

Abraham Begat Isaac...
Parashat Toldot
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Shabbat shalom.

Today's Torah portion, *Toldot*, begins with a simple statement, and I'm going to focus this morning entirely on only this first verse:

יְצַחֵק בֶּן אַבְרָהָם אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ אַיִלֵּה תוֹלְדוֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת יִצְחָק
Ay-leh toldot Yitzhak ben Avraham, Avraham holeed et Yizhak. "This is the story (literally, these are the generations) of Isaac the son of Abraham; Abraham begat Isaac."

Now one of the foundational principles of Torah interpretation is that there are no extra or superfluous words in the Torah, so it raises the question: if Isaac was Abraham's son, why does the text need to also say that Abraham begat him?

One obvious answer: who your father is really matters, and often the most important thing you can say about someone is indeed to identify their father. Certainly if Oedipus had known who his father was, he would have taken steps *not* to kill him. And whether or not you're a Star Wars aficionado, we all remember those five most famous words from the entire film series, when Darth Vader proclaims, "Luke, I am your father."¹ On the lighter side, about a year and a half ago, I was watching an episode of the game show Jeopardy, and during that break in the first round when host Alex Trebek asks each contestant for an anecdote about themselves, one young woman said that as a child she had actually thought that Alex was her father, because her father had a similar mustache and glasses and arrived home from work every night right after that show ended, and she never saw the two of them in the same room at the same time.²

But let's look at our verse from a different angle. Suppose the Torah states emphatically that Abraham begat Isaac because it's concerned that you might actually think that someone else was the father. Now why would you possibly think that? Well, let's look at the text elsewhere in Genesis. After a long period of infertility as a couple, Sarah gave her servant Hagar to Abraham as a concubine, and the text says, "He came to Hagar, and she conceived."³ (Note that in biblical Hebrew the word *va-yavo* וַיָּבֹא, meaning "he came," has the same sexual connotation as it does in modern English usage.) If we look at the story of Hannah, another famous infertile woman in the Bible, the text says

¹ In reality, this is a famous "misquote." He actually said, "No, I am your father." See <https://m.imdb.com/news/ni0780269>. The clip can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwtaMOGC-js>

² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1906038426113731> (you might need a Facebook account to view this)

³ Genesis 16:4

“Elkanah (her husband) was intimate with his wife, and Adonai remembered her.”⁴ So, when Sarah finally conceived, what does the text say? Simply, “Adonai took note of Sarah, as He had promised, and she conceived...”⁵ Where is the mention of any physical intimacy between the couple? It simply isn’t there. Now, admittedly, not every conception in the Torah is preceded by a mention of cohabitation, but the absence of it in this case, in contrast to its explicit mention in parallel circumstances, strikes me as odd.

So, if I dare suggest that Abraham might not have been Isaac’s biological father, then who? Well, I would propose that maybe one of the angel messengers who came to visit Abraham at the beginning of parashat *Vayeira*, which we read two weeks ago. (There are other possible circumstances in the Tanach of an angel of God fathering a child, particularly Samson,⁶ but I don’t have time to go into that here.) Remember that Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent when three men approach.⁷ He quickly gets up and shows them extraordinary hospitality. He runs into the tent and curtly orders Sarah to bake cakes. Then he runs to his herd and chooses a calf to slaughter and cook and have prepared for the guests. Now, I don’t know how quick you are in the kitchen, but even with the help of his servant, I would think it would take some time to slaughter, prepare, and present such a meal, and who knows what might transpire during that interval? Then, when the meal is completed, the guests ask him, “Where is your wife Sarah?”⁸ That seems like an innocent question, but it’s a peculiar conversation starter. Let’s examine the wording closely. In Hebrew it’s *a-yay Sarah eeshtecha* אשתך אייה שרה. Now the word *a-yay* אייה, while having the face value meaning of “where,” actually has a much richer context. As Rabbi Perkins pointed out in his Yom Kippur sermon this year,⁹ the first time the word is used is after Eve, and then Adam, ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and God asks Adam, *a-yeka* איך, “Where are you?”¹⁰ And then the second time is after Cain had murdered his brother Abel, and God asks him, *a-yay Hevel ahicha* אייה הבל אחיך, “Where is your brother Abel?”¹¹ Now in both of these situations it is clear that God knows perfectly well the physical locations of those people. What he is really asking is, “Do you realize what you have done? Do you recognize your own wretched spiritual and moral status?” So when God’s angels collectively ask Abraham “Where is your wife Sarah?” they are not asking for GPS coordinates, but rather they are reprimanding him for his relationship with her. They have just been eyewitnesses to him uncaringly blurt out commands to her: “Quick! The best flour! Knead! Make cakes!”¹² They also know what she has sacrificed for him: she

