



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Toldot 5774

By Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster

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As an activist, learning about the work of previous generations can be inspiring—and terrifying. I begin to wonder if I will ever be able to accomplish what the leaders of eras past did, or be willing to take the same risks. For example, when I was in elementary and middle school, the fight to end South African apartheid was often in the news and many of the young activists were not much older than I was. I remember thinking: “What would I be able to do to show such strong moral leadership and live up to their example?”

I imagine that the patriarch Isaac felt the same anxiety, as he is often seen as living in the shadow of his father. Abraham was a trail-blazer, taking his clan to a new land to establish a monotheistic religion and forming an everlasting covenant with God to found a new nation. He did not leave a lot of space for the son born to him late in life, Isaac, to do more than continue his legacy—much as the achievements of earlier activists can feel limiting to today’s aspiring leaders.

Yet our awe for these accomplishments is often tinged with disappointment when we find that our predecessors’ work was left unfinished. We sometimes feel as though we’re fighting the same battles, still struggling for a renewed and repaired world despite their best efforts. In *Parashat Toldot*, Isaac experiences this frustration, discovering that some of his father’s achievements were not fully realized. In one example, a conflict over the digging of wells that Abraham had attempted to resolve in his day reignites when Isaac comes to dwell in the same land. Abraham’s tenuous treaty with the local Philistine king, Abimelech, collapses when Isaac begins to prosper, and the Philistines stop up the wells that Abraham had dug, forcing Isaac from the land.¹

I can understand how Isaac, re-entangled in a conflict of the past, might be discouraged, tempted to give up on finding his own resolution. Indeed, at first he tries to avoid conflict by moving—three times—to dig new wells, comforting himself with the thought that God has blessed everyone with a lot of space in which to live.²

But when the quarrel over water follows him to Beer-sheba, God appears, launching a turning point for Isaac: “I am the God of your father Abraham,” God says. “Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring...”³ The blessing, simultaneously invoking the greatness of his father and foreseeing Isaac’s future as his own man, gives Isaac the courage to secure the lasting peace that Abraham failed to achieve. When Abimelech later comes to meet him with an entourage, Isaac, backed by God’s assurance of support, has the strength to confront the Philistine king about his harassment: “Why have you come to me now, seeing that you have been hostile to me?”⁴ Stunned by Isaac’s directness, Abimelech is forced to recognize God’s hand in Isaac’s prosperity, and swears a treaty

¹ Genesis 21:25 and 26:18-22.

² Genesis 26: 19-22.

³ Genesis 26:24.

⁴ Genesis 26:27.

between them that holds for future generations. The Torah underscores that the conflict has been finally put to rest: While Abimelech and Abraham merely parted ways after their treaty⁵ Isaac and Abimelech depart “in peace.”⁶

Just as Isaac had to finish the work left behind by the patriarch Abraham, we too often find that previous generations of iconic activists left us to resolve some of the greatest problems of global injustice, even after their groundbreaking achievements. Despite the freedoms gained by the historic fall of apartheid, South Africa today still faces tremendous xenophobia⁷ and racism,⁸ with many black citizens still living in abject poverty,⁹ marginalized in shantytowns and slums. We see this tension elsewhere too: Tremendous strides were made during the 1970s to reduce the number of people around the world who were hungry and malnourished, but in recent years, the commoditization of staple foods and the collapse of local agricultural systems have led to a world where more than 1 in 7 people are chronically food insecure.¹⁰ In many countries, thanks to the work of grassroots feminist organizations, the rights of women continue to advance; but many women around the world still face gender discrimination, and sexual violence is increasingly being used as a weapon of intimidation in armed conflicts.¹¹

We have inherited an awe-inspiring legacy as well as profound problems left unresolved. Our task, like Isaac’s, is not to be intimidated by our predecessors’ renown, nor discouraged by the challenges they left behind. God’s blessing inspired Isaac to move the story forward despite the barriers, to find sustainable solutions to the problems that were left for his generation. It is up to us find the inspiration and confidence in our day to pick up where our predecessors left off, and to strive to leave the world “in peace.”



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This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2009.

⁵ Genesis 21: 32.

⁶ Genesis 26: 31.

⁷ Madondo, Tafadzwa T. “South Africa: Xenophobia Déjà vu and Human Rights in South Africa.” *Pambazuka News*. 7 October 2009. <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/59294>

⁸ Malala, Justice. “South Africa: Racism runs deep.” *BBC News*. 30 August 2000. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/903379.stm>

⁹ “South Africa poverty ‘emergency.’” *BBC News*. 23 October 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7685253.stm>

¹⁰ “Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up.” *AJWS*. http://ajws.org/hunger/campaign_at_a_glance.pdf

¹¹ Kelemen, Michelle. “In War Zones, Rape Is A Powerful Weapon.” *NPR*. 21 October 2009.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=114001201>

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