

Toldot: “A Potato, An Egg, Coffee, and a Knife”

Sermon 2022

Shabbat shalom, everybody.

Once upon a time a daughter complained to her mother that life wasn't fair. “I feel like I can't control anything”, she said.

Her mother, a chef, didn't say anything. Instead, she took her out to the kitchen. She took four identical pots, filled them each with the same amount of water, and brought the water to a boil over the fire.

Into the first pot, her mother dropped a raw potato.

Into the second pot, her mother delicately placed a raw egg.

Into the third pot, she stirred freshly ground coffee beans.

And into the final pot, she slipped a steel chopping knife.

The daughter was confused. “Mother”, she said, “You're not listening to me. I'm telling you that I feel powerless. And all you're doing is making breakfast!”

“Shhhh”, said her mother. “Wait.”

A few minutes later, her mother carefully took the pots off of the fire. She put the egg and the potato on a plate and poured the coffee into a mug, handing all of it to her daughter. She took out the knife and lay it on the table.

Then she asked, **“*Daughter, what do you see?*”**

**“*I see a potato, an egg, coffee, and a knife*”** the daughter replied.

**“*Look closer*”** her mother said, **“*and touch the potato.*”** The daughter did and she noticed that even though the potato had started out hard, in the boiling water it had become soft and mushy.

She then touched the egg and noticed that though it had once been fragile, in the boiling water it had become hard and strong.

Then, she sipped the coffee (mmm, coffee!) and a smile spread across her face at the delicious taste that the boiling water had released from the beans.

***“You see, daughter?” said the mother. “The same boiling water affected the potato, the egg, and the coffee in different ways. Life is like that boiling water: It is what we are given. We can’t control where we are born or what we are taught as young children. But we can control how we respond to what life gives us-- what we do with those lessons. We can choose, sometimes, to what extent we want to grow soft, or grow hard, or become something new entirely.***

***“I understand, mother”, said the daughter. “But what about the knife? It is just as hard, and just as sharp, right now, as before it went into the boiling water.”***

***“Ah”, said the mother. “But the boiling water DID change the knife. The knife is now kosher.”***

Now that I’ve gotten us all in the mood for some freshly brewed coffee-- and, I’m truly sorry about that-- let’s learn a little Torah.

If we look at the story of the boiling water through a Jewish lens, at least for the purpose of this drash today, then the boiling water is our Torah.

Yes, the boiling water is Torah: It is given to us. It gives us life; it is our sometimes confusing, sometimes frustrating guide; our font

of nourishment; our ongoing, mysterious, powerful source for inspiration and change.

And, just like the boiling water, which causes the potato to soften, the egg to harden, the coffee to brew, and the knife to become mysteriously kosher again, the Torah can influence different people, different situations, and different moments differently. Well-versed, well-read Jews can cite the lessons of the Torah in support or opposition of all kinds of stances. We can also feel pulled in different directions when multiple Jewish values may seem to contradict one another in regards to an issue. This is part of how we see Jews on different sides of political debates. It's also part of how we have evolved to have multiple denominations and attitudes towards Jewish law.

And yet-- even with all of our differences-- the boiling water remains the same. Our Torah, those scrolls, are sacred, and they are sacred to all Jews, whether we are taking them at the *pshat*, at the face value, or whether we are digging deeper for hidden meanings, as has long been a tradition of our people.

I'm going to give you an example of that deeper digging. There's a famous verse that decrees that consequences should be an "eye for an eye", or the many verses invoking capital punishment,

very directly, unambiguously. And yet, what happened? The rabbis had a choice. And over the centuries, they developed a system of law which did not reflect the which have been interpreted pretty much across the board, for centuries, as NOT the way that we believe a Jewish society is supposed to run.

Even though it is one of our central tenets to honor the words and lessons of our Torah, and even though the literal words in the Torah itself are quite clear in these cases, calling for strict and swift punishments, we as a people have chosen to prioritize a more humane system of justice which errs instead on the side of preserving innocent life, because we know our human justice systems are fallible and make mistakes.

