



# NOV AND THE

# BINDING OF ISAAC

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ISAAC, THE FIRST JEWISH CHILD,  
was a miracle.

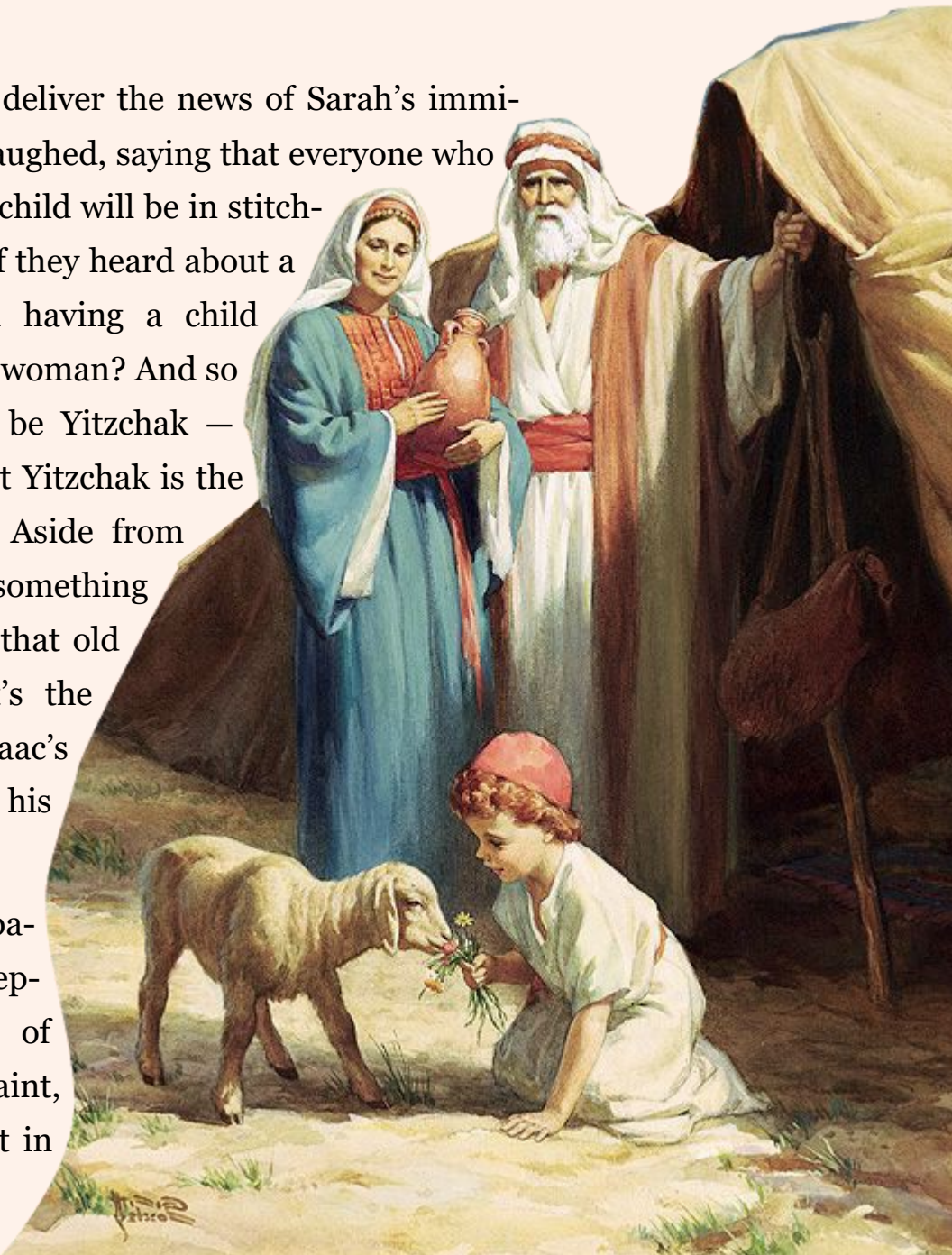
Born to elderly parents whose child-  
less fate was “written in the stars,”  
Isaac’s soul had to fight its way into  
the world.

