



Around the Shabbat Table Shabbat Toledot 5764

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Introduction

Parshat Toldot includes stories and scenes that are among the most famous in the bible: The birth of Jacob and Esau, the struggle between the brothers which began in their mother's womb and at birth, and continued through their lifetime. During the years of the struggle, Esau, at a moment of weakness, "sold" his birthright to Jacob. Next, Jacob succeeded by collaborating with his mother, Rebekah, to trick Isaac, the twins' father, into giving Jacob his blessing. Isaac had planned to bestow on Esau a blessing upon receiving the meal Esau would have prepared for his father from his own hunting experience.

Let us examine a couple of these events. The whole saga began with Rebekah's pregnancy. While suffering a difficult pregnancy, Rebekah, in her private prayer at a holy site, learned from God that she was carrying twins who would become the ancestors of different people. She was told by God that the older twin would someday serve the younger. It is quite possible that Rebekah never shared this oracle with her husband Isaac. Although the promise was vague, she understood it to mean that Jacob, the younger twin, and not Esau, the first-born, was destined to be the "chosen son". Thus, when she overheard her husband preparing to bless Esau "before I die", she felt that she must insure that her beloved son Jacob would receive his father's blessing, not Esau. She helped Jacob disguise his appearance to look, feel and smell like Esau, the hunter, and even serve the food Esau would have served. When Esau discovered the deceit, he is hurt and angry, vowing to kill Jacob. Rebekah became aware of Esau's threat and was fearful. She faced a dilemma: She knew that the best thing for Jacob was to escape Esau's wrath and therefore Jacob must be sent away. But she is reluctant to make Isaac aware of the animosity between their two sons. How can she convince Isaac that Jacob must be sent away? Rebekah told Isaac of her concern that Jacob would marry one of the local women, which was unacceptable to both Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac then made the decision to send Jacob away to Rebekah's original family in Haran. Upon Jacob's leaving on his unknown journey, Isaac gave him the "Abrahamic Blessing".

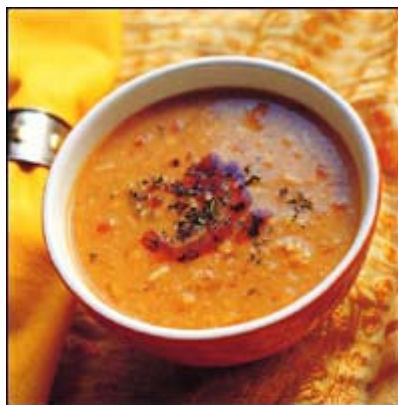
Rebekah would never see her favorite son again. The Torah never mentions her death, and Jacob will suffer most of his life.

There is another very profound story in Parashat Toldot that is usually not discussed much and even glossed over. It is Jacob's relationship with the Philistines among whom he

lived. This story tells us about Isaac's every day life and interaction with the local population.

We know very little about Isaac's life. The Torah does tell us in one verse that he was very successful in agriculture and became very wealthy. What is puzzling is why, with so little told about him, our *parasha* devotes about nine verses to tell us about Isaac's work with wells; his digging them and his effort to restore the wells built by his father. The Philistines tried to block his plan, but he was able to reactivate the wells three or four times.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary suggests that the story of Isaac and the wells "points to the loyalty of Isaac to his father's legacy. Isaac does not merely reside where his father once lived, not only does he drink from the same water, but more importantly, abides by the teaching he embodied." Rabbi Schorsch sees the son's action as symbolic of healing the painful relationship of Abraham the father and Isaac the son. "It is no accident", says the Chancellor, "that the first time Isaac perceives the God who addresses him as the God of his father, occurs directly after the restoration of the wells." Isaac needed time and his own way to integrate his fathers' teachings and traditions to make them his own. Transmission of legacy, of a tradition is a dynamic process, must be interactive and must be actively pursued to be internalized and make it our own.



Questions for your Family's Discussion

In the introduction we discussed two major themes in the *parasha*: a. The problems in Isaac's and Rebekah's family regarding their relationships with their twin sons and the twin sons' interpersonal relationship; b. Isaac's digging of wells as a metaphor for Isaac's actively internalizing his father's legacy, teaching and values. Please discuss the following:

1. How do you explain the fact that Isaac did not know about the problems in his own house?
2. Do you find it strange that Isaac prefers Esau, "a skilled hunter, a man of the outdoors who, according to Rabbi Schorsch, "scarcely exhibits any interest in such matters as justice and righteousness that we identify with Abraham?" Explain your reasons.
3. In Rabbinic interpretations and discussions, water stands for Torah. This association makes sense: both Torah and water are life-giving. Given this, explain

your understanding of Isaac's digging of the wells as symbolizing the re-claiming of Abraham's traditions and teachings

4. The Philistines tried to prevent Isaac from digging wells and fought at least three of his attempts to restore his father's wells. Today's Palestinians take their name from those of the ancient Philistines (although historically speaking, there is no relationship). Taking this image, try to relate how contemporary "Philistines" are trying similarly to curb development of actualizing a legacy?

Texts to Wrestle With

Compare the two blessings that Jacob received from his father. The first one, when he deceived his father claiming to be Esau and the second as he leaves his parents house to go into Exile. What makes the second blessing the real **link in the chain**, the real continuation of the family legacy? How does the first blessing fit in? How does the first blessing fit in? How does it relate to what Rebekah learned at the holy site while pregnant?

"May God give you
Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the
earth,
Abundance of new grain and wine.
Let peoples serve you,
And nations bow to you;
Be master over your brothers,
And let your mother's sons bow to you.
Cursed be they who curse you,
Blessed they who bless you."

"May El Shaddai bless you, make you
fertile and numerous, so that you
become an assembly of peoples. May
he grant the blessing of Abraham to
you and your offspring, that you may
possess the land where you are
sojourning, which God gave to
Abraham



Towards an Action Agenda

(From "Teaching Torah" by Sorel Goldberg and Barbara Binder Kadden, Published by ARE)

- 1) Isaac dug a number of wells providing water for his family and herds. Isaac was not carrying out a sophisticated irrigation project, but he was in a way reclaiming the land and making it more fertile. A major project in Israel has been reclaiming desert lands and making them bloom. The work has largely been carried out by the Jewish

National Fund. Contact your local J.N. F. representative for information, brochures, program materials, and films. Mount a campaign to raise funds for trees in Israel.

- 2) The red pottage for which Esau begged and which he received at such a dear price must certainly have been delicious. Try the following recipe:

Mujeddrah

(Rice with Lentils, Esau style)

- 1 cup brown lentils
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 cup long grain rice
- 2 cups water
- 2 large onions, sliced in rings
- 2 tablespoons vegetables or olive oil

1. Pick over the lentils; wash and drain. Boil in water with one teaspoon salt for about 30 minutes, or until tender.
2. In another pan, bring water to a boil. Add the rice and the remaining one teaspoon salt. Turn off the heat and let sit until the lentils are ready.
3. Drain and rinse the lentils and rice. Combine. Bring about 1 ½ cups water to a boil. Put in the lentils and rice, cover and simmer slowly about 20 minutes, or until the rice is cooked.
4. Sauté the onions in oil until golden. Add to the cooked rice and lentils.

From *The Jewish Holiday Kitchen* by Joan Nathan. Copyright 1979 Schocken Books Inc.



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