

Souls with Cracks Complete Each Other

Abraham and Isaac's Divine paths each have their dangers, but they find solace when bound together.

The forefathers and mothers are central figures in our lives, not only because of their biological contribution to the Jewish nation, but primarily because of the spiritual themes they embody. Each of our ancestors lived their lives according to his or her inner Divine calling. Their relevance to us is in those enduring ideas.

Therefore, when the Torah recounts the story of their lives, its main concern is to reveal their souls to us—their core personalities. These episodes are replete with allusions to their respective paths; if we pay close attention, we will find the imprint of those ideals on every detail of their recorded activity.

The Roads to Heaven...

Love and fear, or kindness and severity. Those are the cornerstones of any devout individual; any act—of man or G-d—is driven by one, or both, of those forces.

A constant flow of giving, is “kindness.” *The world was built with G-d's kindness,*¹ says the Psalmist, because creation of anything, and certainly a world, entails a full outpouring of the self. Unmitigated, non-judgmental openness is the hallmark of anything associated with this Divine attribute.

Attention to detail is one way of understanding “severity.” G-d's severity approaches with caution, parses the details of the scene, and makes a judgment on what it finds. Unlike kindness, severity is not an open channel; it is a closely guarded one. Sensible restriction is an outcome of severity. The Hebrew word for severity, *gevurah*, thus connotes force, power, and dominance. For censoring the expression of oneself is an act of force. It requires restraint, much like a dam must be stoic to withhold a surging stream.

To serve G-d with kindness means to approach Him with abandon. In every circumstance, one seeks to expose the Divine; in every encounter, to educate another of G-d's supremacy. There is little thought given to process and patience—of where one's energy is appropriate, and what is the most sensitive

¹ Psalms 89:3.

way to approach. The person who “loves” G-d is possessed with the urgent desire to invite Him, everywhere, all the time.

Conversely, one who “fears” G-d is focused on perfection. He, too, is eager to enrich his life and those of his fellows with Divine awareness, but he demands an honest journey. Not everyone and not everywhere is suited or prepared to respond to G-d. The G-d-fearing person is exacting, and will only work with those who are earnest and sincere in their spiritual lives. In his own life as well, he is methodical—careful in his ascendancy to G-d. Every step is measured to see whether he is ready for this advance.

...Have Potholes Too

However, these same impulses that guide one’s Divine service can also be employed for profane purposes.² Uninhibited openness in the hands of a lesser person can lead to a profligate life. The willingness to encounter G-d everywhere can be inverted to a willingness to probe every enticement the world offers. And the measured reserve that charts a disciplined approach to G-d, can instead evolve into elemental harshness. In place of using caution as a tool for progress, it becomes a weapon of evil.

Yet, in their unholy counterparts kindness remains salvageable, while severity does not. The descent into excess is still fueled by a general congeniality—his regrettable decisions come out of his unbounding zest for life. Therefore, that passion can again be steered towards holy pursuits.

Severity gone wrong is a much more difficult thing to correct. Placed outside the context of Divine service, severity is just that—a cruel, unrelenting attitude. Once a person shuts the gates of his soul to his fellows, how can he be extracted from that cocoon?

That is why Kabbalistic and Chasidic texts warn the individual to incorporate both kindness and severity in their Divine service. Each person acts in accordance with their dominant trait, but must make use of the other to maintain balance. Kindness’ encompassing arms can benefit from severity’s restraint, but most important is what Kabbalah calls the “sweetening of severity.” If the full intensity of the person’s demanding approach is left unchecked, it is not a long

² For the following, see *Or Hatorah, Beresheit*, vol. 1, p. 93.

way from becoming pure hostility. When severity is warmed by the touch of kindness, it becomes a tenable path.

Abraham and Isaac

Here, we will examine the lives of Abraham and his son Isaac. As the first two patriarchs, they embody those fundamental traits of Divine service—love and fear. Abraham was possessed by kindness and served G-d with love.³ Isaac was cautious and severe; he served G-d with awe and respect.⁴

There are obvious indications of their personalities in the broad strokes of their narratives. Abraham's open tent, his large entourage of devotees who he *caused to call out the name of the Lord*,⁵ his readiness to sacrifice himself for the good of others, are all shining examples of his kind nature and his loving approach to G-d. Isaac, however, never left the land of Israel in search of others to draw close; he lived an introverted life, intensely focused on his and his family's spiritual welfare.