Isaac — Yitzchak, in Hebrew — is the model of overcoming impossible  
challenges to carry out the Divine directive no matter what. His parents  
devoted a lifetime to prayer, his father underwent the transformation of  
circumcision at an advanced age, and at long last the Divine promise was  
realized.

When angels came to deliver the news of Sarah’s immi-  
nent conception, she laughed, saying that everyone who  
hears of her bearing a child will be in stitch-  
es. Who wouldn’t be, if they heard about a  
hundredyear-old man having a child  
with a ninety-year-old woman? And so  
the child’s name will be Yitzchak —  
“He Will Laugh” — but Yitzchak is the  
one who laughs last. Aside from  
the fact that there’s something  
laughable in a couple that old  
having a child, what’s the  
connection between Isaac’s  
essential nature and his  
name?

According to the Kabba-  
listic tradition, Isaac rep-  
resents the attribute of  
justice and self-restraint,  
and we see it manifest in

# FATHER AND SON



his capacity to act with force for a higher purpose. It's about overcoming the expected... overcoming the natural boundary for the supernatural goal. If there's something funny about that, it's not so obvious. So let's go deeper.

What makes a joke really funny? It starts with an ambiguity (a space the Kabbalists would call a *tzimtzum* — a kind of primordial vacuum of the unknown), which is then broken by the unexpected punch line. When our assumptions are overtaken unexpectedly, we laugh. Isaac is that punch line. Isaac is what happens when a human being, through activating his will and changing his life, alters the course of the heavens and changes his fate. It's all about overcoming the locked and bound expectations of the natural.

And Abraham and Isaac are so very, very different. Abraham was a channel for revealing the Divine attribute of loving-kindness, which is endlessly generous and infinitely giving. Isaac appeared to be the opposite: a master of self-discipline, overcoming his natural desires so as to align with the quality of Divine justice. Yet the Torah confirms, twice, that no matter how different they appear to be, Abraham and Isaac are from the same root: "These are the offspring of Abraham...Abraham gave birth to Isaac" (Genesis 25:19).

The whole world laughed and thought that Sarah's child must be someone else's because she conceived soon after being taken captive by a foreign ruler after a lifetime of infertility with Abraham. But the Creator made Abraham's and Isaac's faces identical so no one could make a mistake. The outward form expresses the internal essence. Even though it appears as though they can't possibly be related, they spring from the same source.

There are different pathways to achieving unity with the Creator; different attributes we cultivate to mirror the Divine attributes. But just as all of those qualities are only reflections of the Unique One, so too are all these

different pathways unified at their source.

Abraham’s path is so different from Isaac’s, but both are involved in the same basic work. They just go about it differently. And each master that came to the world expanded on the path laid down before him; he just did it in his own, unique way. It’s not only true of the tzaddikim throughout the ages, but also of every one of us. Every person has his own particular attribute to cultivate that is his individual contribution to the revelation of Godliness.

Isaac’s gift is different from his father’s, but we shouldn’t think that just because he’s a master of self-command that his channel isn’t a wideopen conduit of blessing. That would be a mistake; there’s abundance in the attribute of loving-kindness, and there’s bounty to be discovered in din, holy judgment and restraint.

After the death of Abraham, we learn that Isaac settled down and planted measures of seed, and reaped one hundredfold of what he sowed. The verse ends, “And God blessed him.” It was a time of famine, and Isaac’s yield was one hundred times the expected amount. This was a degree of blessing even Abraham didn’t see. Joining the work of father and son bore fruits that everyone could touch and appreciate.

The work of Isaac evolves from the completion of the work of Abraham. But why should “Abraham give birth to Isaac?” Why does perfection of the quality of loving-kindness pave the way \_\_\_\_\_ for the completion of the attribute of Divine justice?

To joyfully take up a life that includes holy boundaries, you have to really and profoundly feel and know that every limit is inscribed with the deepest love.

One of the main messages of this book is that the Divine directives flow from love and not from harsh restriction. To joyfully take up a life that includes holy boundaries, you have to really and profoundly feel and know that every limit is

inscribed with the deepest love.