⁴ I Samuel 1:19

⁵ Genesis 21:1

⁶ See Marc Brettler’s commentary at <https://www.thetorah.com/article/who-was-samsons-real-father>

⁷ Genesis 18:1-15

⁸ Genesis 18:9

⁹ https://www.templealiyah.com/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/yom_kippur_sermon_2019.pdf

¹⁰ Genesis 3:9

¹¹ Genesis 4:9

¹² Genesis 18:6

too has left her home, schlepped across international borders, and she given him her handmaiden Hagar as a concubine. “Have you ever taken the time to notice,” they are asking, “how much pain she is enduring? *You* have a son Ishmael, but *she* is childless. You tell her to do as she wishes,¹³ but you show no tenderness and offer no support. Do you know that she has given up on you, thinking you’re too old to even be intimate with her anymore?¹⁴ Haven’t you noticed that she often laughs inappropriately at serious things?”¹⁵ And then they say—and this is not in the text, this is my personal *midrash*—“Well, Abraham, we’re her to tell you that Sarah’s time has come—*we* have made sure of that—and she will indeed bear a son.”

Now, whenever I come up with a personal interpretation of Torah verses, I always wonder, given thousands of years of Torah interpretation by scholars great and small, someone else must have come up with this, or at least a similar, idea before. So I checked the commentaries, and sure enough none other than Rashi, the foremost of all the commentators, came up with something similar, although he suggested that it was the chieftain Avimelech, with whom Abraham has had many encounters. Rashi says, “Scripture ... felt compelled to say ‘Abraham begat Isaac,’ because the cynics of that time said, ‘Sarah must have gotten pregnant by Avimelech! See how many years she lived with Abraham without getting pregnant!’ What did [God] do? He shaped Isaac’s facial features exactly similar to those of Abraham’s, so that everyone had to admit that Abraham begat Isaac.”

By the way, the next time someone asks Abraham a question with the Hebrew word *a-yay* אַיָּה is after God commands him to sacrifice Isaac, when Isaac asks him, *a-yay ha-seh* אַיָּה הַשֶּׁה “Where is the sheep?,” when he probably knows full well that he is the intended sacrificial object. Which leads me to this horrifying speculation: when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac, maybe, just maybe, he was partially willing to do so because he thought, “the boy is not *really* my kid after all.”

Okay, now why would I concoct a Torah verse interpretation of this sort, borderline if not outright heretical, and admittedly sordid? Well, I’m going to shift gears now, and maybe you’ll sense my reasoning. We can continue the discussion of Isaac’s paternity at kiddush if you’d like, but I have a feeling that by the time I’m finished you’ll have other questions you’d rather ask.

¹³ Genesis 16:6

¹⁴ Genesis 18:12

¹⁵ Sarah’s laughing, and those laughing in response to her, is a repeated meme: Genesis 18:12-15, 21:3 (Isaac’s name is based on the Hebrew, meaning “he will laugh”), 21:6-7, and 21:9 (Ishmael is said to have “played” or “made fun,” but the Hebrew root is the same. In my opinion, Sarah’s laughing was a neurotic response to her frustration with infertility, her unsupportive husband, and her rivalry with Hagar. Even after Isaac’s birth, this remains part of her persona. She is always laughing and giggling with Isaac. There are many Rabbinic and midrashic interpretations of what Ishmael might have done; mine is that he was mocking Sarah’s proclivity toward inappropriate laughter.

