

**D'VAR TORAH BY: RABBI MICHAEL DOLGIN**

When reading [Parashat Tol'dot](#) each year, I am amazed how relevant these ancient stories remain today, including the last significant moment in Isaac's life.

There are not many stories that feature Isaac, and yet many of us know of the traumatic moment when he gives his blessing.

Visually impaired and laying on his deathbed, he offers to bless his son Esau once he brings him game to eat, but with cueing from his mother Rebecca, Jacob stands before his father wearing his brother's clothes and animal skins on his arms, imitating his hairier sibling. While Jacob is aware that he is assuming a dishonest role, he participates as if he can pass the guilt of his own morally corrupt actions on to his mother.

As Jacob approaches, Isaac asks him who he is. When Jacob claims to be Esau, Isaac comments, "The hands belong Esau but the voice belongs to Jacob." It is abundantly clear that Isaac knows this cannot be Esau. He even asks Jacob to reconfirm his false identity in Genesis 27:18, 20, 21, 22, and 24. His physical inability to see becomes a willful blindness to the dishonesty that surrounds him. Isaac can no longer look away when, having given Esau's blessing to Jacob, Esau comes in with game hoping to receive that blessing as well. Isaac is unable to cope with the truth that is revealed before him.

Esau asserts his place as the firstborn and his right to the blessing, unaware of the trickery of his mother and brother and complicity of his father. In verse 33, we read that Isaac "was seized with very violent trembling." This is far from surprising; his family's dysfunction and animosity would be enough to make anyone tremble. However, the commentators clarify that there is a deeper dis-ease being expressed in this scene.

The midrash asserts that Isaac trembled twice in his life: when his father Abraham tied him to the altar and prepared to sacrifice him, and at the moment we discuss here. Which trembling is more

profound? Unanimously and surprisingly, the answer is that the story of the blessings is more traumatic. This emotional wave of fear causes him to tremble “*ad m’od*.” These Hebrew words are translated as “exceedingly,” but “*m’od*,” the Hebrew word for “very,” refers specifically to our core humanity.

Humans can be “*tov m’od*,” “very good,” and we are called to love God “*b’chol m’odecha*,” “with all of our being.” Our most famous commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki of Worms, or Rashi, evokes an even more powerful image. Rashi quotes (without citing) the midrash Tanchuma, saying that Isaac saw hell (Geihinom) opening beneath him.

Both of these descriptions are shocking: How could Isaac find this moment even more painful than being bound on the altar by his own father? Judaism rarely invokes the image of hell, so why here? Perhaps the answers are found in the symbolism of Esau. In rabbinic literature, Esau represents Rome: the empire that conquered the Jewish people, desecrated our holy places, and destroyed the Temple. In this passage, we can discern the roots of our conflict with the civilization that surrounded and dominated us.

The issue is fundamentally the lack of honesty in this biblical family. Esau and Jacob (who represents Israel) maneuver and deceive rather than interact truthfully. Their game offers a lesson for today: The greatest threat to our civilization is a failure to communicate in an open way, combined with an unwillingness to listen to one another.

In his commentary *Pardes Yosef*, Yosef Patzanovski takes it even further. He says, “Fear and trembling took hold of Isaac when, in a spirit of prophecy, he saw the results of hatred.” Patzanovski knew this lesson all too well; he was murdered by the Nazis on the 2nd of Sivan in the Lodz Ghetto, four days after the death of his wife, leaving his Torah commentary uncompleted.

To this day, hatred continues to run rampant in our world, and we dare not grow accustomed to it. Perhaps, like Isaac, we should tremble a bit more at the possible outcomes of what is happening today in our world. We should recommit ourselves to truth, openness, and communication, and we must find the courage to stand against those who choose evil.

Willful blindness is not a curiosity. It presents a profound danger to all we hold dear.