Over the years, countless people have joined us for Shabbos meals; our home has been open to guests and visitors from every conceivable background. Many students have asked me how my wife and I have managed to raise a family — children who are now raising families of their own — devoted to traditional observance in a world so often opposed to those ideals and practices.

“How do you do it?” they want to know. “We live in turbulent times, temptation is everywhere, and all of your kids are on such a good path. And your home was so open! Your children were exposed to so many different possible lifestyles; why were you confident that the exposure wouldn’t draw them away from you?”

But that’s exactly what we’re talking about here. When love abounds, when kindness and understanding and trust are the foundation of our relationships with our children, what seem to be “restrictions” on their lives don’t feel like that to them. They just feel like part of that love.

A child can accept the limits set by a parent as long as the child is secure in that parent’s boundless love. And that will be true even if the limit that’s been set isn’t so comprehensible to the child. As we’ll see in the next section, Isaac is the greatest model we have of a child acting with the highest degree of self-restraint. He could do the unthinkable — be willing to offer himself in total self-sacrifice — because he had total trust in his loving father, and in his beloved Creator

As we learned earlier, Adam’s interaction with the serpent in the Garden of Eden broke that relationship of loving trust with the Creator. Adam lost his connection. But Abraham and Isaac, with their loving-kindness and uprightness, restored it. Together, they did more than revive the old connection — they opened up a fresh path.

