical text focuses on his life. Having received the patriarchal blessing, he becomes the center of attention. Rebecca is not mentioned again. Her death is not recorded. The death of Isaac is recorded briefly (Genesis 35:27-9).

According to one source, before his death Isaac prayed on behalf of Simeon and Levi in their fight against the Canaanites (Genesis 34:25ff).

And Judah said to Simeon and to Levi and to all his brothers: "Brace yourselves and be soldiers, for the Lord our God is with us. Do not fear them. Stand up and each take his objects of war and his bow and his sword and let us go and let us fight these uncircumcized ones, and the Lord our God will save us." And they arose, and each man took his objects of war, large and small, the eleven sons of Jacob and all of Jacob's servants with them.... And the children of Jacob sent to Isaac son of Abraham, their father, to Hebron, Kiryat Arba, saying: "Pray for us to the Lord our God to save us from the hand of the Canaanites who come upon us, and to deliver them into our hands." And Isaac son of Abraham prayed to the Lord for his children and said: "Lord, God, You promised Abraham my father saying: 'I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven' (Genesis 22:17), and You also promised me that You will keep Your word. And now, behold, the kings of Canaan come together to fight with my children who do not do violence with their hands. And now, Lord, God, God of all the land, make sensible the advice of all these kings without fighting my children. And put the fear of my children in the heart of all these kings and all their people and humble their proud ones and return them from upon my children. And save all my children and their slaves from them with your strong hand and with your outstretched arm for with your strong and mighty arm you can do

all this...." And the Lord hearkened to the prayer of Isaac and Jacob and the Lord put great fear and awe in the heart of all the advisors of these kings, and they were greatly afraid of the children of Jacob.¹

According to the rabbis the Patriarchs demanded their death after God had shown them their reward in the world to come.

R. Meir said: The dead of idol worshipers are dead, but the dead of Israel are not dead because by their merit, the living exist. For thus you find when Israel did that deed [worshiped the Golden Calf], if Moses our teacher had not mentioned the merit of the Patriarchs, Israel would have been lost from the world, as it is said: "Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel your servants" (Exodus 32:13). Therefore, it is difficult for the Holy One blessed be He to declare the death of righteous ones, as it is said: "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalms 116:15). What does God do? (God) shows them their reward in order that they will demand death with their mouth. Rabbi Abahu, when he was about to die, the Holy One blessed be He showed him his reward, and he was surprised and said: "All these for Abahu?" He read (the verse) about himself: "But I said: 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for naught and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord'" (Isaiah 49:4). Thereupon, he desired death. And also Abraham demanded death with his mouth, as it is said: "[And Abram said: 'Lord, God, what shall you give me,] since I go childless [and Eliezer of Damascus shall be possessor of my house]'" (Genesis 15:2). Therefore, the Holy One blessed be He said to him: "And you will go to your fathers in peace" (Genesis 15:15). Isaac demanded death with his mouth, as it is said: "And I will bless you before the Lord before my death" (Genesis 27:7).² Therefore it is written: "And Isaac expired and died" (Genesis 35:29). Jacob demanded death, as it is said: "Now let me die" (Genesis 46:30). And the Holy One

¹Sefer Hayashar Vayishlach pp. 115-6.

²This quotation is from Rebecca's report to Jacob of what Isaac said. He actually said: "Make for me tasty dishes which I like, and bring them to me and I will eat, so that my soul will bless you before I die" (Genesis 27:4).

blessed be He said to him: "You say 'Now let me die.' You will dwell seventeen years and then you will be taken away."³

Isaac's mentioning of his death is interpreted as wanting to die because of the reward he will receive in the world to come. But his death is not absolute, because his merit, along with the merit of Abraham and the merit of Jacob, continues to exist for future generations of Israel.

Both of Isaac's sons were present when he died.

And Jacob took his sons and his grandsons⁴ and his wives and he sent to Kiryat Arba, to Isaac, his father. And there he found Esau and his wives living in the tent of Isaac, and he pitched his tent outside of his. And Isaac saw Jacob and his wives and his sons and his daughters⁵ and all he had and rejoiced greatly in his heart. And of him, Scripture says: "You shall see your children's children, peace be upon Israel" (Psalms 128:6). R. Levi says: At the time of the ingathering of Isaac, he left his cattle and his possessions and all he had to his two sons. Therefore, both of them rendered lovingkindness to him, as it is said: "Esau and Jacob his sons buried him" (Genesis 35:29).⁶

Isaac, like Abraham and Jacob, died in Tishre, on Rosh Hashanah, although one opinion says that all of them died in Nisan.⁷ He was buried in the Cave of the Machpelah in Kiryat Arba, a place which derives its name from the fact that four couples (Adam and Eve,

³Tanchuma Vayechi 4 (57b); see also Vayechi 1 (56a); Tanchuma Buber Vayechi 2 (106b); Kohelet Rabbah 9:5:1; Yalkut Shimoni I 155, II 735, 1082.

⁴This is probably an error.

⁵Jacob only had one daughter.

⁶Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 38 (38a-b); see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 36:6; Bereshit Rabbati 36:3 (p. 161).

⁷Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a; see also Midrash Hagadol Genesis 21:1.

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah) are buried there.⁸

According to rabbinic tradition Judah killed Esau when Isaac died.

