



Murray Bowen was one of the pioneers of the field of family therapy. He noted that families have a system of psychological interconnectedness. For instance, when one member of a family becomes anxious, this tends to have an emotional snowball effect on the other members of the family. For psychological health and wellness, it is important for individuals within families not to become too fused with the thoughts, emotions, and actions of other members of their family. Rather, the ideal is differentiation of the self, where each individual is able to experience and balance both intimacy with, and independence from, others in the family.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks highlighted in his essay, “On Clones and Identity,” Yitzchak was the least individuated of the patriarchs. There isn’t much we know about his life, but what we do know seems to parallel and repeat many of the events and actions of Avraham. They both have to leave their land and enter the land of the *Plishtim* because of a famine. They both tell Avimelech that their wives are their sisters. To accentuate the parallel, the Torah tells us that Yitzchak even re-digs the same exact wells that Avraham dug, and even gives them the same exact names that his father gave them! There seems to be a lack of differentiation of self on Yitzchak’s part.

Apparently, there was insufficient water from Avraham's wells that Yitzchak re-dug, so Yitzchak moved towards individuation and initiative by digging a new well. Yet, the Torah tells us that his first attempt was fraught with difficulty. The people of *Gerar* claimed that the water from the well belonged to them, which led to an argument. Consequently, Yitzchak named that well "*Esek*" because of the fight that transpired. Yitzchak's second attempt to dig a well was just as unsuccessful. It also led to controversy with the people of *Gerar*, so he called it "*Sitnah*" because of the hatred and enmity it engendered. Finally, Yitzchak's third attempt to dig was successful as it was devoid of dispute. Yitzchak calls this well "*Rechovot*," which connotes peace, freedom, and space. Yitzchak is able to create a location for himself by differentiating from the *Plishtim* as well as carving out his own personal place in his family narrative.

What is unclear, however, is why the third attempt was successful, while the first two were not. The Chafetz Chaim suggests that the Torah is teaching us a lesson in grit and perseverance: if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Rabbi Norman Lamm suggests another approach in the name of his uncle, Rabbi Joseph Baumol. If we pay careful attention, there is a fundamental textual difference between the first two diggings and the third. For the first two, the *pesukim* highlight that it was Yitzchak's servants who dug the wells – "*Vayachperu avdei Yitzchak.*" Yet, for the third well it says "*vayachpor be'er acheret.*" Yitzchak—not his servants—dug the third well.

While there is a place for delegation, there are actions in life that must be performed by the individual if they are to be successful. While Avraham served as an important role-model for Yitzchak, it was time for Yitzchak to begin to differentiate and forge his own path. This journey could not be proxied out to others. It was something Yitzchak needed to experience himself. *He* needed to dig the new well, not his servants. Once he took responsibility and acted on his own accord, he was able to merit the "*Rechovot*" – the space to flourish and grow on his own.

**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI  
SCHIFFMAN**

[www.PsychedforTorah.com](http://www.PsychedforTorah.com)  
[PsychedforTorah@gmail.com](mailto:PsychedforTorah@gmail.com)  
[@PsychedforTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedforTorah)

