



Around the Shabbat Table

**Parashat Toledot 5762
November 2001**

*This week's writer: Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan,
Director of Nassau / Queens Services, Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York*

Shalom!

Introduction

This week the Torah portion of Toledot is read in our synagogues. Toledot is part of the continuing biblical narrative of the history of our ancestors, in this case, focusing largely on the complex relationships between Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, and Esav.

A central story in the parasha concerns the blessings which Isaac is to pass along to his twin sons, Jacob and Esav. Early in the Torah portion, we learn that Esav sells the right of the first-born to Isaac (possibly including the right to a first blessing). As the story continues, we are told that Isaac's eyesight is failing and he is preparing for his own death (which, interestingly enough, does not occur until much later). He summons Esav, asking him to hunt for game and prepare it as he likes, after which Isaac will give him his special blessing.

The plot thickens when Rebecca overhears the conversation. Knowing that Jacob is deserving of this blessing, she hatches a plot to make sure that he will get the blessing instead. Rebecca tells Jacob to go and bring her two young goats for her to prepare. When Jacob objects, telling her that Isaac, even with his poor eyesight, will be able to tell the difference, she coaches Jacob to disguise himself using goat skins, so that, to the touch, Jacob will appear as Esav.

Through this subterfuge, Jacob is able to receive Isaac's blessing. Nonetheless, Esav too, receives a blessing. As the parasha concludes, Jacob flees his family's home in fear that Esav will avenge Jacob's actions in obtaining the blessing.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. The Torah mentions Isaac's failing eyesight, possibly to set the stage for the drama that will unfold. If *physical* eyesight is meant, the story simply implies that Isaac was unable to see which son was in front of him. Is there another type of "sight" that might be meant here? Are Isaac's perceptions of which son is more deserving of favor inaccurate due to a deficiency in some other type of "sight?"
2. Was Rebecca's advice to Jacob right? Would it change your opinion if you knew that the right to the blessing had been sold to Jacob previously?
3. Was Jacob right to follow Rebecca's advice? What should a person do if his idea of right and wrong conflict with the view of his/her parent(s)?

Some Texts to Wrestle With

"Praised are You, Lord our God, master of the universe, who opens the eyes of the blind." (Daily prayer book) -- Interestingly enough, this blessing is recited even by one who is physically blind.

"The integrity of the upright shall guide them; but the perverseness of the faithless shall destroy them." (Proverbs 11:3)

Towards an Action Agenda

The story of the blessing is set up by references to "blindness." An organization called the Jewish Braille Institute distributes books on tape to blind people. They are always looking for volunteers (including those willing to record books on tape. To volunteer, contact them at 212-889-2525 or toll free at 1-800-433-1531, or e-mail admin@jewishbraille.org

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

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact us at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Nassau / Queens Center of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. This project has been funded through a generous grant by the Long Island Program Services Committee of UJA-Federation of New York.