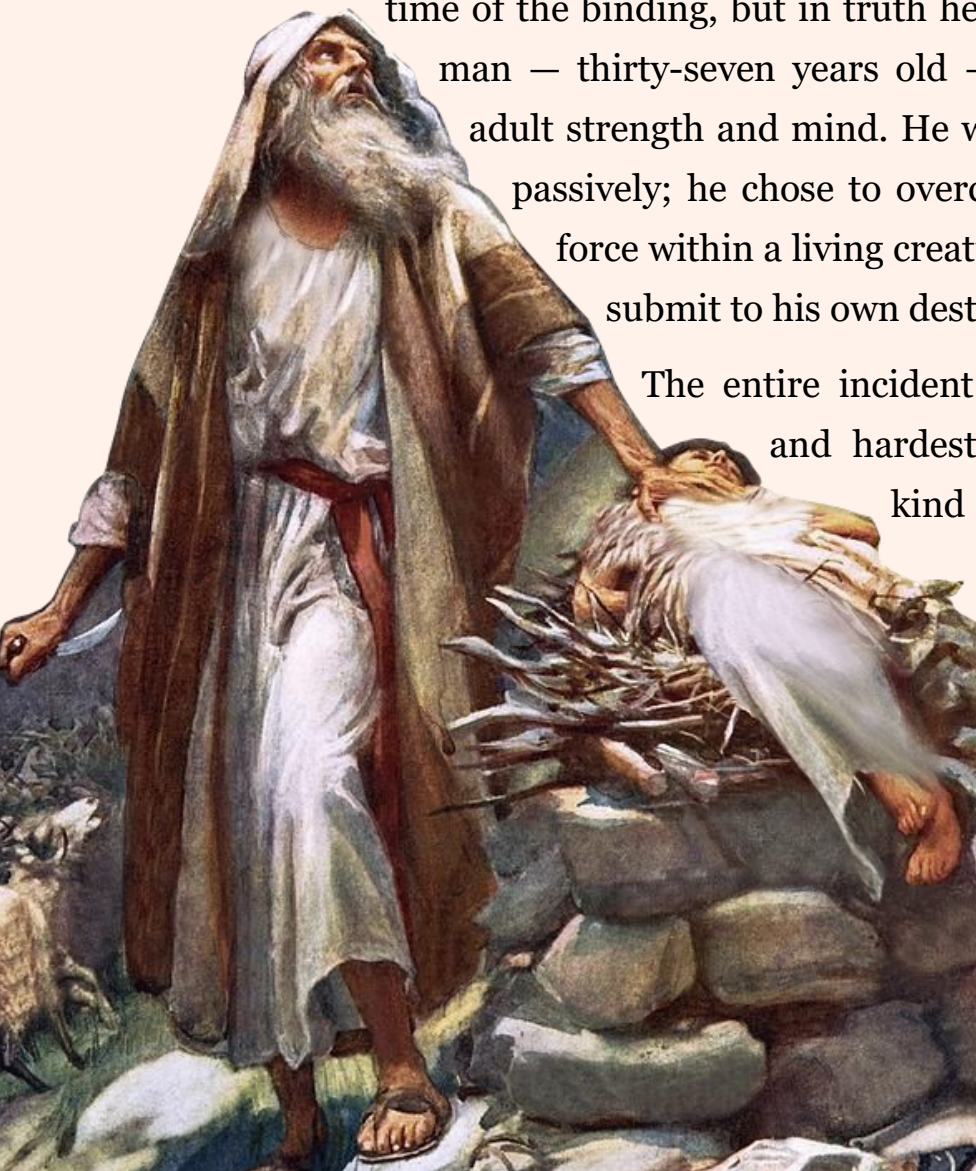
# THE BINDING

BOTH ABRAHAM AND ISAAC REACHED the apex of their lives at the same moment — on the top of Mount Moriah, at the binding of Isaac. It was the most challenging of Abraham's ten trials, and demanded of Isaac the seemingly impossible.

As we've already learned, there was no force within Abraham as powerful as his loving-kindness and compassion. He spent a lifetime cultivating that quality until it was perfect. And then he was commanded by God to offer up his own child, in whom the Divine promise of a future people rested! Abraham had to set aside everything he thought he knew about his Creator and accept a Divine decree that made no sense.

But what about Isaac? We have this image of Isaac being just a boy at the time of the binding, but in truth he was by then a fully grown man — thirty-seven years old — in full possession of his adult strength and mind. He wasn't a child being carried passively; he chose to overcome the strongest natural force within a living creature — the will to live — and submit to his own destruction.

The entire incident is filled with the darkest and hardest questions. Why would a kind and loving God test them in this way? And why reverse the command at the very last moment, sparing Isaac just as the knife was on his throat? If Isaac was never really meant to be sacrificed as an offering, why put them through



that trauma?

And why does the binding of Isaac play such a central role in Judaism — the foundation of every day’s morning prayers, the bedrock of our Rosh Hashanah service, and even the guarantee of our future redemption from exile?

Here we are again, back with our dragons — those concepts we find so threatening at first. These kinds of questions are challenging, but they also give us wings that help us soar. The dragons are the guardians of treasures. The binding of Isaac must have deep relevance to us on a personal level, but what exactly are we meant to take away from the story? What’s the message we’re supposed to live and work with?

If we examine the essence of the binding, it’s about the reality that sometimes we have to overcome ourselves — even our most essential self-definition — to stay attuned to the Divine Will. Sometimes God’s

