

Living Tradition, Living Water

Genesis 26, which will be our focus today, tells a story from the adult life of Isaac. It is a story strikingly similar to a story about his father, Abraham, in Gen. 20. Like his father, Isaac receives the Lord's blessing and prospers. Like Abraham he goes to the land of Gerar to escape famine and has a similar exchange with the local king. Like his father he digs wells and finds water... Read Ch. 26, especially vv.1-18, and prayerfully ponder the details of God's Word.

After sharing your initial observations of Chapter 26 with a friend, let's focus on a puzzling statement found in v.15:

"Now the Philistines had filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham" (Gen.26:15).

Water is essential to sustaining life in the desert. The Philistines were as dependent as Isaac's family on water for their survival. Why would they go to such lengths to block the wells, even having them 'filled with earth' which would effectively make them difficult to find again? Generations of Torah students have been intrigued by this question. What thoughts and insights do you bring to the discussion?

The sheer insanity of the Philistines' action has led some commentators to conclude that the story of the wells carries intense symbolism. As the patriarchs laboured to release life-sustaining water out of parched ground, they were also creating a flow of living faith in the midst of a land of idol-worshippers.

The action of the Philistines, then, symbolizes the forces of hard-heartedness that seek to stop the lifegiving action of God, with deathly consequences. But what evidence from the text and tradition support this interpretation? Carefully revisit the text before reading on.

"Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham...and he gave them the names that his father had given them" (v.18).

Isaac digs for water, but not indiscriminately. He operates in the footsteps of Abraham, honouring the ways of his father. According to Jewish storytelling traditions, just as Abraham had named certain places with titles that reflected his relationship with God (see Gen. 21:31; 22:14), Abraham had named the wells in a similar fashion. Thus in eradicating the wells the Philistines were attempting to extinguish the very mention of the God of Abraham. Amidst opposition, Isaac is persistent in recovering both the wells and their names. Like his father, his efforts bring forth what the Hebrew text calls 'mayim hayim:' 'living water.' This is followed immediately by the Lord's appearance to Isaac: "I am the God of your father Abraham..." with the added divine assurance, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (v.24).

Isaac sought to be faithful to the religious traditions of his father. What challenges have you experienced in your efforts to remain faithful to the traditions of your ancestors?

A fragile relationship exists between human harmony and availability of the earth's natural resources. Discuss in the light of Genesis 26. •

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York: Lambda, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.

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