



Around the Shabbat Table

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Shalom!

Introduction

The matriarch Rebekah plays a major role in this week's Torah portion, Toledot. After experiencing infertility followed by a difficult pregnancy Rebekah gives birth to twins. Esau, the elder, grew up to be a hunter and was the favorite of his father Isaac. Jacob, the younger and his mother's favorite child, was less athletic and more cerebral than his older brother. Jacob was both clever and cunning when he obtained the birthright, the prerogative of the eldest son, from Esau.

Because of famine Isaac and his very beautiful wife Rebekah travel to Gerar where God reaffirms the covenant with Isaac promising to make his descendants as numerous "as the stars of heaven" and to give them the land of Canaan. Isaac settles in Gerar, and like his father Abraham, tells the people that his wife Rebekah is his sister in order to protect his own life. When the king, Abimelech, learns of this deception he is furious and tells his people that death will be the punishment for anyone who harms Isaac or Rebekah. They settle in Gerar where Isaac uncovers the wells that had been dug by his father, Abraham, and covered up by the Philistines. There were disputes between the herdsmen of Gerar and those of Isaac as to who had rights to the water. Rather than quarrel Isaac moves from well to well and after making a peace treaty with Abimelech, he settles in Beersheba.

Years pass and Isaac is now old, going blind, and feels that his death is imminent. He asks Esau to hunt then prepare for him some fresh game so that he can enjoy a good meal before giving Esau his "heartfelt blessing". At this point, Rebekah, who overhears them acts to change history and to insure that the blessing and the leadership of the people will fall to her favored son, Jacob. Rebekah, like Jacob, acts with cunning and cleverness, dressing Jacob in Esau's clothing, and covering his arms with the skin of kids to make them hairy. She then prepares Isaac's favorite dishes for Jacob to bring to his father. In speaking with his younger son, Isaac utters the oft quoted verse, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau," and he is "fooled" into blessing Jacob.

Esau is furious when he returns from hunting and discovers that once again Jacob has outwitted him. Esau prevails upon his father to also give him a blessing. Despite the fact that Isaac complies, Esau has already been outsmarted because through the first blessing Jacob has already

achieved great wealth and leadership of the family. His mother learns that Esau wants revenge and is planning to kill his brother. The resourceful Rebekah takes quick action and informs her younger son that he must leave immediately for Haran and take refuge in the home of her brother Laban. After a final blessing from his father, Isaac, and a warning not to take a Canaanite wife, Jacob flees to Haran.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. After the birth of the twins the Torah tells us that “Isaac favored Esau, because he [Esau] put game into his mouth, but Rebekah favored Jacob.” (Gen. 25:28)
 - a. How did parental favoritism affect the relationship between Jacob and Esau?
 - b. Is it possible for parents to love children equally? Is it possible for parents to treat children equally? Is it “fair” to treat children equally if one child has “special needs” either physically, mentally, or psychologically?
 - c. Do you feel there is favoritism towards one child in your family? Have you ever have a family discussion about this issue?
2. Why do you think so many people in the Bible, such as Rebekah and Jacob, behave in ways we might criticize as being sneaky, unfair, or immoral? What do you think the Torah is trying to teach us?
3. Describe the different personalities of Jacob and Esau. Which brother do you think had the best chance of being a good leader? Why?
4. Isaac opened up the wells that had been dug in the time of Abraham and found good water. Some commentators see a great deal of symbolism in this story; for example, the well water could symbolize knowledge that must be released to be beneficial. What “living waters” lie deep within you ready to be released?
5. How would you describe Rebekah based upon her behavior in Toledot? How would you describe Isaac? Which of them was the stronger?



Texts to Wrestle With

1. Concerning favoritism the rabbis instruct parents to “Love equally all your children. Sometimes the favored disappoint, and the neglected make you happy.” (*Berekiah Ha-Nakdan, Mishle Shualim*) and “Play no favoritism: Because Joseph got a multicolored coat, the brothers “hated him.” (*Genesis Rabbah 84:8*)
2. The psychologist Haim Ginott writes as follows concerning parental favoritism and sibling rivalry:
 - “Those who want to be superfair to each child often end up being furious with all their children. Nothing is so self-defeating as measured fairness. When a mother cannot give a bigger apple or a stronger hug to one child for fear of antagonizing the other, life becomes unbearable....
 - Children do not yearn for equal shares of love: they need to be loved uniquely, not uniformly. The emphasis is on quality, not equality. We do not love all our children the same way, and there is no need to pretend that we do. We love each child uniquely, and we do not have to labor so hard to cover it up.” (*Between Parent and Child, Macmillan, New York, 1965, pp127-132*)
 - a. As a parent which text best exemplifies your attitude towards child rearing? As a child which statement would you prefer your parents to live by?
 - b. As a parent do you agree or disagree with Dr. Ginott? As a child do you understand what this psychologist is saying? Do you agree or disagree with him?
3. Was Isaac really fooled? The great commentator Rashi offers three different reasons for Isaac’s disability:
 - a. “One, verse 1 follows directly on the statement that because Esau had married a foreign woman, the father’s grief caused his eyes to dim.
 - b. Two, the angels cried when they saw Abraham ready to kill his son, and their tears fell into Isaac’s eyes...
 - c. Three, Isaac wanted Jacob to have the blessing all along and thus “turned a blind eye” to the charade”

A Midrash tells us that: “The moment Isaac heard his son mention God’s name (27;20) He knew it was Jacob, and not Esau.”

- Do you think Isaac knew that he was blessing Jacob?
 - Why or why not?
4. In Toldot there are many tricks or deceptions which lead to Jacob’s succeeding his father Isaac. Roland De Vaux, writes: No, it is a deception that is reported by Scripture without being approved by it. The mystery is that of God’s action who uses for His ends even human faults yet remains completely sovereign in His choice. He had preferred Jacob over Esau even before their birth.”
 - Are the actions of Jacob and Rebekah in Toldot justifiable? Do the ends justify the means? Does the Torah condemn or condone their actions?

Towards an Action Agenda

1. To learn more about Dr. Ginott's ideas regarding child rearing read one of the following books: *Between Parent and Child* or *Between Parent and Teenager*.
2. Make a Family *Brit* (Covenant) or a Family Ten Commandments stating how your family should treat and be treated by its members.
3. Discuss with your family members some wishes, thoughts or ideas that are hidden in your hearts waiting to be released. Together can you make any of these hidden wishes come true?



Shabbat Shalom

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

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