R. Joshua ben Levi said: According to an old tradition Judah killed Esau. When? When Isaac our father died. Esau and Jacob and all the tribes went to bury him, as it is said: "Esau and Jacob his sons buried him" (Genesis 35:29). All of them were in the Cave of the Machpelah, sitting and crying. The tribes arose and gave honor to Jacob, and left the cave so that Jacob would not cry and be humbled before them. Esau threaded himself through them and entered the cave. He said: "Now I can murder (Jacob), after my father has died," as it is said: "May the days of mourning for my father draw near so that I may kill Jacob my brother" (Genesis 27:41). Judah looked and saw that Esau entered after him, and immediately said: "He is going to kill father in there." He slipped and squeezed by himself and entered and found Esau about to kill Jacob. Thereupon, Judah arose and killed Esau from behind. And why didn't he kill him facing him? Because Esau's facial features resembled (Judah's) father's. Therefore, out of respect for (Jacob) he killed him from behind.⁹

Although Isaac's death is recorded in Genesis 35, the midrash places it after events that occur in the following chapters, specifically at the time Joseph leaves prison.¹⁰ Therefore, Isaac is present when Jacob learns of the apparent death of Joseph.

"And his [Jacob's] father wept with him [Jacob]" (Genesis 37:35).¹¹ This refers to Isaac. R. Levi and R. Simon (disagreed). R. Levi said:

⁸Erubin 53a; Sota 13a; Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 20 (19a); Yalkut Shimoni I 162; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 23:2.

⁹Midrash on Psalms 18:32; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 162.

¹⁰Seder Olam Rabbah 2 p. 9; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 41:4.

¹¹The verse is usually understood: "And (Joseph's) father wept for (Joseph)."

(Isaac) cried in his presence, but when he left his presence he bathed and annointed and ate and drank. And why didn't (Isaac) reveal to him (that Joseph was alive)? He said: "The Holy One blessed be He has not revealed it to him. Shall I reveal it to him?" R. Simon said: [Isaac mourned with Jacob] because all who must observe mourning rites, one mourns with him.¹²

Isaac also sat in judgment of Tamar.¹³

Another source speaks of Isaac following the death of Jacob. However, this midrash probably refers to Isaac after his own death. Esau will not allow Jacob to be buried in the Cave of the Machpelah. So Naphtali cuts off Esau's head and takes it into the cave.

What did Isaac do? He grasped Esau's head and prayed before the Holy One blessed be He, saying before Him: "Master of the Universe, may favor be granted this wicked one, because he did not study any of the commandments that are in the Torah." As it is said: "[Let favor be shown to the wicked] who has not learned righteousness" (Isaiah 26:10). And concerning the land of Israel and the Cave of the Machpelah in iniquity (the wicked one) speaks, as it is said: "In the land of uprightness he will deal wrongfully" (Isaiah 26:10). The Divine Spirit responded, saying: "As I live He shall not see the majesty of the Lord," as it is said: "And he will not see the majesty of the Lord" (Isaiah 26:10).¹⁴

¹²Bereshit Rabbah 84:22 (p. 1028). According to R. Levi, Isaac knows that Joseph is still alive but does not want to reveal this information to Jacob. Therefore, Isaac mourns in his presence, but does not mourn at other times.

¹³Yalkut Shimoni I 145.

¹⁴Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 39 (41b).

VIII

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

As noted in the introduction, of the three Patriarchs, Isaac is the least significant in the biblical narrative. How do the rabbis view Isaac in relationship to Abraham and Jacob? A number of sources explicitly state that the three of them are of equal significance.

In every place (in Scripture) Abraham precedes Isaac, and Isaac precedes Jacob, but in one place it says: "Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob [and also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham]" (Leviticus 26:42). It shows that the three of them are of equal importance.¹

Similarly you say: "And He said: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'" (Exodus 3:6). I might think that each is more important than the one following. When it says: "Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham" (Leviticus 26:42), it shows that the three of them are of equal importance.²

Why are the Patriarchs listed backwards (in Leviticus 26:42)? As if to say, if the deeds of Jacob were not worthy, there are the deeds of Isaac; if the deeds of Isaac are not worthy, there are the deeds of Abraham. Each one is worthy that it may be hung on his own sake.³

Another interpretation of "blessings of the breasts" (Genesis 49:25). These are the blessings by which Abraham and Isaac were

¹Bereshit Rabbah 1:15 (p. 14); see also Yalkut Shimoni II 511.

²Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bo pp. 1-2. This passage probably forms the basis for the Bereshit Rabbah passage above.

³Vayikra Rabbah 36:5; see also Sifra Bechukotai 8:7; Yalkut Shimoni I 675, 801.

blessed by the Divine Presence.... And why are they called "breasts?"... Just as one breast is not larger than the other, so too the Patriarchs are of equal importance.⁴

According to the Talmud only Abraham, Isaac and Jacob should be called "Patriarchs (אבות)" because they were more prominent than those who followed.⁵ However, some rabbinic sources call other biblical characters "Patriarchs" when they are listed with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁶

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob shared many privileges.

Our rabbis taught: The Holy One blessed be He gave a foretaste of the world to come in this world to three: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.... The evil inclination did not rule over three: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.... And there are those who say also David.... Our rabbis taught: The angel of death did not rule over six: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam.... Our rabbis taught: Worms and maggots did not rule over seven: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Miriam and Benjamin son of Jacob....⁷

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are called the three pillars on which the world stands.⁸ They are considered to be perfect,⁹ and strong in

⁴Bereshit Rabbati 49:25 (p. 251); see also 46:3 (p. 222).

⁵Berachot 16b.

⁶Pesikta Rabbati 8 (29b) refers to seven Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Kohath, Amram, Moses and Aaron. Kallah Rabbati 53a and Derech Eretz Zuta 58a refer to seven Patriarchs with whom God make a covenant: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Pinchas and David. The same two sources and Yalkut Shimoni I 78 list seven Patriarchs who died with universal honor: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Amram the father of Moses, Benjamin son of Jacob, Jesse and Chileab.

⁷Baba Batra 16b-17a; see also Yalkut Shimoni I 106; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 24:1.

⁸Midrash on Psalms 1:15; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 7:8:1.

⁹Pesikta Rabbati supplement 1 (195a).

