

ISAAC'S PERSONALITY AND THE MEANING OF *LA-SU'AH BA-SADEH*

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While the story of the patriarch Isaac appears in parts of Genesis chapters 21-28, he often shares the narrative spotlight with other important biblical figures. The verses featuring Isaac as the sole protagonist are few, but if we want to get a clear picture of Isaac's personality, each of these must be analyzed carefully. One such verse describes what Isaac was doing just before Rebekah arrived. We are told that *Isaac went out la-su'ah ba-sadeh toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching* (Gen. 24:63). What was Isaac's purpose in going out in the field (*sadeh*) toward evening? Why was it significant for the Bible to describe what Isaac was doing when Rebekah arrived?¹ What exactly was Isaac doing in the field? It is not clear, since the verb *la-su'ah* occurs only here. What we do know is that it was in this context that Rebekah first saw Isaac, creating her first impression of him. Whatever Isaac was doing at that moment was formative in developing Rebekah's view of her future husband.

ISAAC WAS PRAYING

The most popular rabbinic interpretation of this phrase is that the term denotes prayer, as in Psalms 102:1, *A prayer for the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea [yishpokh siho] before the Lord*. The verb *si'ah* means "to talk" and in that understanding it means "to talk to God." This exegetical approach is found in TB *Berakhot* 26b, where the verse in Genesis is understood to describe Isaac's creation of the afternoon service. This approach also appears in *Genesis Rabbah* 60:14 and, subsequently, in the commentaries of R. Saadiah Gaon, Rabbenu Hananel, Rashi, Ralbag, Sforno, and later Shadal, as well as in the translations of Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan. The term *si'ah* in the sense of conversing is not found anywhere else in the Pentateuch. It is a common term in Psalms and Job, but unique in the Torah,

hence most non-midrashic interpreters reject the "prayer" interpretation.

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Isaac is often portrayed as passive, being brought by Abraham as a sacrifice, and being tricked in his old age by his wife Rebekah and son Jacob. Even when he is active, his actions mirror those of his father, Abraham: digging wells, leaving to escape famine, claiming that his wife is his sister, etc.² According to the view that Isaac went out in the field to pray, here too he is continuing a tradition of Abraham found in the Midrash, that of prayer, and in fact TB *Berakhot* 26b understands that just as Abraham instituted the morning service, here Isaac created the afternoon service.

There is a possible clue in the narrative that Isaac was out in the field engaged in lonely meditation. In Genesis 24:62 we are told that *Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi before he went out la-su'ah basadeh*. What is the significance of the place he came from? Beer-lahai-roi is an emotionally charged location; it is the well where the angel appeared to Hagar after she fled from Sarah's harsh treatment, where she was informed of the upcoming birth and destiny of her unborn son who would be named Ishmael (Gen. 16:14). While it is not clear from the text what exactly Isaac was doing when he visited that particular well, it was evidently a place that held great meaning and complicated associations for him. The fact that it is specifically mentioned here, before we are told that Isaac *went out la-su'ah basadeh*, lends itself to an interpretation that Isaac was engaged in deep thought or prayer.

Based on this approach, Rebekah first met Isaac when he was deep in prayer. R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv), in his *Ha'amek Davar* commentary to Genesis 24:65, explains that this first impression, seeing Isaac as a holy figure and feeling herself unworthy, drove a wedge between the two, so that Rebekah felt she could not communicate freely and as an equal with Isaac. Whether we accept this psychological insight or not, there was certainly a clash of two cultures when Rebekah first saw Isaac. Here was a woman of pagan origin encountering a monotheistic believer engaged in solitary worship. This moment completes and emphasizes the break between Rebekah and her former life in Padan-Aram.

