

My first internship as a rabbinic student was with Chaverim, a social friendship program for developmentally delayed adults. I was excited to be working with a new group of people. I was excited to have an internship. Yet, I wasn’t sure what to expect. I didn’t know what “developmentally delayed” or “developmentally disabled” meant. I imagined a group of people with distorted speech. I wasn’t sure whether Chaverim members would understand my speech or whether I would understand theirs. I immediately discovered how far off base I was. The first thing I learned about Chaverim members is how much they love to socialize. They love to talk about themselves and to ask you personal questions.

Chaverim members really appreciate any level of independence they achieve; whether it means paying their own bus fare or living in an apartment independently. Chaverim members know that people often think they are helpless, thus, as much as they can, they want to do things for themselves. Chaverim members taught me many skills that are crucial for my rabbinate.

Among them Chaverim members taught me not to make assumptions about what someone needs. When I don’t know if someone needs help, I now ask, I offer. When it comes to personal one-on-one tasks, now I try to never help uninvited. I apply this new understanding not just for Chaverim members, but for anyone I meet who might be in need. When we help someone without asking, the message we are sending is “I don’t trust you to be able to do this for yourself. I don’t think you can do this.” That is a **harsh** message to send. But when we ask someone “would you like me to pick that up for you?” what we are saying is, “I assume you can do this for yourself. But I notice that you are struggling. I see you. Can I make this easier for you?” This message gives the person a choice and is a much more empowering message to send.

My experiences with Chaverim influenced my reading of today’s torah portion in which we read about Isaac’s marriage to Rebecca. Before we look at Rebecca’s and Isaac’s meeting, we

should take a closer look at Isaac. Who is Isaac? I mean, really, who is Isaac? Last year my husband – relating an idea he heard from his grandmother – made an interesting observation that lead me to take a closer look at Isaac. Here is what I discovered:

Some scholars say that Isaac never existed. These scholars argue that Isaac’s only role is to help tell the story of Abraham’s life and connect Abraham to Jacob. These scholars assume that Abraham and Jacob are many generations apart, perhaps not even related. In this way, Isaac was created to shorten the story and to relate Jacob to Abraham. The section we refer to as “Isaac’s life” seems to be a slightly edited version of Abraham’s story – except that wherever it used to read “Abraham,” now it reads “Isaac.” Yet, if the story of Isaac is merely to create a connection between Abraham and Jacob, why not cast him as a gigantic and powerful hero?

So, who was Isaac? What were his contributions?

Many people, when they read the text closely, note that Isaac is never alone. He **seems** incapable of doing anything alone. His parents are highly over-protective. Sarah seems to overreact when she perceives Ishmael to be mistreating Isaac. Abraham seems overly involved in finding a wife for Isaac. And when the time comes to bury their father, although Ishmael and Isaac were previously estranged, Ishmael seems to know that Isaac cannot bury Abraham alone; so Ishmael returns to help him bury their father. For reasons that are not clear, Isaac is never alone and is **described** as if he is incapable of doing anything independently.

In *parshat Chayei Sarah* we learn of the process through which Isaac marries. Abraham wants to find a wife for Isaac. As far as our Bible stories go, Jacob, Esau, Joseph and his brothers

all find their own wives. Even Moses’ marriage is not quite an arranged marriage. In contrast to our Bible stories, Isaac’s arranged marriage seems unusual.

Abraham requests his servant to go and find Isaac a wife. Abraham tells his servant where he should go to find such a wife. From the dialogue and rituals that takes place, it is clear that Abraham trusts this servant. Also, it is not a stretch of the imagination to say that the servant probably knew Isaac, the servant probably knew Isaac very well.

As the story unfolds, the servant is worried about finding a good match for Isaac and he seeks God’s help. Why should the servant have been so worried? Is Isaac a difficult man? An unattractive man? He must have known something about Isaac that we, many generations later, can only speculate about.

As it turns out, it seems that the servant is looking for an exceptionally, **exceptionally** kind and loving wife for Isaac. At first, this quality does not seem peculiar. Don’t we all want exceptionally kind and loving partners for ourselves? But when we look at the other men in the Torah, none of them seem to have been looking for these specific attributes: for exceptionally kind and loving wives. Many of the Torah wives do have moments when they do beautiful and loving acts, but these were not their most important attributes when the men married them.

What does this process of searching for a wife for Isaac tell us about him? Why could he not find a wife for himself?

The climax of Isaac’s story for me is when he meets Rebekah. The servant finds Rebekah and brings her back to marry Isaac. The minute Rebekah sees Isaac and understands that this is the man she will marry, two things happen: she falls off¹ her camel and she veils her face.