Torah and mitzvot,¹⁰ having kept the entire Torah even before it was given to Israel.¹¹ Sefer Yashar (ספר ישר), a lost book mentioned in the Talmud, received its name because it was about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are called righteous (ישרים) in the verse "May my soul die the death of the righteous (ישרים)" (Numbers 23:10).¹² All three Patriarchs withstood tests before God raised them to their positions of prestige.¹³ The Patriarchs' relationship to Israel is expressed by the following midrash:

Another interpretation of: "blessings of the breasts" (Genesis 49:25). These are the blessings with which Abraham and Isaac were blessed by the Divine Presence.... Why are they called "breasts?" [Just as breasts] are becoming and honored and pretty and praised of a woman, similarly the Patriarchs are becoming and praised and honored and pretty of Israel. And just as breasts are of equal size, similarly the Patriarchs are of equal importance. And just as breasts are full of milk, similarly the Patriarchs are filled with Torah. And just as breasts are the life of a baby, similarly the merit of the Patriarchs is the life of Israel.¹⁴

Similarities between the Patriarchs have been noted in earlier chapters. For example, each of the Patriarchs instituted one of the daily prayers. In fact, prayer is called the "trade (אומנות)" of the Patriarchs. A famine occurred in each of their lives. All

¹⁰Sota 14a.

¹¹Vayikra Rabbah 2:10.

¹²Avodah Zarah 25a; see also Yalkut Shimoni II 22, 141.

¹³Bemidbar Rabbah 15:12; Tanchuma Buber Bechaalotcha 13 (25b); Yalkut Shimoni I 719; Pesachim 87b refers to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as "God's tested ones."

¹⁴Bereshit Rabbati 49:25 (p. 251).

of them sought converts.¹⁵ When Moses complains to God (Exodus 5:22-3) after Pharoah has made the work of the Israelites more difficult, God responds: "Alas for those who are gone and cannot be replaced. Behold, many times I revealed myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shadai and they did not criticize my ways."¹⁶

Related to this matter is the concept of "זכות אבות," the merit of the Patriarchs. This phrase implies that the good deeds of Abrahah, Isaac and Jacob contribute to the welfare of their descendants. The phrase particularly relates to the Jews standing in judgment on Rosh Hashanah.

"[Thus says the Lord your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God who teaches you for your profit,] who leads you in the way you shall go'" (Isaiah 48:17). R. Levi in the name of R. Chama bar Chanina: This can be compared to a person who had a case before his father. (His father) said to him: "My son, if you want to be judged worthy before me in the case, appoint for yourself this certain advocate and you will be judged worthy in the case." Similarly, the Holy One blessed be He said to Israel: "My children, if you wish to be judged worthy, mention before me the merit of the Patriarchs and you will be judged worthy." When? On Rosh Hashanah. "In the seventh month, [on the first day (באחד) of the month shall be a solemn rest for you, a memorial proclaimed by the blast of the horns (זכרון תרועה), a holy convocation (מקרא קודש)]" (Leviticus 23:24). "On the first day" refers to Abraham, as it is written: "Abraham was one (אחד) and he inherited the land" (Ezekiel 33:24). "A memorial proclaimed by the blast of horns" refers to Isaac, as it is written: "And (Abraham) saw, and behold, a ram caught in the thicket by its horns" (Genesis 22:13). "A holy convocation" refers to Jacob, as it is written: "Listen to me, Jacob, my servant and

¹⁵Bereshit Rabbah 84:4 (p. 1004); Yalkut Shimoni I 140; Bereshit Rabbati 35:1-2 (pp. 152-3).

¹⁶Sanhedrin 111a; see also Shmot Rabbah 6:4.

Israel my called (מקוראי)" (Isaiah 48:12).
 When should one mention before Me the merit of
 the Patriarchs and be judged worthy? On Rosh
 Hashanah: "In the seventh month...."¹⁷

Certain specific deeds in the lives of the Patriarchs provide a
 basis for the merit of the Patriarchs. For example, after the
 destruction of the Temple, the Patriarchs and Moses are summoned to
 weep for Israel.

Thereupon, Abraham said before the Holy One
 blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, at 100
 years of age You gave me a son and when he
 reached the age of knowledge and was a boy of
 37 years old, You said to me: 'Offer him for a
 burnt-offering before Me.' I was made merciless
 about him and did not have mercy upon him.
 Rather, I, myself, bound him. Won't You remember
 this for me, and won't You have mercy on my
 descendants?" Isaac said: "Master of the
 Universe, when Father said to me: 'God will see
 to the lamb for the offering, my son' (Genesis
 22:8)¹⁸ I did not object to Your words and I was
 willfully bound on the altar and I stretched my
 neck under the knife. Won't You remember this
 for me and have mercy on my descendants?"
 Jacob said: "Master of the Universe, didn't I
 spend twenty years at Laban's house? And when I
 left his house, wicked Esau met me and sought to
 kill my children, and I risked my life on their
 behalf. But now they are delivered into the
 hand of their enemies like sheep to the slaughter,
 after I raised them like chickens and endured the
 trouble of raising children. For most of my days
 I was in great trouble on their account. And
 now, won't You remember this for me, to have
 mercy on my children?"¹⁹

Of particular note is that both Abraham and Isaac base their plea
 upon their role in the akedah.

¹⁷Vayikra Rabbah 29:7; see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 23:7;
Pesikta Rabbati 40 (169a); Yalkut Shimoni I 645.

¹⁸According to the rabbis when Isaac heard this, he knew that he
 was to be the offering. See chapter three.

¹⁹Eichah Rabbah Proem 24.