ISAAC WAS PLANTING

The other common approach, found among the less midrashically-oriented interpreters, is that the phrase has something to do with the noun *si'ah*, mean-

ing a shrub, as in Genesis 2:5: *no shrub of the field* [si'ah ha-sadeh] *was yet on earth*. According to Rashbam, the verse indicates that Isaac went out to plant in the field and check the vegetation growing there.³ He considers this approach to be the *peshat*, the plain meaning of the verse, since in the phrase *la-su'ah ba-sadeh* the word *la-su'ah* is juxtaposed with *sadeh* (field); likewise, *si'ah* as a singular noun only occurs once in the Pentateuch (Gen. 2:5), where it clearly means "shrub".⁴ Genesis 24:63 appears to be using the same phrase as Genesis 2:5. Now if the word *la-su'ah* in the case of Isaac means "to plant", it has a very similar meaning in both verses, but if it means "to talk" or "pray", we have two completely different usages of similar sounding phrases in two completely different contexts.

Assuming that the reference is to planting, we have here a verse that tells of Isaac working in agriculture – an occupation unique among the Patriarch. While Abraham also engaged in husbandry, since he *planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord* (Gen. 21:33), Abraham's planting was a religious act, like establishing a monument, whereas Isaac engaged in simple farming. We are told that during his stay in Gerar, *Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year* (Gen. 26:12). This was not a complete break with Abraham's lifestyle, since Isaac had herds as well (e.g., Gen. 26:20), and pastoral nomads at the time engaged in some forms of agriculture.⁵ However, it did not typify Abraham or Jacob, only Isaac.

This connection with the land is also evident in other aspects of Isaac's life. While Abraham and Jacob journeyed outside of the Land of Canaan, Isaac never did so, even during the famine (Gen. 26:2-3).⁶ Later, we find Isaac extolling *the smell of the fields* (Gen. 27:27) and giving an agricultural blessing to his son for *abundance of new grain and wine* (Gen. 27:28). While Isaac's more sedentary lifestyle is often interpreted as a sign of passivity,⁷ we can view it instead as an aspect of the agricultural lifestyle which he hoped his children would continue.⁸

The meeting of Rebekah and Isaac may still be framed as a clash of cultures: not that of idolatry versus monotheism, but rather of shepherd versus farmer. Rebekah comes from a family of herdsmen and now meets her groom planting in the field, a sign of the new life that awaits her. Since this interpretation of the verse is considered by Rashbam a *peshat*-oriented one, it may

well be that even those who interpreted the verse midrashically, as referring to prayer, understood that the simple linguistic meaning is actually planting.⁹

ISAAC WAS TAKING A WALK

Ibn Ezra, Radak and Rabbenu Bahya understand that *la-su'ah* means Isaac was walking among the bushes. The term may be related to the Arabic *saha*, meaning "to take a stroll,"¹⁰ or to the word for bush (*si'ah*) which in this sense means "to walk among bushes." This is perhaps the most radical interpretation of the verse, as we find Isaac engaged in something that no other Patriarch in the Bible is reported to have done, pursuing a leisure activity. Rabbenu Bahya describes Isaac as *le-hishta'ashe'a*, "having fun," strolling among the trees.¹¹ Although Ramban (on Gen. 24:62) interprets *la-su'ah* to mean engaging in conversation, he explains that Isaac was not praying to God but chatting with his friends, another leisure activity.

If the phrase is understood to mean strolling through the field or conversing with friends, it seems that we have here an aspect of Isaac's personality not usually emphasized, that of someone enjoying his leisure time. It is interesting that this phrase should occur just as he is about to meet Rebekah, since the only other time we find Isaac apparently having fun is also with Rebekah (Gen. 26:8), when Isaac is seen *fondling* or "making sport" with his wife. There may be a hint here that Rebekah managed to elicit an aspect of Isaac's personality that he otherwise seldom expressed.¹² Although Isaac was named for laughter, there does not seem to have been much to be happy about in those parts of his life described in the Bible.¹³ This verse, however, appears to indicate that Isaac did enjoy himself, and perhaps this is how he lived his daily life, taking evening strolls in the fields. Isaac is accordingly no longer seen as a dour, severe individual, but as a happy and tranquil one.

