

D'var Torah, Sara Klein

Parashat Toldot
November 2007

Shabbat shalom.

Our Torah portion this week is Toldot (many translations in English, including “line” or “story” or “generation”). Most of us are familiar with this famous story, which is focused entirely on the nuclear family of Isaac, Rebekkah and their twin sons Esau and Jacob.

To summarize briefly, Isaac marries Rebekkah at the age of 40, and after many years of infertility, Rebekkah becomes pregnant with twins. The twins struggle physically within Rebekkah’s womb, and she is troubled by this. She seeks out God, who tells her that she carries two nations within her womb, and that the older will serve the younger.

Esau, the elder, is born red and hairy. Jacob is born second, smooth and fair, holding onto Esau’s ankle (hence the name “Yaakov”, which relates grammatically to “ekev”, Hebrew for ankle and the title of another Torah portion found in Deuteronomy). Isaac loves Esau, we are told, while Rebekkah loves Jacob.

Esau and Jacob grow up entirely outside of our view. We have no sense of them as children, no idea how they are raised by their parents, no concept of their outside influences or of their relationship to each other. We next meet them as full adults. Esau is a rugged outdoorsman skilled in hunting, whereas Jacob is mild-mannered and more

comfortable indoors – a man of the tents, we are told. A fine cook. One day Esau comes back from hunting, famished, and sees Jacob making a stew. He trades his birthright to Jacob on the spot in exchange for some of Jacob's fine stew.

Later in the portion, after Isaac has moved his family to Gerar and prospered there, we return to Isaac towards the end of his life, feeble and blinded by his experience (perhaps, the rabbis suggest, from the trauma of the Akedah, that near death experience at the hands of his own father Abraham). Perhaps sensing that his death is approaching, Isaac asks Esau to kill some game and prepare it for him so that Isaac may give his innermost blessing to his first born. Rebekkah, who loves Jacob, instructs Jacob to bring her some game and prepares it to her husband's liking. She covers Jacob's smooth hands in kid fur, and tells Jacob to take the stew to Isaac and trick his father into bestowing Esau's blessing on Jacob. Jacob completes the ruse, accepting his father's blessing and his prophecy for the future of the Jewish people.

But let's go back now and look again at Rebekkah, pregnant with twins. Genesis 25, verse 22: "But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, if so, why do I exist?" If they struggle, says Rebekkah, why do I exist? Rebekkah's pain is clear to us. How could such a struggle emanate from me, she seems to be saying. How could I create such turmoil inside my womb, this place of creation, this nurturing enclosure?

What parent of more than one child has not uttered similar words? Siblings who fight, who struggle against each other, create a particular type of anguish in their parents. How

could these children, we ask, the product of our love and unity, our wholeness, splinter off into such factions? What could we have done to cause this, and what could we possibly do to make it better?

From the moment we are introduced to Esau and Jacob, and throughout their history together in the Torah, we are confronted with their polarity, their diametric opposition to each other. Esau is hairy; Jacob is smooth. Esau is a brute; Jacob is mild-mannered and cunning. Esau despises his birthright; Jacob covets Esau's birthright. Toldot speaks to us in modern terms about this very human tendency to label, to categorize. Humans have perhaps always had this need to place their fellow humans in identifiable boxes. It seems at least possible that the very notion of race, for example, is a human construct that satisfies this deep need we have to sort each other. Esau is red; Jacob is fair. This need we have to categorize exists despite the following finding from a 2005 study on the scientific basis of race classifications: "the general consensus among most scholars in fields such as evolutionary biology, anthropology, and other disciplines is that racial distinctions fail on three counts--that is, they are not genetically discrete, are not reliably measured, and are not scientifically meaningful." In other words, human beings created race, there is little to no basis for it in science, or, to look at it in another way, there is no notion of race in God's creation of humans and the world.

Like our ancestors Isaac and Rebekkah, we also struggle in our family lives with this tendency to sort, to label. Try as we might as parents, and as adult children of parents, to avoid it, we all do it. I have two children. As an enlightened parent I would never tell

you, nor do I believe, that so-and-so is the clever one, that this one is the athlete. I might, though, tell you that they are as different from each other as day is from night. By doing so I would be sharing with you my truth, but I would also be introducing a duality in their existence that is entirely unnecessary. I would be setting one against the other, in a way. Because day is not night, and night is not day. The full truth is that they are each a universe, each day and night, each bitter, sweet, salty and sour, as we read earlier in our prayerbook. Each is a whole, not merely a half of my complete matched set of children.

And even when parents succeed in not comparing their children against each other, that human tendency to sort, to categorize, will not die. How often do we as children, even adult children, do this to ourselves? How often do we tend to identify ourselves not by who we are, but by who our sibling is not? He was always the student in the family, we say. I just got by. In my own family, my brother and I very efficiently sorted ourselves into the smart one and the popular one (and without much help from our parents, I should add). How many years was it before the popular one began to see his (or her!) own brilliance, the smart one to recognize her (or his!) social skills? And what opportunities were lost to each of us during those years when we defined ourselves, at least in part, by what we saw in the other and therefore not in ourselves?

Esau was a brute, while Jacob was clever. And so we are led to believe that Esau was never clever, and that Jacob was never a brute. Yet we know this is false, and we know it by the very same text. How much cunning was required to be a successful hunter in

those days? How brutish is the act of using trickery to steal your own twin's birthright?
Each one was human, each contained a universe, each was a whole.

One of the most beautiful rabbinic interpretations of Toldot teaches us that Isaac and Rebekkah's family of four constituted an ideal that each individual member of it could not attain on his or her own. Together, Isaac and Rebekkah loved their children, even though as individuals they could not meet this ideal. Together, Esau and Jacob possessed the qualities necessary to be a great leader, although neither did standing alone. Some Chasidic rabbis go further to suggest that rather than impersonating Esau, Jacob actually *became* Esau, bringing his leadership gifts with him as he stepped into the firstborn's vitality and accepted his blessing and his fate. It is this picture of wholeness, of completion, that speaks to me in Toldot. May we continue to heed the message of this portion as we recognize the wholeness in each other and in our families.

Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.