¹ Plaut, p.161 – Plaut gives “falls off” as a possible translation, but he understands it to mean either that Rebekah got off the camel in a hurry and/or that Rebekah fell in love. I am understanding it to literally mean “fall off”

Most scholars understand Rebekah to have “fallen over herself”, to have “fallen in love”. So much so, that she gets off her camel in a hurry, excited to meet her husband. But what if Rebekah literally, as the text tells us, fell off her camel? Did she see something that shocked her? What could possibly cause her to fall off the camel?

And Rebekah veils herself when she understands that Isaac is the man she’ll marry. As you know, back in the days of the bible, there were no elaborate weddings. No designer wedding gowns, live bands, or exotic catered meals. Back in these biblical days, the most that might have happened before a marriage was consummated is the bride veiled herself before her future husband. And Isaac didn’t know this custom. Isaac had to ask his servant who this veiled woman was. The servant had to explain to Isaac, “this is your bride (and that’s why she veiled herself before you).”

Isaac seems oblivious to local customs and symbolism. What does this tell us about him? What kind of boy was he? What kind of man did he become? Perhaps Isaac had some kind of characteristic that placed him outside of the “normal” community. Perhaps Isaac had a developmental delay, explaining why those around him gave Isaac so much attention, protection and help. What would it mean for us today, if one of our ancestors had a developmental delay?

For me, this possibility makes me swell with pride. For me, this possibility would be a reflection of how diverse our community has been from the very beginning. The possibility that Isaac might have had a development delay serves as a reminder that our community is made up of all kinds of people. And all people deserve to be welcomed into our community. All people, of all genders, regardless of disabilities, age, economic status, marital status, sexual orientation – everyone needs to be welcomed into our community.

My hope is to show that looking at Isaac as a patriarch with a development delay enhances our reading of the text. As a matter of fact, I would like to argue that the story of Isaac serves as a “case study” of how society tends to treat people with disabilities.

On the one hand, people around Isaac seem to do things for him without seeking his input. Decisions were made for him and the society coddled him. Today, this is not always the case. Thus, we learn that society does grow, change and develop because today we know to treat people with disabilities as independent people, capable of making their own decisions.

On the other hand, like Chaverim members, Isaac’s story comes to tell us not the extent of his **disabilities**, but the extent of his abilities. Isaac’s story demonstrates that people will sometimes try to take advantage of those who are vulnerable. Such is the case of the famous scene where we witness Rebekah and Jacob plotting to take advantage of a blind and possibly developmentally delayed Isaac. Isaac seems to know Jacob is lying. Yet, Isaac chooses to give Jacob the blessing anyway. Even if Rebekah and Jacob plotted to trick Isaac, he does make a choice. This scene shows Isaac’s incredible ability to make a choice – a choice that we might have thought him **incapable** of. Isaac blesses both sons and sets an important part of our story in motion. We cannot have our history without Isaac.

Isaac is not the kind of patriarch you’d expect him to be. Yet as Isaac’s story unfolds, from childhood, to the terror of almost sacrifice, to marriage, to love, to fatherhood, and to blessings, Isaac is a full fledged member of his family. Isaac did not necessarily have a strong personality, but Isaac did lead a successful life by today’s standards. He managed to learn a trade (agriculture) and made a rich living from it. He fathered two sons and loved them. What more can we ask for?

Likewise, Chaverim members, adults with developmental delays, are not what I expected them to be. Yet looking back, I am glad that I looked past my initial impressions of the Chaverim community.

On a more personal tone, you – the HUC community – could have written me off, you could have said to me that my hearing loss is my problem and that I have to fend for myself. It may have taken a while, but you did adapt and find a way to meet my needs.

Seeing this microphone be passed around in class and at sermon discussions, seeing you participate in the act of including me in this community, it means more than you know. I mean, how can you not feel supported when your very pregnant professor insists on walking around the classroom, making sure that everyone speaks into the microphone?

In addition, I gained advocates. In each of my classes, I had one advocate – fighting for me when I was too tired to speak for myself.

It’s important for me to share this with you, not because I am trying to make this sermon about me, but because it’s important for this community to understand how it has **already** changed and adapted to become a more inclusive community. My hope, my prayers are that these new insights into becoming a more welcoming sensitive community will continue to develop long past my days here at HUC.

There is no way that I could be where I am today without your support. In this process, I learned that I am stronger than I realized. I do have the strength to seek out what I need. I do have the patience to explain and dialogue. And I do have the modesty to know that I don’t know everything. Isaac was a seemingly bland character. But through looking at the text closely, I discovered that he had a much stronger role than I originally perceived. Chaverim members

could be perceived as not having a place in the society at large, yet my experience with Chaverim shaped the tone of my rabbinic education.

I thank Isaac for reminding me that things are not always what they seem. I thank Isaac for reminding me to look deeper, beyond the obvious. I thank Chaverim for teaching me how to be a better rabbi. And I thank you for being a part of my journey.