



Around the Shabbat Table

**Toledot 5763
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Shalom!

Introduction

Parashat Toledot (Generations), which is read this week in our synagogues, focuses on the complex relationships between our ancestors: Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca and Esav. Two themes that run through the *parasha* are blindness and deception, both literal and figurative.

After many years of trying to start a family, Isaac and Rebecca were blessed with a set of fraternal twins. Esav was born first, and he was covered with red hair. Jacob followed Esav, holding on to his brother's heel. Early in the Torah portion, we learn that Esav sold the right of the first-born to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew. Although receiving the "birthright" was an honor, it came with responsibilities. These included religious leadership, taking care of younger brothers and sisters, and ultimately receiving the largest share of family possessions.

When it came time for Isaac to bless his eldest son (supposedly in preparation for his upcoming death), Isaac directed Esav to hunt game and prepare a meal for him. Rebecca overheard the conversation and convinced Jacob to deceive his father, whose sight was failing, by disguising himself as Esav. We are led to believe that Isaac was aware of the deception: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esav," but Isaac blesses Jacob nonetheless. When Esav returns from the hunt, Isaac gives him a blessing as well.

The *parasha* concludes with Jacob fleeing his family's home in fear that Esav will avenge Jacob's trickery. As he leaves, he is counseled by his mother, Rebecca, not to stay and marry a Canaanite woman.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion:

1. Was it okay for Jacob to steal the blessing meant for his brother Esav? Does the fact that Esau had already sold his birthright to Jacob change your opinion?
2. Was it acceptable for Rebecca to plan the trick that enabled Jacob to steal the blessing intended for Esav? Was Rebecca doing the right thing when she schemed to have Jacob flee from the family home?
3. If Isaac questioned whether he was really blessing Esav, why did he go ahead and bless Jacob anyway? Does the concept of Isaac's "failing sight" apply to something other than physical eyesight? It is ironic that when he had his sight, he favored Esav, and it was only with his blindness that he was able to give Jacob the blessing.
4. Is it possible that Esav allowed himself to be cheated because he didn't want the responsibility of being a patriarch of the Jewish people?

Some Texts to Wrestle With:

In light of Jacob and Esav's relationship, discuss these two verses from the Talmud:

"Show no partiality among your sons. Treat them all alike" (Shabbat 10)

"Honor your father and thy mother"- including, also, your older brother"
(Ketubot 103).

In Genesis 26:34,35, we learn that Esav's Hittite wives "were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca." Do you think Esav's action demonstrates indifference to his parents' values? As the portion unfolds, however, we see that although Esav married outside the faith, he maintained a relationship with his parents. How would/did your family react to a member's interdating or intermarriage?

There are several instances in this *parasha* when lies are told. Identify these instances and figure out the following:

- Was the lie justified?
- Are there times when telling the truth would be more harmful than telling a lie?
- Have you told a lie recently? What did you do, and why? Do you feel your lie was justified?

What do you think about the concept of a "birthright?" Throughout the Book of Genesis, the passing on of blessings to the firstborn and the content of those blessings is clearly detailed. Using the Encyclopedia Judaica (which you might find in your synagogue's library), as well as secular sources, research the rights of the firstborn in different cultures.



Towards an Action Agenda:

Rebecca exemplifies a strong woman who effects change from behind the scenes. Rebecca did not wait to receive a command from God but rather seized the opportunity to carry out God's prophecy by having Jacob, not Esav, receive Isaac's blessing. What rights have women assumed in recent years? How has our society changed from increased participation from women? Find out what the term "glass ceiling" means and how it relates to women.

Our forefather Isaac was the first sabra among the patriarchs, the one closest to the soil, the one most in harmony with nature. Isaac sought God in and through nature. Today, the earth is endangered by our prosperity and carelessness. What can you do to help? How can you prevent our earth's resources from being destroyed? One possibility is to participate in beach clean-up activities. Another is recycling, while a third is to be conscious of leaving lights on or water running. To find out about how Judaism and the Jewish community respond to environmental concerns, check out the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life at <http://www.coejl.org/learn/>

Since Isaac's "blindness" is such a central issue in Toledot, investigate the resources offered by the Jewish Braille Institute. They are always looking for volunteers (including those willing to record books on tape). Learn more about their services and how to volunteer by going to: <http://www.jewishbraille.org/>

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

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: <http://www.bjeny.org/>

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