

PARASHAT TOLEDOT

Genesis 25:19–28:9

Toledot may be translated as “generations,” and “history.” This Torah portion begins by describing the birth of Esau and Jacob, the twins born to Rebekah and Isaac. Esau is a rugged person of the outdoors; Jacob is a gentle person, preferring the quiet of his tent. Isaac favors Esau, and Rebekah loves Jacob. While still young, Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a pot of stew. Later, at age forty, Esau brings pain to his parents by marrying two Hittite women. When Isaac is old and near death, Rebekah and Jacob trick him into giving Jacob the special blessing he had intended for Esau. Esau discovers what they have done and vows to kill his brother. Fearing for Jacob’s life and desiring that he marry someone from her people in Paddan-aram, Rebekah persuades Isaac to send Jacob to her brother, Laban. Meanwhile, Esau took his first cousin, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, as his third wife.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

For a time after their marriage, Isaac and Rebekah have difficulty conceiving. Finally, Rebekah becomes pregnant, but she suffers great pain. When she asks the reason for her discomfort, God tells her that she is carrying twins and that, from them, two battling nations will emerge.

When the children are born, the eldest is given the name Esau, meaning “hairy,” because his body is covered with hair. The younger child is named Jacob, meaning “heel,” because at birth his hand was holding onto Esau’s heel.

As they grow, Esau becomes a skillful hunter while Jacob remains quietly within the camp. Isaac favors Esau because he brings him food from his hunting; Rebekah favors Jacob.

Once, while Jacob is cooking some stew, Esau returns from a hunt very hungry. “Give me some

of that stuff you are cooking," he demands of Jacob. "Sell me your birthright," Jacob responds. "I'm starved. What do I care about a birthright!" Esau answers. So Jacob gives him some stew, and Esau gives up his birthright.

· 2 ·

Later, at a time of famine, Isaac visits Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in the Negev town of Gerar. As happened before with Abraham and Sarah, the men of Gerar admire Rebekah. Fearing that they will harm him, Isaac tells them that she is his "sister." When Abimelech discovers what has happened, he offers Isaac protection and, as a result, Isaac prospers greatly in the land of the Philistines.

As Isaac becomes richer, the Philistines envy him and stop up his wells. Seeing the trouble between them, Abimelech tells Isaac: "Leave our land, for you are becoming too powerful for us." Afterwards, Isaac travels to Beer-sheba, where Abimelech visits him in order to confirm a peace treaty between them.

· 3 ·

Near the time of his death, Isaac asks Esau to go out hunting and to bring him back a "tasty dish," promising that he will reward Esau with a special blessing.

Rebekah overhears their conversation and persuades Jacob to dress in Esau's clothing and to put on hairy skins so that he will fool Isaac into believing that he is Esau. "What if I appear to him as a trickster and he curses me?" Jacob asks his mother. Rebekah answers, "I will take your curse upon me."

Their disguise fools Isaac. He believes that Jacob is Esau, and he blesses him with the words: "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to



you. . . . Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you."

When Esau returns from the field with a "tasty dish" as his father had requested, Isaac informs him that he has already given away his blessing. Esau is furious. Threatening to kill Jacob, he shouts: "First he took away my birthright, and now he has taken away my blessing!"

· 4 ·

At forty years of age, Esau married two Hittite women. The mixed marriage upset both his parents. Fearing that Jacob would also intermarry, Rebekah urged Isaac to send Jacob to her homeland in Paddan-aram where he might find a wife from the daughters of her brother, Laban. Isaac follows Rebekah's suggestion. In the meantime, Esau took his first cousin, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, as his third wife.

THEMES

Parashat Toledot contains three important themes:

1. Jealousy between brothers; the creation of stereotypes and prejudice.
2. Favoritism by parents.
3. Problems of intermarriage.

responsibility in creating such a time of understanding and goodwill?

In answer to our questions, the rabbis offer the following fascinating story based upon the Torah commandment "You shall not hate an Edomite, for an Edomite is your fellow human being." (Deuteronomy 23:8)

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua was once walking by the seashore when he noticed a boat sinking at sea. A moment later he watched as a man holding onto a plank of wood floated onto shore. Other Jews were walking by. Because the man was naked, he covered himself and pleaded: "I am a son of Esau, your brother. I have lost everything. Please give me a garment to cover myself." The Jews refused and said: "Your people have treated our people with cruelty. Therefore, may all your people be stripped bare as you are today." The man then turned to Rabbi Elazar and said, "You are an honorable man; please help me." Rabbi Elazar took off a garment and gave it to him. Then he brought him to his home, fed him, and gave him money with which to begin his life again.

When the emperor died, the rescued man succeeded him. He ordered that all Jews in his state be killed. The Jews turned to Rabbi Elazar and asked him to plead for them. When the man, who was now the ruler, saw Rabbi Elazar standing before him, he said: "Does not your Torah teach 'You shall not hate an Edomite, for he is your brother'? I told your people that I was the son of Esau, and they treated me with hatred, not with kindness."

Rabbi Elazar replied: "Though they are guilty of breaking the law of the Torah, forgive them."

The king, recalling what Elazar had done for him, answered: "Because of what you did for me, I will forgive them."

(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 11:1)

Rabbi Elazar ben Judah taught that "the most beautiful thing a person can do is to forgive." (*Rokeach* 13C) Bearing grudges only prolongs hostility. Forgiveness and understanding are the only genuine ways to reconciliation, cooperation, and peace. Perpetuating prejudices through slogans and names only increases human suffering. Perhaps that is why the Torah warns us: "You shall not hate an Edomite, for he is your brother.