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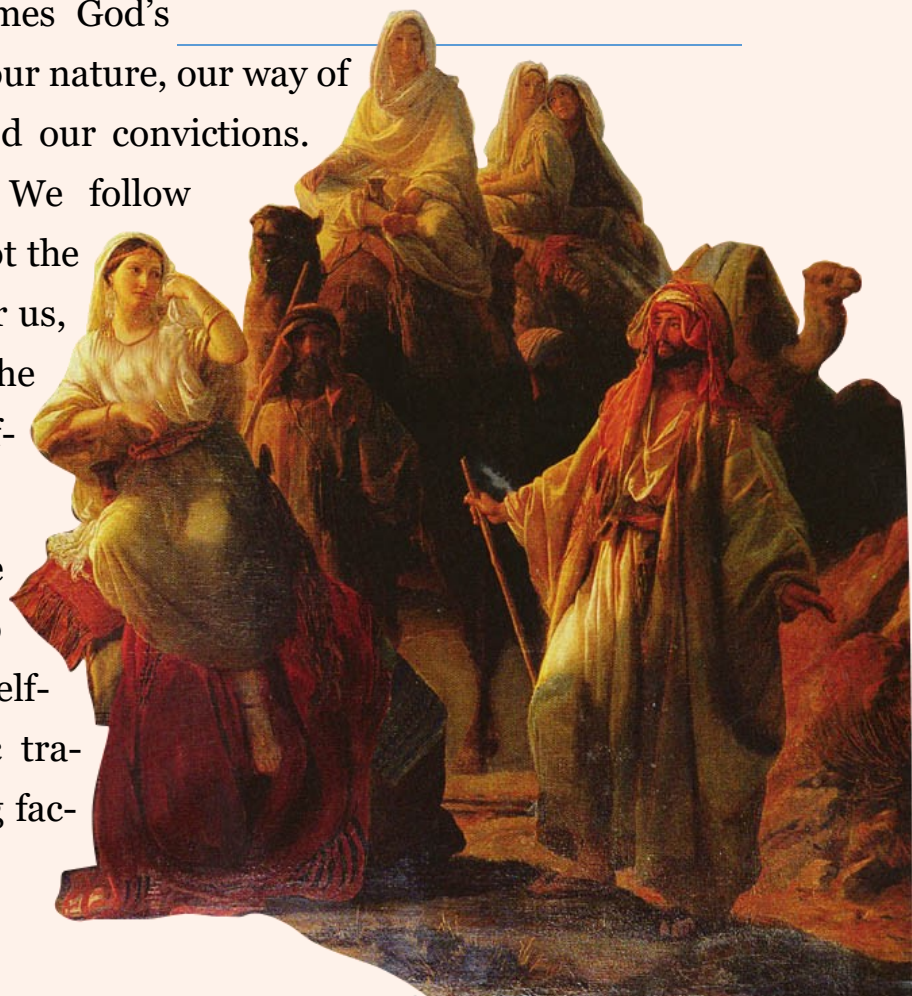
“Dragon” concepts — the ones that we find challenging — are the guardians of the deepest treasures.

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directives will clash with our nature, our way of understanding reality, and our convictions.

What do we do then? We follow Isaac’s example and accept the directive anyway. And, for us, that’s like getting up on the altar; it’s a sacrifice of self-will.

But Isaac’s setting aside of self didn’t only have to do with his literal act of self-sacrifice. The Kabbalistic tradition reveals a surprising facet of Isaac’s nature to us.



Isaac didn't possess what's called a "masculine soul." Physically he was a man, but he possessed a feminine soul. And this mismatch meant he wouldn't be able to father children. It would mean that God's promise to Abraham would be null and void — no future nation would come from Isaac.

On the soul-level, Isaac actually had no future until the binding. The mystics teach us that at that critical moment when Isaac was fully ready to give his life to carry out the Divine Will, Isaac's "feminine" soul flew out of him and immediately incarnated within his future wife, Rebecca. At that instant, his masculine soul entered him. The Isaac that descended from the altar wasn't the same man who had laid himself down upon it. This Isaac would be able to father a nation.

Even though these concepts are very mystical and abstract, there are lessons for us to learn from them that have relevance to us in very practical ways.

Everyone's nature — without exception — is also misaligned in some ways. It doesn't have to be something like Isaac's story; it could be a gender or orientation issue, or any inner quality of ours that we find is out of harmony with the Divine directive.

We all come into the world wired in some way that demands self-mastery, and then our tendencies get solidified in our families of origin and our home communities and societies. We're angry people, jealous people, acquisitive people, fearful people, inconsiderate people — no one is born perfect and we all have a story. We all have a place where we're going to struggle. We learn why in the story of the binding — that submission and acceptance of the Divine Will is the gateway to transformation.

We have it within us to overcome nature — our own nature — and that's the biggest miracle that exists.

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The greatest revelation of the Divine Will is found in the Torah, but not all of those guidelines are necessarily to

our liking! Some of them tell us to curb our natural human appetites. Others instruct us to overcome our character defects, even when it feels like it's going to take superhuman effort. Does God have unreasonable expectations of us?

No, because He knows we have it within us to tap into Isaac's quality — the Kabbalistic attribute of gevurah, restraint. It's our inheritance, the legacy that Isaac left inside of each of us. That means that we also have it within us to move forward decisively, with energy and force and self-mastery, and we become further empowered by the vitality that comes from carrying out the Divine directive. We have it within us to overcome nature — our own nature — and that's the biggest miracle that exists.