

What a joy to revisit these old melodies and prayer forms. It is such a challenging and beautiful dance, to navigate how we hold onto, honor and treasure what came before, while also looking towards the future. I'm so grateful to everyone who is helping us navigate this.

Not surprisingly, there is a moment in our Torah portion that speaks to this challenge. The book of Genesis is full of the narratives of two powerful and active ancestors: first Avraham, who responds to Hashem's call in Lech Lecha, the Torah portion from two weeks ago, and then his grandson Ya'akov who navigates the dramas of birthright and blessing beginning this week.

Yitzhak, Avraham's son and Ya'akov's father, is not nearly as active a character. But reading this parashah, I realized that this is perhaps not because of any deficiency on his part, but rather because he is the only forefather to spend his whole life in the land of Israel, never fleeing even in times of famine, never instigating intrigue.

And there is one moment in this parashah when Yitzhak's character really shines. In Genesis 26, he and Rivka have moved to a southern part of Canaan, to Gerar, the territory of Avimelech, because of a famine. Their presence there is contentious – Yitzhak's wealth and prosperity make the Philistines resentful, they block up the wells that Avraham had dug, and Avimelech asks them to leave. But Yitzhak doesn't go far. Instead, as Chapter 26, verses 18-22 relate, "Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, "The water is ours." He named that well Esek (contention), because they contended with him.

And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah (harassment). He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, “Now at last יהוה has granted us ample space to increase in the land.”

First let’s talk about Avraham’s well. Digging a well is a tremendous accomplishment, and there is a relief at completing a tremendous accomplishment. And yet, this episode reminds us that it is one thing to dig a well, and quite another to keep it working and flowing for more than a generation. A well can be neglected, can fall into disrepair, can be stopped up.

And this is how Yitzhak encounters his inheritance: he digs out the wells that his father had dug, honoring his father by re-establishing the names he gave them, so that the water might flow again. And when the water does flow, but he finds that is a source of quarrel and strife with the people of Gerar, he lets go of his ownership over the wells, and moves on, until he can find a place where the waters flow and he can have the space to access them.

Of course, a well is not just a well and water is not just water. The Chasidic master Me’or Eynaim says that the wells are a metaphor for God-consciousness; a certain wisdom and way of being in the world, which the Philistines saw to repress, and which Yitzhak patiently reclaimed, again and again.

And Rabbi Shefa Gold writes, “Through the story of Toldot we learn to access our lineage. In his time, Abraham accomplished the great work of digging deep wells of spiritual sustenance, but by Isaac’s time, the wells had become obstructed. Isaac lost access to the wealth of his lineage. In re-digging the stopped up wells of his father Abraham, Isaac finds that the process is neither simple nor easy. In fact he digs three wells before achieving success — connection with the source.”

Rabbi Gold suggests that the names of the three wells that Yitzhak digs on his own represent the struggles of dealing with the legacies of those who have come before – sorting out what has been harmful; what has caused strife, until, as she puts it, “well of our ancestors becomes a fountain connecting the dark depths of our human story with the wide skies of awareness.”

Yitzhak’s task in digging these wells is the same task that we are attempting with our celebrations of TBI at 90 and this service tonight. Like Yitzhak, we know that it can happen – frightfully quickly – that we lose access to the blessings of past – whether because we have simply stopped telling the story or there has been a deliberate blockage of the transmission of memory. And sometimes, the process of reopening those memories can be contentious, if the stories that we find are painful. It is quite possible that as we continue to examine TBI’s history over the next several months, there will be contentious memories. And yet, we learn and grow stronger from that process.

Fortunately, this process of memory also brings great blessing and riches. I hope that all of you have felt the flow of blessing this evening, as we have proclaimed, so to speak, the same names proclaimed in a previous generation, and we have sung their songs. Our service tonight reminds me how vast the treasure of blessing we have available to us, if we only dig into it. May we remember that the wells of blessings only flow as long as we work to keep them open, and may we keep them flowing for another generation.

Shabbat shalom.