

PARASHAH TWENTY-FOUR

Genesis 26:12–35; Isaiah 65:23–66:8; Romans 9:6-18

notes by Tim Hegg

Covenant Blessings in a Fallen World

The narrative contained in our *parashah* continues the story of Isaac, and the manner in which the Almighty secures the covenant blessings to him as the chosen offspring of Abraham. Like many nomads of the Ancient Near East, Isaac engaged in short-term agriculture. The opening verse indicates that Isaac “sowed in the land and reaped that same year a hundredfold.” More than likely he planted winter wheat in October-November, which would be harvested in May-June. The hundredfold notice indicates that for every bushel of seed he planted, he reaped 100 bushels at harvest time. This was no doubt well above the expected average, and sets up the narrative message that God was the One Who, in accordance with His promised covenant blessings, was bringing abundance to Isaac—“Adonai blessed him.”

In like manner, the *parashah* ends with a notice of just the opposite in regard to Esau: his life of wickedness signals that he is not the recipient of God’s blessing, and instead, his actions produce grief for his parents. Thus, the section is framed by notices in relationship to the covenant God made with Abraham. The blessings of the covenant are extended to those of God’s choosing. Esau is clearly not a covenant member.

The story continues to describe the great wealth and influence that Isaac possessed. The Hebrew simply states that he grew great (גָּדַל, *gadal*) and kept on growing in greatness. His flocks and herds increased, as did his household, so much so that he was envied by his neighbors, the Philistines. This has been the common response throughout the ages when God blesses His chosen people. Even today, the ownership of the Land is continually disputed by Israel’s enemies. But God will not be overcome. His faithfulness to the word He has spoken is sure, and His covenant with Abraham endures.

The tactics of the Philistines has not changed in millennia either. While the King of the Philistines, Abimelech, had given an edict that no one was to touch or harm Isaac and his family, he could not control the subversive terrorism of the people. Abraham had dug wells, and named them, indicating a rightful ownership over them. And Isaac continued to claim ownership by re-digging them and giving them the same property names used by Abraham. Obviously, in the desert wells are a necessity of life. And the seasonal floods would overflow the wells, depositing silt and sand. This is why many wells were stone lined, so that they could easily be re-dug after the seasonal rains. Yet in Isaac’s situation, the Philistines would shovel the silt and sand back into the wells, making them unusable during the dry season.

Since Abimelech could not promise to control (or personally did not want to control) the actions of individual nomads within his region, he asks Isaac to leave. Without any further word, Isaac moves his family to Gerar, which was just south of the established boarder of Canaan, and thus out of the jurisdiction of Abimelech. His father Abraham had also inhabited this region (21:34) where he dug wells and named them for legal purposes. Isaac re-digs the wells, applying their original names to show his right of inheritance. In the course of re-digging the wells, his men find an old well fed by a subterranean spring. In its original excavation it was no doubt lined with stone, and it was therefore not a difficult task to restore its usefulness. Since the history of

its ownership had been lost, it was considered ownerless and therefore the right of whomever would recover it. Still, the shepherds of Gerar lay claim to it. Significantly, they do not assert the right of the king, showing that the well's location lay outside of his royal domain.

One cannot help but make an application to the present day. After the Jewish people were expelled from the Land, it was decimated and essentially destroyed. The Land reverted to a barren waste, so much so that a traveller like Samuel Clemens declared it the “most God-forsaken land on the earth.” When the Jewish people began to return and rebuild the Land, however, suddenly everyone wants it! The same is true in our story: it is only after Isaac and his men restore the wells to their proper use that suddenly the shepherds of the place want them! Hirsch appropriately interprets the shepherd's complaint this way: “Yes, you dug the well; the hole belongs to you, but the water is ours!”