R. Levi Yitzchak descends past these generalities to the granular level of the stories to illustrate how these ideas are expressed in every single detail the Torah offers. In these items, he finds allusions to kindness, severity, and the interplay between them.

Balanced Diet

Abraham sat by his tent, under the midday sun, looking for desert nomads to invite into his home. The three men who appeared were angels in the guise of men, but Abraham served them anyway. *"Let me fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves,"* he says.⁶ The Torah details the lavish feast he and Sarah prepared, and then concludes, *He waited on them under the tree, as they ate.*⁷

Isaac feuded with Abimelech, King of the Philistines, and his servants, over water Isaac had discovered near Gerar, the seat of the monarchy. But, as Isaac grew wealthier with the blessings of G-d, Abimelech and his people thought it wise to reconcile. They approached and offered a truce. Isaac accepted, and

³ See Zohar I, 47b; *Maamarei Admur Hazaken, Parshiyot*, vol. 2, p. 580.

⁴ See *Pardes*, 22:4; *Maamarei Admur Hazaken*, *ibid.*

⁵ Genesis 21:33; *Sotah* 10a.

⁶ Genesis 18:5

⁷ *Ibid.*, verse 8.

invited them to a meal to mark their friendship: *So he made a feast for them, and they ate and drank.*⁸

The crucial detail here is the Torah's description of the meal. At Abraham's feast, the guests "ate"; at Isaac's, they "ate and drank."

A truism: Food and drink are the staples of human existence, but the roles they play in sustaining the body and aiding its growth are different. Food is our main source of energy. Water dissolves and breaks apart its life-giving nutrients so they can be absorbed into the body. Food and water are life, yes, but to be more precise, food provides while water enables.

The physical reality is a reflection of its spiritual counterpart. A basic exercise of Kabbalah is to define items in our world according to their Divine sources. The distinction between food and drink mirrors the contrast between Divine kindness and Divine severity.

Food, Kabbalah says, represents kindness. It is the great, torrential life-giving force. Water, on the other hand, is severity. It, too, is intent on providing, but it does so through breaking apart a sum into its particulars.

This mystical framing of food and drink breathes life into some otherwise prosaic laws. Rabban Gamliel was once traveling with R. Ila'i, when he spotted a loaf of bread on the side of the road. "Pick up that loaf, Ila'i," he said, and they continued their journey.⁹ The Talmud relates this story and draws the conclusion that it is forbidden to pass by neglected food and not retrieve it. In another discussion about meal etiquette, the Talmud rules that "one may not drink water publicly."¹⁰

With the Kabbalist's metaphorical eye, these guidelines on how to treat food and drink are unearthed as lessons on how to employ kindness and its foil. Generosity, it was said, is never truly the wrong choice. Even if it may veer towards unhealthy habits, it remains, at its core, a positive force that can always be refitted to holy pursuits. When encountering bread, therefore, we are urged to take it. When the opportunity for kindness arises, it is forbidden to turn away without seizing that chance to act kindly. Restriction, however, despite being a

⁸ Ibid. 26:30

⁹ *Erubin* 64b.

¹⁰ *Bechorot* 44b.

powerful way to advance spiritually, can be corrupted by those not seeking a Divinely edifying life. A “public space” is one way of referring to an environment hostile to the G-dly. Its bursting multiplicity, its welcoming of every strain of humanity—both coarse and gentle—is in direct opposition to the unity expected in a G-dly space. “Do not drink water in a public space” is an exhortation to not preach the method of severity to those unprepared to understand its utility. If “water’s” power to break down and limit were to be unleashed to the public, it would result in devastation in place of growth.

To return to the forefather’s repasts: Abraham, the uninhibited giver, serves a meal that features bread and food, while water is conspicuously absent. This is not to say that he didn’t offer water; there was surely drink available. But the Torah chooses to describe the meal in a certain way to reflect Abraham’s way of life. When he sustains others with spiritual guidance, he does so without restraint, without the “water” that curbs his exuberant openness.

In Isaac’s meal, on the other hand, water is prominent. Because when he brings the uninitiated into his sphere of influence, he does not overwhelm them with the surging life represented by bread and food. He appraises them, and then offers what he deems fit—like the thoroughness of water and its minimalistic method.