Many things were done for the Israelites because of the merit of the Patriarchs: they were redeemed from Egypt,²⁰ they were fed manna in the wilderness,²¹ they received the priestly benediction,²² and the sea was parted for them.²³ One midrash says that Israel only lives by the merit of the Patriarchs.²⁴

When Moses stood before God in the wilderness after Israel had sinned, he was not answered. But when he said: "Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them: 'I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of I will give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever'" (Exodus 32:13), then God responded: "And the Lord repented of the evil which He said He would do to His people" (Exodus 32:14).²⁵

A similar notion is presented in a number of sources which stress the significance of all Israelites because they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Rabbi Akiba said: Even the poor of Israel are considered as if they are free people who have lost their possessions, for they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.²⁶

²⁰Shmot Rabbah 1:36.

²¹Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Beshalach p. 160.

²²Bereshit Rabbah 43:8 (pp. 422-3).

²³Yalkut Shimoni I 223.

²⁴Ibid., I 146.

²⁵Berachot 10b; Shabbat 30a; Shmot Rabbah 44:1-10; Midrash on Psalms 7:6; Yalkut Shimoni II 970.

²⁶Mishnah Baba Kamma 8:6; see also Baba Kamma 86a, 91a.

Once Rabbi Jochanan ben Mattia said to his son: "Go out and hire workers for us." He went and supplied provisions for them. But when he came to his father, (his father) said to him: "My son, even if you made for them something similar to a banquet of Solomon's in his time, you would not have fulfilled your obligation to them, because they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."²⁷

In the days of R. Tanchuma, Israel needed to fast. They went to him and said to him: "Rabbi, proclaim a fast." He proclaimed a fast for one day, a second day and a third day, but rain did not fall. He entered and expounded to them. He said to them: "My children, be filled with compassion for one another, and the Holy One blessed be He will be filled with compassion on your account." When they were distributing charity to the poor, they saw a man giving money to his ex-wife. They came and said to (R. Tanchuma): "Why are we sitting here when there is a misdeed here?" He said to them: "What did you see?" They said to him: "We saw a man giving money to his ex-wife." He sent for them and they brought them. He said to (the man): "Why did you give money to your ex-wife?" (The man) said to him: "I saw her in great distress and I was filled with compassion on her account." R. Tanchuma lifted his face upward and said: "Master of all Worlds, this person, upon whom the woman has no claim for sustenance, he sees her in trouble and is filled with compassion on her account. You, of whom it is written: 'The Lord is compassionate and gracious' (Psalms 103:8), and we are Your children, the descendants of Your beloved ones, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, how much the more so should You be filled with mercy on our account." Thereupon, rain began to fall and the world was relieved.²⁸

Being a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is beneficial because their deeds contribute to the welfare of their descendants. However, this contribution is limited to a certain extent. For example, in

²⁷Mishnah Baba Metzia 7:1; see also Baba Metzia 86b.

²⁸Bereshit Rabbah 33:3 (pp. 304-5); see also Vayikra Rabbah 34:14; Yalkut Shimoni II 888.

chapter six a midrash was cited which states that neither Abraham, Isaac nor Jacob could serve as sureties for the Israelites at Mount Sinai because each of them was deficient in some way. If God evaluated the Patriarchs according to the measure of strict justice, they would not be able to survive.

It has been taught: Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: If the Holy One blessed be He examined Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with strict justice, they would not be able to stand before the reproof, as it is said: "And now, stand still so that I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the righteous acts of the Lord, which He did for you and for your fathers" (I Samuel 12:7).²⁹

According to the Talmud the merit of the Patriarchs has ended. God tells Gabriel to write the letter tav in ink on the foreheads of the righteous so that destroying angels would not have power over them, and the letter tav in blood on the foreheads of the wicked so that the destroying angels will have power over them.

Why a tav?... Samuel said: (The tav on the foreheads of the wicked means) that the merit of the Patriarchs is exhausted (תמה).³⁰ Rabbi Jochanan said: (The tav on the forehead of the righteous means) that the merit of the Patriarchs will confer grace (חן).³⁰... Since when has the merit of the Patriarchs been exhausted? Rab said: From the days of Hosea ben Beerī, for it is said: "I will discover her lewdness in the eyes of her lovers and none shall save her from my hand" (Hosea 2:12).³¹ But Samuel said: From the days of Hazael, for it is said: "And Hazael, king of Syria, oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoachaz" (II Kings 13:22). And it is written: "And the Lord was gracious to them and had mercy upon them. And God respected them for

²⁹Arachin 17a.

³⁰The words "תמה" and "חן" begin with the letter tav.

³¹Not even the merit of the Patriarchs will save her.

the sake of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and did not destroy them nor cast them from before him until now" (II Kings 13:23).³² R. Joshua ben Levi said: From the days of Elijah, for it is said: "At the offering of the evening oblation, Elijah the prophet drew near and said: 'Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today³³ let it be known that You are God in Israel, and I am Your servant, and by Your word I have done all these things...'" (I Kings 18:36). But Rabbi Jochanan said: From the days of Hezekiah, for it is said: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there is no end, on the throne of David and on his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with judgment and with righteousness from now and forever. The jealousy of the Lord of Hosts shall do this..."³⁴ (Isaiah 9:6).³⁵

Some midrashim note differences between the Patriarchs.

"And (Jacob) passed before them" (Genesis 33:2). That is what is written: "As a father has compassion upon his children [so the Lord has compassion upon those who fear Him]" (Psalms 103:13). R. Chiya taught: as the most compassionate of the Patriarchs. Which one was most compassionate? R. Judah bar Simon said: Abraham (who said with regard to Sodom and Gemorrah): "May it be far from You to do [this thing]" (Genesis 18:25). R. Levi said: Jacob (was most compassionate, as it is said): "And he passed before them." He said: "It is better that they harm me and not them."³⁶

However, according to another source, Isaac shows the most understanding of Israel's woes.

³²"Until now" implies that the merit of the Patriarchs ended then.