Both the desire to honor the words of the Torah itself, and the desire to preserve life, are important Jewish values. And yet, the rabbis had to wrestle with how to reconcile them. The rabbis had a choice to make, and they chose to go deeper.

So. How did those rabbis centuries ago get to the point that they believed that it was acceptable to God to interpret the Torah this way? How did they know what the Torah truly meant? They could have just as easily-- perhaps even more easily-- taken those same verses and decided that the best way forward would be one

where we literally, to this day, would advocate taking someone's eye out as a punishment. After all, that's what it says in the Torah.

There are cultures in this world, unfortunately, where we see just this level of fanaticism playing out today, and just this refusal to go deeper.

It's a question at the core of our theology, as a people valuing both our sacred and ancient traditions and wanting to exist honestly and fairly in the modern world.

What CHOICES do we actually have, when it comes to Torah and the word of God?

What is given to us-- what is beyond our control-- what is like that boiling water that the potato and the coffee and the knife are put into-- what is the part we cannot choose, and what is the part that we can? What is the part that it is our duty to interpret as best we can?

How do we know when we are supposed to stand our ground, to dig in our heels, to strengthen ourselves like that egg in the boiling water?

How do we know when we are supposed to soak in the Torah and let it soften us and make us malleable and vulnerable, like the potato?

How do we know when we're supposed to sit with the Torah and let it transform us together into something even more beautiful, like the coffee?

And how do we know when we are supposed to just have faith, to surrender, and to accept that we may not understand everything about the Torah, but that following its lessons makes us holy, makes us kosher, like that knife, and that this holiness is, in and of itself, worth it? Even if we don't quite understand the logic behind it, or if it's not easy to see?

Spoiler alert: different denominations, different rabbis, and different Jews will all give you different answers here. One Jew may even give you different answers on a case-by-case basis.

And I'd like to offer you my take on the issue using today's Torah Portion.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah's sons, Jacob and Esau, is famous. Or perhaps infamous. Like almost all of our biblical

family stories, it's a masterclass in how not to communicate and how not to build healthy relationships.

But I've got to share with you-- whenever I read this story, I also always end up thinking something like "Wait a minute. Didn't God set this all up? Didn't God predetermine the entire mess before the boys were even born? Did they actually have any hope at all of NOT turning out this way?"

To quote, in Genesis 25, verse 23, after Rebekah has reached out to God because she is suffering through a difficult pregnancy, God says: "Two nations are in your womb, and two kingdoms will separate from you, and one kingdom will become mightier than the other, and the elder will serve the younger."

See? There! Like I was saying! God knew, right? It was all foretold, it was all fate. Jacob had to plot for the birthright. There was clearly no other option.

.....or was there?

In the subsequent verses, we read about the boys' birth, about their complexions, about their talents-- and then, we read that the parents do not love them equally. Isaac clearly favors Esau. And Rebekah clearly favors Jacob.

Now, how much of this favoring is because of what God said while Rebekah was pregnant? We don't know, we really don't. One could make the argument that Rebekah was strategically favoring Jacob because she believed that he would be the more important son later on in life. Or that she was, piously, trying to bring God's words into fruition. Or, perhaps, she honestly didn't think about God's prediction much, 'cause she had her hands full with two twin babies, and she just genuinely had a special connection with Jacob, and Isaac, a special connection with Esau.

We don't know. All we know is what is reported to us: that they clearly and openly favored one child over the other, and developed imbalanced relationships that were clearly seen by the children themselves. These relationships, and their nuances, were not in the prediction foretold by God.

They were choices. Human choices. Human interpretations. Human mistakes.

Then, we see the fateful interaction between Esau and Jacob, where Jacob withholds food from his hungry brother until his brother swears away his birthright. What? Was this foretold anywhere in what God told to Rebekah before the twins were born? No!

Why in the world would Esau take such an oath so lightly? And if he was truly on death's door, and food was being withheld, would an oath extracted under such duress even count? Besides, had Rebekah and Isaac taught their sons ANYTHING about their responsibilities to each other and to the family? It sure doesn't seem like it. What deeply ingrained wounds and bitterness must have already festered-- for a long time-- in order for Jacob to torment his brother with a bowl of lentils?