A Binding of Love

The most dramatic tale of the lives of Abraham and Isaac is certainly the Binding of Isaac.¹¹ G-d appears to Abraham and commands him to do the impossible—to offer his most precious son as a sacrifice. It is to test his resolve, his faith in the G-d he discovered. Abraham does not hesitate. He saddles his donkey, takes Isaac and two servants, and heads for a mountain in the Land of Moriah. Isaac is originally ignorant of his father’s intention. As they near their destination, Abraham gathers wood and a knife, but no sheep. Isaac asks his father what they intend to sacrifice, “*G-d will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son,*” he answers.¹² The heavy implication is clear to Isaac; he is to be the offering. But, the same verse testifies, *The two of them walked on together*. Together—the Midrash says—in heart.¹³ Isaac willingly and happily proceeded. Father and son reach the

¹¹ Genesis ch. 22.

¹² Ibid., verse 8.

¹³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 56:4.

mountain top; Abraham arranges the pyre, binds his son on it, and raises his knife. But an angel of G-d intervenes and explains that G-d never desired a dead Isaac, he merely wanted to see the depth of Abraham's faith. Abraham's eyes fall on a ram caught in a thicket—he understands that he is to offer it in Isaac's stead. This he did. Then he and Isaac returned home.

Beneath this episode's obvious themes of faith and sacrifice, is a mystical reading of kindness' tempering of severity. Abraham, kindness incarnate, is commanded to bind and slaughter Isaac, the representative of severity. It is an inversion of the classic way this story is read. Instead of seeing Isaac as the passive object of Abraham's experiment in faith, the focus is turned to Isaac. He undergoes the profound transformation; the ordeal is designed with his perfection in mind, not Abraham's.

The symbolism is present throughout the story: The ropes that restrain Isaac evoke the limits we must put to severity. And the life-blood drawn by the slaughterer's knife alludes to the taming of the immensity of severity—its raw strength. Isaac's substitute for the sacrifice—the ram in the thicket—is intended to resemble his identity. Its brute force does this effectively; the ram is Isaac. When Isaac learns of his impending fate, he and Abraham "proceed together," because Isaac understands the need to subject himself to the kindness of Abraham. He appreciates that severity alone can be appropriated by evil forces, and that his father's tenderness can pry open his soul, mellowing his intimidating presence.

Until this pivotal moment, Isaac remained faithful to his instinctive spiritual voice. His demanding nature was never compromised. And so Isaac is not referred to as Abraham's son until after the binding. G-d promises Abraham, "*Your wife, Sarah, will have a son.*"¹⁴ He is not Abraham's child—not when he evinces no affinity for his commitment to kindness. Once he rises from there, however, he can be identified as his father's son. After the binding, Abraham sends his servant, Eliezer, to find a wife for Isaac. When Eliezer asks permission from Rebecca's family to take her as a wife for Isaac, he is told, "*Let her be a wife to your master's son.*"¹⁵ Finally, he is Abraham's child.

¹⁴ Genesis 18:10.

¹⁵ Ibid. 24:51.

It was not Isaac alone who left the mountaintop a changed man. Abraham, through his interaction with Isaac, assimilated his son's caution within himself. As he lifts his knife over his son, the angel declares, "*Now I know that you fear G-d.*"¹⁶ The experience forced Abraham to access a fear of G-d, a self-censorship that would mute his inner protests and allow him to fulfill G-d's command. The main narrative, though, remains Isaac's. It is his transformation that is most crucial, and most notable.

Wells

Abraham's need of Isaac is articulated in a different portion of his life. While dwelling in Gerar, the land of the Philistines and King Abimelech, Abraham and his servants dug wells of water.¹⁷ After Abraham's death, the Philistines choked the wells with earth; they were now useless. Years passed. A famine once again struck the Land of Canaan, driving Isaac to Gerar, where he found immediate success and grew wealthy. He then turned his attention to what would become his life's preoccupation—well digging. *Isaac dug anew the wells that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham...he gave them the same names that his father had given them.*¹⁸

To whom do these reinvented wells belong? Are they Abraham's wells, rediscovered by Isaac? Or are they Isaac's, the one who saved them from being lost to history? R. Levi Yitzchak asserts that they are to be seen as Abraham's wells.¹⁹ Isaac's contribution is in their preservation.