³³"Today" implies a limitation.

³⁴"The jealousy of the Lord of Hosts" and not the merit of the Patriarchs "shall do this...."

³⁵Shabbat 55a; see also Y. Sanhedrin ch. 10 hal. 1 (27d); Yalkut Shimoni II 415.

³⁶Bereshit Rabbah 78:8 (pp. 925-6).

R. Samuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Jonathon: What does this verse mean? "For You are our Father, because Abraham knows not, and Israel does not acknowledge us, You O Lord are our Father; our Redeemer from everlasting is Your name" (Isaiah 63:16). In the future to come, the Holy One blessed be He will say to Abraham: "Your children have sinned against me." He will say before Him: "Master of the Universe, let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name." (God) said: "I will say it to Jacob who experienced the trouble of raising children. Perhaps he will pray on their account." He said to him: "Your children have sinned." (Jacob) said before Him: "Master of the Universe, let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name." (God) will say: "There is no reason in old men and no counsel in children." He will say to Isaac: "Your children have sinned against me." He will say before Him: "Master of the Universe, are they my children and not Your children? When they gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hear' before You,³⁷ You called them 'My son, My firstborn' (Exodus 4:22). Now, are they my sons and not Your sons? And also, how much have they sinned? How many are the years of a person? Seventy years. Subtract twenty for which You do not punish,³⁸ which leaves fifty. Subtract twenty-five for the nights, which leaves twenty-five. Subtract twelve-and-a half for prayer, eating and using a restroom, which leaves twelve-and-a half. If You bear all of them, fine. But if not, let half be upon me and half upon You. And if You say to me that all of them will be upon me, I offered myself before You as a sacrifice." They will begin and say: "You are our father." Isaac will say to them: "Before you praise me, praise the Holy One blessed be He." And Isaac will show them the Holy One blessed be He with their own eyes. Thereupon, they will lift their eyes toward heaven and say: "You O Lord are our Father, our Redeemer from everlasting is Your name."³⁹

³⁷See Exodus 24:7.

³⁸According to Numbers 14:29 God only punished those twenty years of age and older who accepted the report of the spies.

³⁹Shabbat 89b; see also Kallah Rabbati 54a.

A similar idea is expressed in the following midrash.

"And this shall be peace: when the Assyrian shall come into our land, and when he shall tread in our palace, then shall we raise against him seven shepherds" (Micah 5:4). These are the seven shepherds. David is in the middle. Adam, Seth and Methusaleh are on his right. Abraham, Jacob and Moses are on his left. And where did Isaac go? He went and sat at the gate of hell to save his children from the justice of hell.⁴⁰

Just as Isaac was able to withstand God's challenge and offer himself willingly on the altar, he now challenges God to forgive the people's sins.

But if any of the Patriarchs is considered more prominent than the others by the rabbis, Jacob is.

"[When the Lord brings back the captivity of His people] Jacob will rejoice, and Israel will be glad" (Psalms 14:7). "Abraham will rejoice, and Isaac will be glad" is not written here, but "Jacob will rejoice, and Israel will be glad." And why is Jacob, of all the Patriarchs, rejoicing? R. Simeon ben Lakish said: When Israel sins, Jacob feels it from the Cave of the Machpelah, as it is said: "For now, Ephraim, you have committed harlotry, Israel is defiled" (Hosea 5:3). And similarly, when rejoicing and redemption will come, Jacob will rejoice in it more than the other Patriarchs, because he will be invited to the feast, as it is said: "Hearken to me, O Jacob, and Israel my invited (מקראי)" (Isaiah 48:12). What does "מקראי" mean? It means "my invited one," as it is said: "And (Samuel) made them sit in the place at the head of the invited ones (הקרואים)" (I Samuel 9:22). Rab said: It is like one who marries off his daughter. Who rejoices? Is it not the father of the bride? As it is said: "Therefore, thus said the Lord who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob..." (Isaiah 29:22). So it says, when redemption comes to the world and to Israel, Jacob will rejoice more than the other Patriarchs. Therefore

⁴⁰Shir Hashirim Rabbah 8:9:3; see also Kallah Rabbati 54a.

it is said: "Jacob will rejoice, and Israel will be glad."⁴¹

The primary reason that Jacob is considered more praiseworthy than either Abraham or Isaac is that he did not father a wicked son, whereas Abraham fathered Ishmael and the children of Keturah and Isaac fathered Esau.

"For the portion of the Lord is his people, [Jacob and the lot of his inheritance]" (Deuteronomy 32:9). This can be compared to a king who had a field and gave it to tenants. The tenants began to plunder it. He took it from them and gave it to their children. They began to be worse than the first. He took it from their children and gave it to their grandchildren. They were much worse than the first. A son was born to him. He said to them: "Go out from my share. I don't want you to be on it. Give me my share and I will favor it." Similarly, when Abraham our father entered the world, unworthy Ishmael and all the children of Keturah came from him. Isaac came to the world, and unworthy Esau and all the chiefs of Edom came from him. They turned out to be worse than the first. But when Jacob came, an unworthy one did not come forth from him. Rather, all his children were born fit, as it is said: "Jacob was a perfect man, dwelling in tents" (Genesis 25:26). For this reason, God recognized His portion from Jacob, as it is said: "For the portion of the Lord is his people, Jacob and the lot of his inheritance."⁴²

[Sing unto God our strength, blow the shofar to the God of Jacob" (Psalms 81:2).] Rabbi Tanchuma bar Abba began his discourse: "None has beheld iniquity in Jacob" (Numbers 23:21). Why did Balaam mention Jacob, not Abraham nor Isaac, but Jacob? Because He saw that unworthy offspring came from Abraham, namely Ishmael and the children of Keturah, and from Isaac, namely Esau and his chiefs. But Jacob, all (his children) were holy, as He wrote: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel" (Genesis 49:28).