These were choices. Human choices. Human interpretations. Human mistakes! God didn't decree those choices.

And then, when all is said and done, when Jacob has completed his subterfuge and received Isaac's blessing meant for his brother, one thing I've never quite understood is why, in the world, Isaac couldn't find it in him to give Esau a wholehearted and positive blessing, a different one, one of love, one of hope, one of reconciliation. And why did Isaac and Rebekah send Jacob away, in fear, instead of working to heal the wrong that had been done to their family? Why did they choose to encourage distance instead of communication?

There were so, so many human choices made in this story! So many human interpretations and mistakes. So many values at

play, and our ancestors were torn between them. In this week's parashah, we see those ancestors making decisions that don't foster unity, that don't strengthen the family, that don't promote communication and peace, all of which are strong Jewish values.

What would it have looked like if Isaac and Rebekah had approached the situation differently? What would have happened if they had chosen to interpret and react to God's prediction from a different angle?

We can't know for sure.

And yet, I can't believe that we were created to sit back and simply take what life gives us, to not try to better ourselves, to not try to work for the ideals that our Torah so values.

The beauty is, we do have a choice.

And that's why the story of Jacob and Esau is such a perfect one for us to learn from today. This story shows us both how humans did NOT react ideally to a situation, and then, later on, shows us how humans can make the choice to go deeper, to improve the hand they were dealt, and to find a holier path. Let me explain:

Jacob and Esau didn't choose to be born as twins into a family that had received that challenging prophecy. This was the boiling water they were thrust into. They didn't choose to have parents who developed biased relationships with them, rife with favoritism, and who didn't ingrain in them the values and practices that might have led to a different outcome. That prophecy, and that family, is one they were born into. That prophecy, to return to our story from the beginning of this drash, was their boiling water.

And just like the potato, and the egg, and the coffee grounds, that boiling water shaped them. It made Jacob willing to lie and cheat; it made Esau unwilling to properly value his birthright; it embittered their parents and lessened the possibility of balanced connections to their children.

But then-- later in life-- Jacob and Esau make a choice.

We didn't read it in today's Torah portion, but what happens to Jacob and Esau later on?

What happens to these two brothers, who, through no fault of their own, were raised in one of the most famously dysfunctional families known to history?

Once they've been removed from that situation, years later, they meet, again, on a road.

And Jacob sends gifts of apology.

And Esau and Jacob embrace, and they weep, and they forgive each other.

And that was the moment, that was the moment, that was kasher.

They were still born from that same messy situation, still caught in that boiling water, but something invisible, some deeper change, happened.

That forgiveness wasn't in the prophecy.

That forgiveness wasn't commanded to them, or handed to them. That forgiveness was a choice, and a choice they both made, despite the challenges that had been handed them.

They chose, in that moment, to tap into something bigger than themselves: to tap into the holy undercurrent of peace, the potential for harmony, that surrounds us, and that is there, I would argue, in every word of our sacred Torah. That current of potential is always there, even in our most difficult moments-- but

it is up to us to open ourselves to it. Like the knife in the boiling water, when we open ourselves up in this way, though we may not change externally, we become holy. We grow internally.

We are all, as humans, given life. We all have choices about how we are shaped by that life, and to what extent.

But we are also Jews, which means we are also given Torah. Sometimes, the lessons from the Torah will make us feel strong, and sometimes, they will make us feel soft and vulnerable. Sometimes we will be able to control the outcome, and sometimes we will not. But sometimes we will have to make the hardest choice, and surrender and have faith, to be like the knife, to believe that important changes are worth the effort, even if they aren't immediately visible.

We can learn, from our ancestors Jacob and Esau, that we are not only bound by our fate, and not only by prophecy, and not only by the words of Torah, but also by our own choices in how to embody Jewish values in our life.

Torah is like living water, and it is up to us to find a balance: to choose when to harden our resolve like the egg and double down, when to be malleable like the potato, when to surrender to

holiness, like the knife, and when to transform ourselves--like coffee.

Mmmm, Coffee. Shabbat shalom!