Water, it was said, represents the meticulousness of severity. But that interpretation is drawn from water's role in the human body. Its effect on digestion is what links it to caution. A broader assessment of water yields the notion that it is an allusion to kindness. If kindness is a gushing stream of giving and acceptance, then water, which comes to us in voluble rivers and effusive

¹⁶ Ibid. 22:12.

¹⁷ Ibid. 21:25-30.

¹⁸ Ibid. 26:18.

¹⁹ R. Levi Yitzchak's opinion is stated in the context of a problematic passage in the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* (III, 284b) writes: "Three things stand as a testimony; they are, Isaac's well...the Scriptural source for Isaac's well is the verse (Genesis 21:30), *In order that it be to me for a witness that I dug this well.*" That verse, however, records Abraham's words to Abimelech, not Isaac's. How can the *Zohar* borrow a verse speaking of Abraham's well to support its assertion about Isaac's well? It is this question that R. Levi Yitzchak addresses, positing that the well in the verse is indeed Abraham's—but it can also be referred to as Isaac's due to his protective role.

downpours, is synonymous with kindness. Yet, when water is discovered in the earth, new definitions arise. Beneath the earth lie surging springs, but the layers of rock and sediment suffocate these springs. This challenge invites the well-digger. He attacks the stubborn earth with spades, vigorously upending its obstacles in search of life.

So, does the frenetic search for water point to kindness' hunger of giving? Or, does the patient persistence of the well-digger, his insistence on working towards a meaningful discovery—not just immediate enlightenment—remind us of severity's approach? The answer, of course, is both. Well-digging can allude both to the kind soul and the severe one.

Abraham's wells are a testament to his passionate sharing of G-d's love. The waters he uncovers are kind waters. They brim with exuberance; they are offered to everyone. Recall, though, that exuberance stripped of its G-dly focus becomes decadence. Abraham's death marks the departure of that Divine foundation. Who comes to fill the void? The Philistines. The word for "Philistines" also means a thoroughfare—signaling a brazen openness. The Talmud categorizes that nation as a frivolous people.²⁰ When Samson is taken captive, they summon him to *make sport for us*.²¹ Gerar is a sensuous land, a rollicking hub of profane generosity. In the absence of Abraham's steadying influence, his wells are stopped up by his spiritual foils—the Philistines.

Isaac's wells, however, are solemn journeys of self-perfection. He does not wish to impose Divine awareness on others. With assiduous effort and exacting honesty, Isaac hopes to guide them to the realization that G-dly waters reside in their souls.

Abraham went to the earth with a fixation on its waters; Isaac went with an appreciation of the process.

Arriving in Gerar, Isaac finds his father's contribution to be corrupted. His wells of proliferating Divinity are clogged. In their place is a rotting society of unrestrained indulgence. To repair what has been lost, Isaac must provide his contribution—reserve and restriction. He digs again what his father had dug, but with his stamp of censorship. His trepidation coats his father's unrestrained love,

²⁰ *Avodah Zarah* 19a.

²¹ Judges 16:25.

and allows it to give freely, while protected from waywardness by the caution that is its foundation.

Once he re-dug those wells, Isaac *gave them the same names that his father had given them*, because they are not Isaac's wells; he will embark on his own unique search for water at a later point. They are Abraham's loving wells, furnished with Isaac's measured calm.

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And so, with these three expositions, R. Levi Yitzchak discovers the presence of kindness and severity in otherwise unremarkable events. The description of Abraham's and Isaac's respective meals unveils their different spiritual aspirations; Abraham's binding of his son on the mountain is a reminder of the need to temper severity's force, and Isaac's opening of his father's lost wells alludes to the stiffening of benevolence that, in the end, allows it to give without fear of corruption.

Balanced Diet—*adapted from Torat Levi Yitzchak, pp. 196, 252, 424 ff.*

A Binding of Love—*adapted from Likkutei Levi Yitzchak, Bereishit, p. 199; Torat Levi Yitzchak, pp. 292, 367; Likkutei Levi Yitzchak, Likkutim al Pesukei Tanach Umaamarei Chazal, p. 15 ff.*

Wells—*adapted from Likkutei Levi Yitzchak, Shemot-Devarim, p. 460, and Likkutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 118-121*