I want to tell you the story of another family, this one about 3500 years after the time of today's Torah reading. It's the story of my own family.

In the summer of 1937 my father Nat Brodsky met Bebe Rosenfeld while canoeing on the Rancocas River in New Jersey. They soon fell in love, and they were married a year later, on Thanksgiving Day, 1938. They wanted to start a family, but they were unable to conceive. World War II came and went. Finally, in 1948, after over nine frustrating years, during which my mother underwent numerous often painful and uncomfortable workups, my sister came along, and they named her Joy. Three years later I arrived.

As we grew, it became clear that Joy and I were very different. She was beautiful, auburn haired, winner of every freckle contest she ever entered, graceful, strong-willed and rebellious, and uncaring of schoolwork. I on the other hand was gawky, easily tanned, obedient, and studious. As we grew, these differences became even more marked. She struggled throughout school, got pregnant after tenth grade and dropped out of school, and my parents supported her her whole life, while I went on to college, medical school, a job, marriage, and a family.

On Thanksgiving 1982, I invited a cousin of mine who was also living in the Boston area at the time to join us for dinner. At one point the conversation moved to the subject of how different Joy and I were. "Don't you think the adoption had something to do with that?" my cousin asked. "The what?!" I said. After she recovered from realizing that she had just revealed a deep family secret, she explained that many people in our extended family knew that Joy had been adopted, and she just assumed that of course she and I knew also.

About seven years later Joy was visiting my parents' apartment, and my Mom didn't have her reading glasses, so she asked Joy to read a letter from one of my aunts. In that letter, for whatever reason, my aunt mentioned the adoption. That's how *she* found out. When she called and told me, I said, "I know," and I explained what had happened years earlier. After decades of secrecy and deception, I couldn't lie and tell her I hadn't already known. Frankly, I was relieved, happy that I no longer had to bear the burden of this family secret, wondering who among us might have had to carry it all the way to the grave.

Through all of this, I was reassured by all that *I* had not been adopted, that Gil Brodsky had been a true miracle baby after nearly thirteen years of infertility.

Last May I bought my wife Margie a Mother's Day present. She had seen those TV ads for genetic testing, and she said, "How can I be all Ashkenazi with this pale, fair skin and blue eyes? There must be some Scandinavian blood in there somewhere." So I bought her a spit kit from Ancestry.com. Oh, and while I was at it, I figured I'd get one for myself too. So we spat, sent in our tubes, and waited a few weeks for the results. Guess

what? We're both virtually 100% Ashkenazi. Unappreciated factoid: lots of Ashkenazi Jews have fair skin and blue eyes.¹⁶

Kind of boring, right? Well, a few days later I got an email from Ancestry.com, that someone wanted to connect with me. "Hello Gilbert," went the note. "We show as very close relatives on AncestryDNA. A number of us learned our connection after testing on this site and others. We all had parents living in or near the Philadelphia area. I am glad to share this information with you. Please let me know if you're interested in talking." In the next few days two similar emails arrived. So, on Father's Day last year I finally called.

Here's what I had learned: My father, Nat Brodsky, was not my biological father. I had been donor conceived. Now when you think about it, this made sense. After almost a decade of infertility my parents adopted, which they kept a secret, and they wanted another child but were still infertile, so they opted for a new option, one which would at least allow my mother to experience the pregnancy herself—and of course they kept that a secret as well.

There had been a network of Ob-Gyns in the Philadelphia area who had been working with a urologist who had been an expert in the field of male infertility, and he had among other things worked on the technical issues of artificial insemination.

Now late me take a break in the story here to explain that up until the 1940s and 50s, if a couple couldn't conceive, it was always considered the woman's "fault." Even in the Bible the phrase is often used, "God closed her womb."¹⁷ My mother recounted to my sister and me how she had undergone many tests and invasive procedures to figure out what was wrong, and they never found anything. Which makes sense, because there was never anything wrong with her, the fault lay with my father's inability to produce sperm.