Once again, Isaac complies without protest. He names the well עֵשֶׂק, *Esek*, meaning “contention.” Though the word is not found elsewhere in the Tanach, it is commonly used in rabbinic literature in connection with a disputed title to ownership (b.*Ketubah* 93a; b.*Bava Kama* 9a; b.*Bava Metzia* 14a). He leaves the well for the shepherds, and digs another well, naming it שִׁטְנָה, *Sitnah*, meaning “to show hostility” (cf. Ezra 4:6). Isaac moves again, digs yet another well, and names it רְחֹבוֹת, *Rehovot*, from the root meaning “wide,” “extensive.” Finally Isaac had found sufficient open space to dwell without immediate reprisal from the people of the region.

We are struck in this story at how much Isaac strove for peace, even with those who were his enemies. Surely he was many in number, and had wealth on his side. Yet he did all in his power to prevent conflict. One is reminded of the Psalmist's statement, “I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war” (Ps 120:7). In the current middle-east situation, it seems that the more Israel seeks for peace, the more her enemies engage in war.

In the end, Isaac's efforts at abiding peacefully with his neighbors would not bring lasting peace. Isaac leaves the area and returns to Beersheba where he had dwelt with his father after the Mt. Moriah episode. As the narrative makes clear, his only hope (and ours) is in the abiding presence of the Almighty. Whether it was because of Isaac's fear that his enemies would once again come against him, or if it was because Isaac himself had grown weary in the struggle, Adonai appears to him to reaffirm the covenant and its blessings.

The language used in vv. 24ff incorporates similar elements of the language employed when God appeared to Abraham in chapters 15 and 17. God begins by saying “I am the God of your father—do not fear.” The language is emphatic: אֲנִי וְאֵלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיךָ, “I, and no one else, am the God of Abraham your father.” God's faithfulness to Isaac is tied to the promise He had made to Abraham. “Do not fear:” Isaac's fear would only be overcome by putting his faith in the promise of God, in the word that He had spoken. “I am with you” (כִּי־אִתְּךָ אֲנִי), where “with you” is thrown to the front of the clause for emphasis. God is specifically “with” Isaac, because He has determined to bless him. “If God is for us, who can stand against us?” (Rom 8:31).

Then God reiterates the blessings of the covenant: “I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham.” Here Abraham is identified as “the servant of God,” the first such designation in the Torah. Besides the patriarchs, only Moses, Caleb, and David are identified in similar fashion as “My Servant” (cf. Num 12:7; 14:24; 2Sam 3:18, etc.). Isaiah applies this same designation to Israel as a whole, and to the Messiah in particular. The significance of the title becomes clear by the description of Caleb: “He was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me” (Num 14:24).

The blessings come upon Isaac “for the sake of My servant Abraham.” The Sages derive from this that the merits of the fathers secure blessings upon the subsequent generations, and in measure, this is true. For the blessings upon the fathers derive from the covenant made with them, and secure the blessing to their seed. Thus, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable“ (Rom 11:29). Yet God is not willing to bless the unrighteous, and so it is that in every generation, those who cling to the promise of God, and by faith enter the covenant with the all-present God, receive the promised blessings. “Not everyone descended from Israel is Israel” (Rom 9:6).

The peace afforded to Isaac through his continual wanderings is short-lived. God’s blessing upon him unnerves Abimelech. Isaac has grown too powerful, and thus the king approaches him to make a covenant of non-aggression. Even the king sees the evident hand of God upon Isaac! As the king and his companions approach, Isaac questions their intent. Abimelech had given the edict that no one was to harm Isaac and his family, and surely they were not coming to pay a friendly visit! They had only been hostile to Isaac in the past. They therefore make it clear that they are seeking a treaty of non-aggression, but their reasoning rings hollow: “make a pact with us that you will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you.” Clearly the treaty is self-serving for Abimelech, for he boasts that in spite of the trouble caused Isaac, no harm befell him! Even though it is evident that Isaac’s welfare was by the protection of God, Abimelech takes credit for it.

Once again, Isaac is seen as peace-loving. He prepares a covenant meal, and in the morning, the treaty is ratified. Isaac and his family will enjoy peace for a time.

