

I'm aware that between Shabbat at Home, this American Jewish life, and my vacation, the last time I gave a full d'var Torah here was about a month ago. The world looked a little different then, and I know many of us have been wondering how our roles need to evolve in the aftermath of the election. I'll read this week's parasha in light of that question.

Toldot is most famously known as the parasha in which Jacob and Esau are born, and in which Jacob wheedles and then steals from his brother Esau, first his birthright, then his blessing. In the grand drama of Jacob and Esau, Isaac, their father, is mostly a passive player, his blessing sought after and fought over by his sons.

But there is an episode in this parashah about Isaac that is often eclipsed by the drama of his sons. Genesis 26 describes how the wells that Abraham had dug were filled in and blocked up by Philistines, jealous of Isaac's prosperity. Isaac had to dig new wells. The Philistines argue over Isaac's right to dig his father's wells, and force Isaac to move around in search for water.

In the book, *Speaking Torah*, Rabbi Art Green brings a teaching from the Me'or Eynaim, an 18th century Chassidic master in Chernobyl about Isaac's need to dig new wells. Quoting Genesis 26:18-19:

"Isaac returned and dug the wells of water... the servants of Isaac, digging in the valley, found a well of living water.

The Me'or Eynayim compares this quote with the verse from Jer 2:13: "They have forsaken Me, a source of living water, hewing out cisterns, broken cisterns, that cannot hold water."

In Jeremiah, wells of living water represent the wisdom that connects us to God, to the Source of that which nourishes us. And so too, here in Genesis, he teaches:

The patriarchs taught "all who were to come into the world how to dig within themselves a spring of living waters, to cleave to their font, the root of their lives." ... "after the death of Abraham, however, the wellsprings of wisdom were sealed, blocked by the Philistines, representing the evil in humans that overtook the world. ... then Abraham's son Isaac came along, following in his father's footsteps. He taught the people of his own generation how to dig again into that living font of waters; he taught this by means of various wonderful and mysterious processes of the mind. Isaac returned and dig the wells of water. All this came about by means of faith, which is the prerequisite for all. You need full faith that the glory of God fills all the world, that there is no place devoid of God and none beside God..."

Now this teaching really resonated for me, for a couple of reasons.

First there is the spiritual reading: the Me'or Eynayim teaches that Isaac's struggle was ultimately about access to spiritual connection, to the nourishment that comes through connecting with God, with the ultimate Source. When we are spiritually disconnected, we can become confused about how to meet our material needs. When we are not psycho-spiritually in tune, when we don't have practices for connecting and grounding, that is when we can turn to problematic relationships with the material world in order to heal spiritual voids.

But that doesn't mean our only work in this time is internal, spiritual work. As Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, teaches Chapter 3, verse 16, "Without bread, there is no Torah - and without Torah there is no bread." The equation of bread to Torah, of water to God, is not a casual metaphor, but a very astute one. Our ancestors who used these metaphors knew that water that most precious physical substance on earth.

So I think a literal reading needs to exist alongside the teaching of the Me'or Eynaim, particularly that image of Isaac having to do the exact same work of digging the exact same well his father had already dug. Just the pshat, that literal image, is very evocative for me, particularly post-election, as it seems increasingly clear that the work of the next several years will be for conscious communities to fight for the exact same progress that we or our parents already fought for and perhaps thought we had already won. So the reminder, through the story of Isaac and the wells, of the ephemeral nature of progress, is an important one. The rights we have – whether to vote, to protest, or to water itself, can be compared to the wells dug by our ancestors. We might have expected that they will always be there for us. But a well can be blocked up, and we never know when we might be called upon to dig up a blocked well or a new well, to fight again for progress we thought we had already won.

So how does one have the strength to fight the same fight over and over again? With both interpretations, side by side.

We are living through times where, quite literally, we must be called upon to protect water sources - here, at Standing Rock in North Dakota, and all over the world - from pipelines, from privatization, and from anything else that might block the flow of living waters. And we may be called to fight battles that we and our ancestors already had to fight - for women, for Jews, for freedom of religion in this country, for civil rights for all - to combat oppression of all kinds. And for the long haul of these fights, we will need whatever connection to the Source we can muster, however that connection manifests for each of us.

Spaces where we can come to replenish our spiritual connection, practices of song and sabbath, joy in community, will be more important than ever in the coming months and years, not to lull us to a sense of comfort in terrifying times, but to keep us spiritually awake. To keep us oriented to the work, political, physical and spiritual that needs to be done. And that work is not necessarily possible to neatly breakdown into the different categories of material versus spiritual. As Rav Yisrael Salanter, the 19th century founder of the Mussar movement taught - "My neighbor's physical needs are my spiritual needs."

"My neighbor's physical needs are my spiritual needs." We cannot be spiritually fulfilled as long as our neighbors are denied their basic needs. In the coming months and years, I hope that we as a community will be vigilant about protecting our own spiritual well-being – by responding to protect any of our neighbors who are physically threatened. Thus may we preserve the flow of living waters like our ancestor Isaac – both physically and spiritually.