⁴¹Midrash on Psalms 14:7; see also Pesikta Rabbati 41 (174b).

⁴²Sifre Devarim 312 (p. 353).

Therefore, (Balaam) did not mention one of the Patriarchs other than Jacob. "Blow the shofar to the God of Jacob, selah!"⁴³

Why is it said of Abraham and of Isaac "And he died" (Genesis 25:8, 35:29), but it is not said of Jacob? Because Abraham left evil children.... And so too, Isaac left evil children, Esau and his generation. To teach you that one who dies and leaves all his children busy in Torah and mitzvot, it is as if he did not die.⁴⁴

The rabbis need to explain the numerous references to Jacob which refer to the people of Israel. They explain that Jacob, because he fathered only fit children, is the only one of the Patriarchs mentioned in some verses.

Other reasons that Jacob, of all the Patriarchs, is mentioned are also given.

Another interpretation of ["None has beheld iniquity in Jacob" (Numbers 23:21)]. Why Jacob of all the Patriarchs? Thus our rabbis taught:⁴⁵ "In a measure a man measures out, in the very same measure it is measured out to him." This is like a king who had three friends. He wanted to build a palace. He brought the first. He said: "See this place which I seek to make a palace for me." The friend said to him: "I remember it as a mountain at first." He brought the second, who said to him: "I remember it as a field at first." The king dismissed him. He brought his third friend, who said: "I remember it as a palace at first." (The king) said to him: "By your life, when I build a palace, I will call it by your name." Similarly, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the friends of God. Abraham called the Temple a mountain, as it is said: "In the mountain the Lord will be seen" (Genesis 22:14). And Isaac called it a field, as it is said: "See, the odor of my son is like the odor of a field" (Genesis 27:27). The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "You called it a house before it

⁴³Pesikta Rabbati 39 (165b); see also Midrash on Psalms 81:1; Yalkut Shimoni II 830.

⁴⁴Bereshit Rabbati 49:33 (p. 257).

⁴⁵Sota 1:7.

is built. By your life, when I build it I will call it the house of Jacob. "[O house of Jacob, come] let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:5).⁴⁶

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Why does it say this? Because it says: "Speak to the children of Israel" (Exodus 25:2). "Speak to the children of Abraham" and "Speak to the children of Isaac" are not written here, rather, "Speak to the children of Israel." Our father Jacob merited that the speech would be said to his children because our father Jacob feared all his days, and said: "Woe to me lest unworthy offspring as came out of my fathers come out of me." From Abraham came forth Ishmael who practiced idol worship, as it is said: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian" (Genesis 21:9), that he practiced idol worship. The words of R. Akiba.⁴⁷

Another source compares the Patriarchs to a planted field.

"And Jacob saw that there was corn..." (Genesis 42:1). This is what Scripture says: "Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God" (Psalms 146:5). Why doesn't it say "the God of Abraham" or "the God of Isaac" but "the God of Jacob?" You find that God did not stand by Abraham nor by Isaac, but by Jacob, as it is said: "And behold, the Lord stood by him" (Genesis 28:13). R. Simon said: The king does not stand by his field when it is sowed nor when it is threshed nor when it is hoed. And when does he stand by it? When it has been dug. Thus, Abraham hoed.... Isaac sowed.... The king did not stand by it until Jacob came and reaped the produce, as it is said: "Israel is the Lord's hallowed portion, his first-fruits of the increase" (Jeremiah 2:3). And the Lord stood by him. "Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is the Lord his God."⁴⁸

⁴⁶Pesikta Rabbati 39 (165b); see also Pesachim 88a; Midrash on Psalms 81:2; Yalkut Shimoni II 552.

⁴⁷Sifre Devarim 31 (pp. 49-50); see also Yalkut Shimoni I 833.

⁴⁸Tanchuma Miketz 5 (50a).

This midrash considers the lives of Abraham and Isaac as preparation for Jacob.

Perhaps the rabbinic attitude toward the Patriarchs is best summed up by the following midrash based upon the verse: "Then will I remember (וּזְכֹּרְתִּי) My covenant with Jacob, and also (וְאִנִּי) My covenant with Isaac, and also (וְאִנִּי) My covenant with Abraham I will remember (אֶזְכֹּר)" (Leviticus 26:42).

Why are the Patriarchs mentioned backwards? As if to say: if the deeds of Jacob are not worthy, then there are the deeds of Isaac. If the deeds of Isaac are not worthy, then there are the deeds of Abraham. Each one is worthy enough for it to be hung on his sake. And why does it say with regard to Abraham and Jacob "remember," but with regard to Isaac it does not say "remember?" R. Berechiah and our rabbis differ. R. Berechiah said: Because he was a child of affliction. But our rabbis said: One sees the ashes of Isaac as if piled on the altar. And why does it say with regard to Abraham and Isaac "also," but with regard to Jacob it does not say "also?" Because it teaches that the bed of our father Jacob is complete. Abraham brought forth an unfit one, Ishmael and the children of Keturah. Isaac brought forth an unfit one, Esau and all his chiefs. Jacob's bed was complete, for all his children were born righteous.⁴⁹

Jacob is considered more prominent than Abraham and Isaac because he bore only fit offspring. Otherwise, the Patriarchs are considered equal to each other.

⁴⁹Vayikra Rabbah 36:5; see also Sifra Bechukotai 8:7-8; Yalkut Shimoni I 675.