CONCLUSION

The different approaches to interpreting the phrase *la-su'ah ba-sadeh* have given rise to different English translations for example, the 1917 JPS "Isaac went out to meditate in the field" as opposed the 1985 NJPS "Isaac went out walking" and Alter's "Isaac went out to stroll in the field."¹⁴ More significantly, the different interpretations give us different ways of viewing the character of Isaac: as a holy man emulating his father and engaged in prayer, as a

farmer tending his field, or as a person enjoying an evening stroll. Each of these descriptions, different as they are, also provide a different Isaac that Rebekah first encountered, thus forming her own initial impression.

NOTES

Thanks to my friends Avi Levine, who first asked me about this phrase, and Rabbi Ari Berman, who opened new lines of interpretation with his insights.

1. *Midrash Tanhuma, Shemot* 10, implies that the narrative function of the previous verse, Genesis 24:62, *Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi*, is to add a well element to the description of Isaac meeting his future wife, as the meeting at the well is a common motif in the narratives of Jacob and Moses meeting their future wives. However, the narrative significance of Genesis 24:63 is not as clear.

2. See Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images* (Northvale New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1984) pp. 33-42; Naomi H. Rosenblatt, *Wrestling with Angels* (New York, Delacorte Press, 1995) pp. 231-3.

3. Shadal rejects this approach, since there is no evidence anywhere in the Bible for a verb based on *si'ah*, meaning "shrub." Also, it seems very unusual to inspect crops *toward evening*,

4. Although here *Genesis Rabbah* 13:2 does provide the interpretation that it was as if the trees were conversing with one another, interpreting *si'ah* as "taking." This refers to the rustling of leaves in the wind. See R. Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: The Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992) vol. 2, p. 201, note 90. See also Rabbenu Bahya on Genesis 2:5. For a more fanciful interpretation, based on *si'ah* meaning "prayer," see R. Abraham Menahem Rapaoport's *Minhah Belulah* (16th cent.), who explains that the trees and vegetation were praying for rain.

5. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 185.

6. In light of this, God's command to Isaac during the famine, '*Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land...*' (Gen. 26:2), can be viewed as God telling Isaac that he should follow his own instinct to stay in Canaan, and that he need not emulate his father Abraham in every way.

7. Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images*, p. 39.

8. Perhaps Isaac's choice of a less nomadic lifestyle was an attempt to avoid God's dire prediction to Abraham, '*Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years...*' (Gen. 15:13). It is thus ironic that Isaac was later put in a position where he had to send Jacob away from Canaan (Gen. 28:6), setting in motion the series of events that would ultimately bring the Israelites to Egypt. Similarly, the rabbinic idea that the 400 years begins with the birth of Isaac takes on an ironic undertone (see Rashi to Gen. 15:13).

9. Rabbenu Bahya, commenting on this verse, explicitly states that the *pesht* is "strolling among the trees" and the *derash* is "praying."

10. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 169.

11. See, however, Moshe Weinstock, *Kedushat ha-Torah ve-Dikdukeha* (Jerusalem: 1995) p. 274, who brings the interpretation that the strolling was more functional, to clear his mind, as in the expression *heseh ha-da'at*.

12. The text itself may hint at this when Isaac is said to be comforted after his mother's death after marrying Rebekah (Gen. 24:67).

13. See David Zucker, "Isaac: A Life of Bitter Laughter", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 40:2 (April 2012) pp. 105-110.

14. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996) p. 122, notes that "the translation reproduces one current guess, but the verb occurs only here, and no one is sure what it really means." Hizkuni gives both main options in his commentary, planting and talking. E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible – Genesis* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1987) p. 185, states that "the guesses of the ancient versions (to chat, pray, meditate, take a walk) leave too wide a choice, to say nothing of the possibility that none may have hit the mark."



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