But there was more to my story. I learned that the person who had sent me that original email was my half-sister, that we shared the same donor. And as they say in those infomercials, but wait—there's more! Our shared donor was not an anonymous Penn medical student or resident, but it was the fertility doctor himself. And it wasn't just the two of us; he had given his own sperm to those Ob-Gyns to inseminate others as well. He was a pioneer not only in male fertility research, he was also a pioneer serial inseminator. So, I asked, how many of us are there? "You're number 30," she responded.

In the almost year and a half since then, we're now up to 46 of us.

So, who are all of these half-bothers and half-sisters of mine? Well, we all grew up in the greater Philadelphia and South Jersey area. Current ages range from 75 to 49. Twelve of us are doctors, although none of those twelve grew up in homes where either parent was a physician. We also have one dentist and several other sibs who work in allied medical

¹⁶ There are many sources to explain this. See <https://www.quora.com/Why-do-many-Ashkenazi-Jews-have-blue-eyes-Is-this-a-normal-trait-in-the-Levant-or-rare>

¹⁷ See e.g., I Samuel 1:6

fields. Several others are university professors, including chairs of their departments, and there are also several successful entrepreneurs.

Yes, we do look alike, in many ways. In my case, the most notable feature I see is the lips and smile.

Most of us have met, and we have had reunions. While some sibs have chosen to not join in with our group—an individual decision which we all support—most have embraced their new biological family. Those of us who have met share an immediate connection, and we genuinely like each other. We have a private social media account in which we share personal stories and discussions. There have been three annual family reunions, and we're already planning details for the one next year in Philadelphia. We share and celebrate our accomplishments; in October, for instance, two brothers who had met for the first time just this June joined to run their first marathons together. And we support each other in sorrow; when one of our brothers lost his wife to a rapid illness this past year, the sibs helped with shiva arrangements in both Philadelphia and Florida, and we collectively spent dozens of hours on the phone comforting him.

So, what do we know about our biological father? He was married, and he had one daughter. That daughter, after initial reluctance, actually joined our group and supported it, but recently she has left it. From what we have learned, he was socially quite shy, and he preferred working privately in his lab over interacting with other people.

So, who is my father? Well, the virtually unanimous answer among my sibs is that the man who raised us, who wanted us so much he was willing to forego his own genetic legacy so that his wife could experience the wonder of carrying a baby, who was willing to keep such a family secret for so long, that man is my father. Nat Brodsky was the one who taught this gawky, nerdy kid to look someone straight in the eye and give a strong handshake when you met them. He taught me the meaning of a hard day's work, as I spent all day most of my winter and spring vacation days at his clothing store, making boxes, tagging shirts, and covering the cash register. It was he who insistently encouraged me to go to medical school when I wavered in that decision. He was not book smart, but he was street smart, and so much of what I know about people I learned from him. There's a line in the story of the *Akedah*, Abraham's binding of Isaac, and it's repeated twice: *Va-yaylchi shnayhem yachdav* וילכו שניהם יחדו “And the two of them walked together.”¹⁸ When I say “the two of us walked together,” that's my father, and I'm talking about Nat Brodsky.

I actually feel that I got lucky on both counts. Maybe I got my academic skills from my DNA donor and my interpersonal skills from my father. And of course a good dose of both from my mother. There's a prayer which we say very early in the morning service, the *Ashreinu*, which goes, “We are fortunate. How good is our portion? And how

¹⁸ Genesis 22:6 and 22:8

pleasant is our lot? And how beautiful is our *inheritance*?” Every time I come to that prayer, I think about my *two* fathers.

So what lessons have I learned from this?