Conclusion

"And the days of Isaac were [180 years]" (Genesis 35:28). With regard to Abraham "life" is written: "And these are the days of the life of Abraham who lived..." (Genesis 25:7). And similarly Jacob: "And Jacob was [in Egypt.... And the days of Jacob, the years of his life...]" (Genesis 47:28). But with regard to Isaac "life" is not said. Why is it so? R. Berechiah said: Because he was chastened from his eyes and behold, he was like one who is dead. But the rabbis say: The Holy One blessed be He sees Isaac our father, all his days, as if he were bound upon the altar.¹

After reading the rabbinic literature about Isaac, one must conclude that the rabbis too saw Isaac, all his days, as if he were bound upon the altar. From the day of his birth, the rabbis note, God advanced the end of servitude for his ancestors, because of Isaac's role in the akedah. During the famine Isaac could not go to Egypt because he would become an unfit offering. According to two explanations Isaac became blind in his old age due to his experience while bound on the altar.

However, while the rabbis consider Isaac to be the hero of the akedah, this opinion does not influence their view of the rest of his life. For example, one might expect the rabbis to enhance Isaac's role in the blessing of his sons, but they do not. At no other point in the rabbinic account of his life does Isaac express such unwavering faith in God as he does in the midrashic account of the akedah. Apart from his blindness, the rabbis do not indicate that Isaac's intense experience being bound on the altar had any influence upon his latter life. Isaac's reward for being a willing offering

¹Bereshit Rabbati 35:28 (p. 159).

is enjoyed by his descendants, who benefit from the merit of the akedah on Rosh Hashanah, and at certain times in history.

Isaac's willingness to offer himself as a sacrifice earned him the epithet "master of suffering." This title, which means that Isaac not only experienced suffering, but also overcame it, appropriately characterizes much of his life.

According to the rabbis he was a premature baby, being born during the seventh month of Sarah's pregnancy. The nations of the world claimed that Abraham and Sarah were not his parents. Some people said that Abimelech or Pharoah fathered Isaac. Others said that Hagar, not Sarah, was his mother. Still others stated that Abraham and Sarah had acquired him from the market. At the feast to celebrate his weaning Abimelech ridiculed him, calling him "puny," a description which is not challenged.

When Abraham complained to God about how much better it would be if suffering existed, God responded by initiating suffering upon Isaac. Therefore, he was weaned from affliction according to some rabbis, and from the evil inclination according to others.

Isaac's relationship with his half-brother Ishmael was also difficult. The midrash states that Ishmael hated Isaac. Ishmael's influence upon Isaac motivated Sarah to demand that Hagar be sent away with her son. According to some sources Sarah was worried that Ishmael's idol worship would be a bad influence upon Isaac. Another opinion says that Ishmael would shoot arrows at Isaac, trying to kill him while claiming that he was only playing. The rabbinic view of the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael reaches a climax when Ishmael taunts Isaac about circumcision. Unwilling to put up with Ishmael's

ridicule, Isaac --in his first remarks recorded by the rabbis-- countered Ishmael and claimed that he would offer his life at God's request. Immediately, Isaac's integrity was tested, as God asks Abraham to offer Isaac for a sacrifice. What Isaac must have considered as a casual statement suddenly becomes the cause of a major trial in his life and in the life of his father.

The akedah, and particularly the rabbinic literature which makes Isaac its hero, most clearly reflects the title "master of suffering." The ordeal must have been traumatic. When Isaac realizes that he is to be the burnt-offering, he reacts with fear and trembling. Yet he never wavers from his willingness to obey God's wish. Perhaps Isaac is considered to have mastered suffering because for the most part he does not appear to be suffering. The rabbinic literature about the akedah does not give the reader the impression that Isaac is suffering. On the contrary, he willingly and happily offers himself. Yet, he must be suffering on the inside as indicated by his initial reaction of fear and trembling. Even after he is saved by God, his ordeal continues. According to some midrashim, Isaac himself told Sarah what had happened, thereby causing and witnessing her death.

Isaac also experiences suffering in his marriage to Rebecca. She is barren for twenty years before giving birth. The rabbinic literature places the blame for their childlessness alternately upon Rebecca, Isaac, as well as both of them. Furthermore, the rabbis state that Rebecca was worthy of bearing the twelve tribes. The reader must assume that Isaac was worthy of fathering the twelve tribes. So their inability to do so, due either to Esau's wickedness

or to Rebecca's lament during her pregnancy, may have been very disappointing.

Famine is another affliction that Isaac is able to overcome. Unable to go down to Egypt, he successfully produces 100 times what he expected, according to the rabbis. His sudden wealth, however, provokes the envy of the Philistines, who stop up his father's wells and send him away. Again, Isaac is able to deal with the problem, this time by giving room to the hour. In other words, he lets the natural course of events transpire, after which the Philistines return to him.

Dealing with his wicked son Esau can also be considered an affliction. The rabbis argue that Isaac misjudged his character, and failed to chasten him, a fact which leads to his wickedness. Esau's wives also contribute to Isaac's suffering. According to one midrash he loved Esau in order to get close to him and lead him to a life of righteousness. If so, Isaac clearly failed. Indeed, Isaac may have been unable to do anything to change Esau's character. On a personal level, however, Isaac deals with Esau. Realizing that he has bestowed the blessing of the first-born upon Jacob, Isaac trembles greatly, indicating his anguish. Yet he handles the situation well, albeit with the help of God. Isaac affirms Jacob's blessing and blesses Esau appropriately. Finally, in order to prevent further suffering, Isaac sends Jacob to the house of Laban in order to escape Esau's wrath.

Blindness is one of Isaac's most serious afflictions. According to the midrash Isaac brings this affliction upon himself by telling God that when a person dies without suffering, the

measure of justice is stretched out against him. Whether Isaac is able to overcome this particular instance of suffering is unclear. Certainly he fulfills his duty of blessing his sons, although his role in this episode is unclear in the rabbinic literature. He attempts to overcome his disability by using his other senses to determine the identity of his son who comes to receive the blessing. But it remains unclear whether he realizes that Jacob is before him.