The episode ends with the finding of yet another well, and the fact that it was on the same day as the oath taking, appears to give substance to the well’s name, though there is a subtle play on terms. The well is called Shiba (שִׁבָּעָה) which means “seven,” but it incorporates the same consonants as the verb “to take an oath” (שָׁבַע, *shava’*). In 21:30f Abraham and Abimelech make oaths together, which incorporates seven lambs. Thus, the word “seven” and the verb “to make an oath” (which share the same consonants) provide the meaning of the name, Beersheba, “well of seven lambs that were the sacrifice in the oath-taking.” Isaac, in renaming the place with the name given by Abraham, establishes his rightful claim to it, but also reaffirms the oath that he and Abimelech had taken.

The *haftarah* portion was no doubt chosen by the Sages to emphasize the divine hand in bringing about Israel’s blessing. The opening line, “they will not labor in vain” most likely reminded the teachers of old that though Isaac had met with much resistance from his neighbors, God blessed him nonetheless, increasing his flocks and his family: “For they are the offspring of those blessed by Adonai, and their descendants with them.” But the prophet Isaiah takes the issue of blessing to its fullest extreme, for in the last days, Israel will be blessed as a nation, being brought forth by the sovereign hand of the Almighty. Even animals that might otherwise prey upon them will be turned to docile vegetarians. No harm will be done in all of God’s holy mountain, meaning Mt. Zion, the place of the Temple and God’s visible glory in the *Shekinah*. Here, the divine presence of God and the safety and peace that accompanies His presence, is assured.

But Israel was not to think that God was somehow confined to the Temple! He was never in need of a place to dwell. Rather, He willingly chose to manifest His presence in the very place where the method of His salvation was constantly portrayed in the sacrifice of an innocent victim on behalf of sinners. But God does not need an elaborate Temple in which to manifest His presence—this He is willing to do within the life of a humble individual, one who trembles as His

word: “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Is 66:2). The metaphor of God “looking” is that of showing favor, even as the priestly benediction enjoins. When God “lifts His countenance” upon a person, He has granted that one a revelation of Himself, which is the greatest of all possessions.

But in Isaiah’s day, the nation was not characterized by humility before the Lord. Their stubborn willingness to trust in foreign powers rather than to trust in God was evidence of their lack of genuine faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For in the same way that He appeared to the patriarchs and revealed His lovingkindness to them, so He was willing to guard and bless the nation of their offspring—yet they resisted His will. Yeshua Himself laments the wayward life of the nation: “How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matt 23:37).

Yet God’s purpose to bless Israel will not be thwarted, even by her unbelief, for by His own sovereign power He will birth her anew in the day of her salvation: “Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation be brought forth all at once? As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth her sons” (Is 66:8). Indeed, God will bring His people to Himself, removing the heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh upon which will be written His Torah, and then she will walk in His ways, and bring Him glory.

This message of promised redemption is surely what Paul has in mind in the larger section from which the Apostolic reading is taken. Having proclaimed that no one whom God has chosen could ever be lost from His love (Rom 8:35ff), Paul turns his attention to wayward Israel. His point is that the hard heart of unbelief that she presently portrays, especially in the rejection of God’s Messiah, is only temporary—there is coming a time when Israel as a whole will be saved (Rom 11:25-26). In the meantime, however, Paul wants us to remember that mere physical lineage, i.e., “Jewish status,” is not enough to guarantee right standing before God. And he uses Isaac and Ishmael, as well as Jacob and Esau as his proof. All of these were the direct offspring of the patriarchs to whom the covenant promises of God had been given. Yet Isaac was blessed with the covenant, while Ishmael was not. Likewise, Jacob is chosen for the covenant, but Esau is not. Our Torah portion makes this very clear: God specifically blesses Isaac, but Esau is allowed to go his own way.

What is Paul’s point in bringing these illustrations to bear upon his subject? Simply that God’s blessing is not something anyone can demand, but is a matter of His sovereign and eternal mercies. One’s physical lineage cannot lay claim to God, nor does one’s own good works secure His eternal favor. And even though the obedience of parents may bring blessing upon their children, in the end it is God’s hand of mercy in each person’s life that brings that one into covenant fellowship.

It was God’s awesome sovereignty that caused the Apostle Paul to break into a full doxology at the end of his treatise on Israel:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33ff).