1. First of all, secrets: we shouldn't have them. Truth is like dandelions: no matter how well you tend your lawn to suppress them, they will pop up. And this is all the more so true today than a generation or two ago, given modern biotechnology and social media. There is a line in Deuteronomy, often repeated in the Yom Kippur liturgy: *Ha-neestarot ladonai elohaynu v'haniglot lanu u;vanaynu ad olam* והנסתרות ליה אלקינו והנגלות לנו ולבנינו עד עולם. “The hidden things are for Adonai our God, but the revealed things are for us and for our children, forever.”¹⁹ Only God can keep a secret, and only God should, and when secrets are revealed, the ramifications affect not just the secret-holders, but also their children, often indelibly.
2. Infertility remains as big a challenge to us today, personally, medically, and socially, as it ever has. The things my parents went through, especially my mother, should not be endured by anyone, and the secrets they felt compelled to keep should not have been a burden either. Yet even today it's too much a taboo subject. It's like cancer used to be, and mental illness still is, a source of shame and a subject that we prefer to avoid rather than discuss. I was even looking recently through the very extensive Mental Resource Guide²⁰ on our Temple web site, and do you know what was missing? Fertility support services. That has since been fixed.
3. Families: our concept of what makes a family is ever expanding. From the traditional model of a father, mother, and biological children, we now accept adoptive families, single parent families, blended families, and same sex parent families. And now a new entity: geographically dispersed genetic sibships.
4. Acceptance, understanding, and forgiveness: I cannot imagine the emotional pain and difficulty our parents went through when they decided to undergo donor insemination, and when almost all of them decided to keep that fact a secret. And try as we might—and we all *have* tried—none of us can get into the mind of our common donor, who must have thought he was doing good, even though there really can be no medical or ethical justification for his actions. Yet the sins of the parents should not be visited on the children. I feel blessed to have the life that I have had. To harbor anger or resentment would do neither me nor anyone else any good.²¹

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 29:28

²⁰ https://templealayah.com/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/mhi_resource_guide_revised_10.24.19.pdf

²¹ Of note is that in the conclusion to the Joseph story (Genesis 50:18-20), Joseph reassures his brothers that their actions had been “for good.” “Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.” Of note to my own story, of Joseph's eleven brothers, ten were actually genetically half-siblings, the same genetic relationship I have with my own siblings, yet the Torah makes no distinction—they are always referred to simply as “brothers.”

5. Nature vs nurture: The paths that my sibs and I have taken have so many striking factors in common. Is it because of our shared genes? Or our common middle class Baby Boom era suburban Philadelphia upbringing in households where we were desperately wanted? Frankly, I don't really care. If life is a journey, then our DNA represents the luggage we must always carry with us, and our nurture represents the roads that we have traveled already with our families. But I have always believed in free will as much as in destiny, and at some point each of us faces the road ahead and makes our own decisions which route to take.
6. Finally, miracles. After a lifetime of being told I was a miracle baby, I'm not any more. Oh well, that's okay, I still consider myself half a miracle. And when you come right down to it, every one of us is a true, complete miracle.

So, *ay-leh toldot* אלה תולדות, this is the story of Isaac the son of Abraham; Abraham beget Isaac. After a traumatic childhood, Isaac went on to marry and to beget his own family, complete with its own challenges and seismic dysfunctions, which we read about in the rest of today's *parshah*. Like his father, he was a well digger and a nomad. He re-dug many of the wells his father had, but also many new ones,²² and he set the foundation so that eventually his son Jacob would be able to settle down.

And so too, this is the story of Gilbert Brodsky, son of Nathan Brodsky; Nathan did not beget Gilbert, but the two of them walked together.

On this Shabbat *Toldot*, and on this Thanksgiving weekend, when so many of us gather together with our families, may each and every one of us have the courage, the strength, and the support to say, *ay-leh toldot sheli* אלה תולדות שלי: This is *my* story.

Oh, one last thing. Remember that silly anecdote I told you about that contestant on Jeopardy who was a little confused about who her father was? Well, it turns out that she and I are related! She's my niece; her mother is my newly found sister Diane, the first of my new sibs that I met, and I am thrilled to say they are both here today. I'm sure you'll all greet them warmly at kiddush, so you can also learn a little bit of their stories.

Shabbat shalom!

²² Genesis 26:13-22