Isaac clearly deserves the title "master of suffering," not only due to his heroic role in the akedah, but because of his ability to overcome affliction at other stages of his life.

Besides this description Isaac's character is not developed with any depth by the rabbis. They claim that he, like Abraham and Jacob, kept the entire Torah, and they occasionally offer examples of specific mitzvot he fulfilled. He is referred to as a wise son, but the rabbis do not offer examples to support this description. Perhaps his most outstanding quality is a sensitivity to his fellow human beings and to his responsibilities toward God. This sensitivity is most apparent in the midrash cited in chapter eight in which Isaac is understanding of Israel's woes. Whereas Abraham and Jacob tell God that He should wipe out the Israelites because of their sins, Isaac stands up to God. He says: "Master of the Universe, are they my children and not your children? When they gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hear' before You, You called them 'My son, My first-born' (Exodus 4:22)." Isaac continues by pointing out how little they have sinned. And when the people respond to Isaac, he tells them to praise God first. According to another midrash Isaac sits at the gate of hell to save his children from

the justice of hell. Both of these midrashim demonstrate Isaac's concern for his descendants.

This sensitivity is expressed at other times in his life. On the journey to Mount Moriah Isaac comforts his father, telling him to do God's will and God will do his will. When he is bound upon the altar, Isaac tells Abraham not to inform Sarah of the akedah when she is standing on the roof or near a pit. He also is concerned about what his parents will do during the rest of their lives. He is about to be killed, yet he is concerned about his parents.

According to the rabbis Isaac, apparently hearing Hagar's cry, brings her back for Abraham to marry. Isaac's concern for the poor is expressed by the midrash which says that he sowed righteousness.

Sometimes, Isaac's sensitivity is expressed as his being worried that he has not done the correct thing. For example, following Abraham's death, Isaac wonders: "Perhaps I have not done as many good deeds as my father did. What will the Holy One blessed be He demand of me?" He was willing to offer his life, yet he is worried that he has not done enough. Isaac was also concerned when he realized that he had bestowed the blessing of the first-born upon Jacob. Only when he discovered that Jacob had obtained Esau's birthright, was Isaac satisfied that he had done the correct thing.

The rabbis clearly consider Isaac to have been a very sensitive and understanding person. He is concerned about other people, particularly about his parents. He is also concerned about whether he is fulfilling the demands which God has placed upon him.

Isaac is also quite perceptive according to the rabbis. This fact is most obvious when he realizes that he is to be the burnt-

offering before his father confirms it. At another point in the akedah Isaac asks his father whether he is a priest, again indicating that he is aware that they are not preparing for an ordinary sacrifice.

Isaac is perceptive, as well as patient, when he is told by the Philistines to leave. As mentioned above, he allows events to run their course, a fact for which he is rewarded in the end.

Finally, when he blesses his sons he appears to be quite perceptive. Lacking sight, he uses each of his other senses to determine the identity of the son before him. At one point the rabbinic material states that Isaac believes Jacob is before him because he knows that Esau would not mention God. However, after examining his son again, he blesses him. The reader remains uncertain whether the rabbis believe that Isaac thinks he is blessing Esau.

Although the relationships between Isaac and other biblical figures are not developed to a great extent by the rabbis, a number of points are worth mentioning. Isaac appears to be somewhat attached to his mother. As noted above, he expresses concern about her finding out about his death. The account of Abraham and Isaac preparing to leave for Mount Moriah in Sefer Hayashar particularly reflects an emotional attachment between mother and son. The rabbis also state that Isaac mourned for Sarah three years.

The rabbis attempt to show how Rebecca replaced Sarah in the matriarchal lineage. The most noteworthy aspect of Rebecca's relationship to Isaac is that she often tells him what to do. For example, she tells Isaac to pray for her when she is barren. She also tells Isaac to send Jacob away after he has received the blessing of the first-born.

Isaac's relationship to his father is more difficult to determine. Isaac is an obedient son; a number of midrashim about the akedah state that Isaac is obeying both the will of God and the command of his father. Isaac's concern for his father following the akedah was noted above. He realizes that his father needs companionship after Sarah's death, so he brings a wife for him. And, according to the rabbis, Isaac mourned three years --a period described as excessive-- for his father.

The rabbis appear to establish a relationship between Isaac and Pesach. The significance of his birth being on Pesach, vis-a-vis the Exodus from Egypt, is discussed in chapter one. According to the rabbis both the akedah and the blessing of his sons occurred on Pesach.² However, it remains unclear whether this fact is significant. That the akedah occurred on Pesach is mentioned but once in the literature surveyed. The blessing of the sons is said to have occurred on Pesach in order to explain why Rebecca told Jacob to bring her two kids. And the reason Isaac is said to have been born on Pesach is to attempt to reconcile various verses relating to the period of Egyptian bondage. Therefore, it is apparently only a coincidence that all three events occurred on Pesach. One assumes that the rabbis established this relationship in order to imply that Isaac was a paschal offering. However, if this was their intent, one at least expects to find many more explicit references to this relationship.

From the midrashim about Isaac the reader clearly must conclude that, to the rabbis, Isaac was much more than a link between Abraham and Jacob. The rabbis view him as a unique figure, distinct from,

²Shmot Rabbah 1:1.

and equal to Abraham and Jacob. Isaac is portrayed as a perceptive, sensitive individual whose devotion to God leads him to become a figure of heroic stature in the akedah. Isaac is particularly inspiring to the rabbis because of his ability to endure suffering and master it. He does this most dramatically during the akedah, but also many other times in his life. Perhaps the rabbis, who often faced suffering, identified themselves with Isaac and interpreted his life in such a way as to establish an inspirational paradigm for themselves. In any case, they clearly indicate their admiration for Isaac by referring to him as "master of suffering," a title which accurately encapsulates the rabbinic view of Isaac.

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