You shall not hate an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land." (Deuteronomy 23:8)

PEREK BET: *Parental Favoritism*

Our Torah portion not only contains the story about the beginnings of the historic struggle between Esau-Edom and Jacob-Israel, but it also takes us into the biblical home of Rebekah and Isaac. We are told that the young brothers, Esau and Jacob, have very different personalities. Esau is a hunter; he prefers being outdoors. He is also impatient, demanding, and quick to lose his temper. Jacob is described as a "mild" person, quiet, patient, clever, and calculating.

The two brothers are portrayed as jealous of each other and in constant competition for their parents' interest and affection. To complicate family matters even further, we are told that each parent has chosen a favorite son. Isaac prefers Esau "because he also had a taste for freshly killed game." Rebekah "loved Jacob." Nor do Isaac and Rebekah hide their preferences. When Isaac decides to present his sons with his parental blessing, he tells Esau, not Jacob, to hunt him some fresh game and to prepare it for him. As a reward he promises to give him the gift of his "innermost blessing."

When Rebekah overhears what her husband has promised, she tells Jacob to bring her some game and she will prepare food for his father. Afterwards, she dresses him in animal skins so that Isaac might be tricked into blessing her favorite son, Jacob, instead of Esau. Her trick is successful. Isaac is fooled into blessing Jacob, but the results are tragic. The jealousy between the brothers hardens into hatred.

Did parental favoritism cause the hostility between Jacob and Esau or is such antagonism inevitable between brothers and sisters?

Some interpreters argue that the differences between Jacob and Esau made it impossible for them to get along as brothers. Jacob, they explain, was a quiet, timid, studious person while Esau spent his time trapping animals and associating with those who knew how to use a spear, a knife, and a sword. Jacob was calm and reasonable while

Esau demanded satisfaction immediately, losing his temper if he could not have his way.

A few commentators trace the differences between the brothers to their early childhood. Once, when Esau returned from hunting in the fields, he entered the house, smelled the sweet stew Jacob was cooking, and demanded a bowl of it. "I'm starving," he said. "I want it now."

Knowing that Esau would often make foolish mistakes when pressured or upset, Jacob took advantage of him. He wanted all the privileges of being the firstborn. So he said to Esau, "Sell me your birthright, and I'll give you some stew." Impulsively, Esau agreed.

The differences between them

Rabbi Pinchus said in Rabbi Levi's name that Esau and Jacob were like a myrtle and a wild rosebush growing side by side. When they had fully grown, one produced a sweet fragrance, and the other produced thorns. For thirteen years, both Esau and Jacob studied at school. Afterwards, Jacob continued to study, and Esau became an idolator. Jacob had learned that answers to questions came slowly and through hard work. Esau wanted immediate and easy answers. (Genesis Rabbah 63:10)

Rabbi S. Z. Kahana, a modern commentator living in Israel, claims that Esau and Jacob represented two different philosophies of living. "Esau accepts the world as it is: all is well. But Jacob is not satisfied with the world as it is. He recognizes that a great deal remains to be done." (Heaven on Your Head, Research Centre of Kabbalah, New York, 1986, p. 34.)

While most commentators agree that Esau and Jacob had very different personalities, there are some who suggest that the jealousy, distrust, and hatred that developed between them was not their fault but the fault of their parents. Commenting on the relationship between Isaac and Esau, and Rebekah and Jacob, psychologist Haim G. Ginott points out that the competition and jealousy be-

tween them "was sparked" by parental favoritism and preferential treatment.

"Why did Isaac and Rebekah show such favoritism?" That is the question.



Abravanel

Don Isaac Abravanel argues that Isaac was simply blinded to Esau's faults. "Affection," Abravanel comments, "ruins judgment." Others suggest that Isaac was aloof, withdrawn, and out of touch with his sons. He spent no time with them. Therefore, he was not aware of their strengths or weaknesses.

Another explanation for Isaac's favoring of Esau is found in *Genesis Rabbah*, an ancient collection of interpretations by the rabbis. There it is suggested that Isaac never recovered from the terror he experienced when his father, Abraham, nearly offered him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. He remained fearful all his life and had trouble making decisions. He remained weak and frightened, always leaning on others who displayed strength. For that reason he favored Esau over Jacob.



David Kimchi disagrees. He holds that Isaac was neither weak nor incapable of making clear decisions. Isaac favored Esau because he realized that Esau was weak not strong and, therefore, required more support, more help, more direction, and care if he was to mature as a responsible adult. Isaac considered Esau the weaker son because he saw that Esau was "wild," irresponsible, undisciplined, and uncaring about others. Isaac believed that Esau would change if he gave him gifts and favored him with special attentions and blessings.

As for Rebekah, the commentators nearly all claim that she forced Jacob into dressing up like Esau and into lying about who he was in order to steal the blessing from his brother. One interpreter tells us that Jacob "acted out of duress"; another claims that he pleaded in tears with Re-

bekah that she not force him to deceive his father. (*Genesis Rabbah*; also *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah* on Genesis 18:2)

Why did Rebekah show such partiality to Jacob?

One view is that she, more than Isaac or anyone else, had a "mother's intuition" that Jacob was especially endowed with powers of wisdom to inherit the leadership of the Jewish people. Before the twins were born, God had told her: "Two nations are in your womb. . . . One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." She simply was following her inner voice, favoring the younger child she sensed was to be the "leader." (*Midrash ha-Gadol* 27:13)

Grandfather Abraham also favored Jacob

One tradition of interpretation claims that Abraham also favored Jacob over Esau. He praised his intellectual qualities and disapproved of Esau's wild behavior. Rebekah noted Grandfather Abraham's opinion and was influenced by it. (Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol. I, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1968, p. 316)

Esau was treated unjustly

Author Eli Wiesel writes the following about Rebekah's treatment of Esau. "His own mother seemed to resent him. She pushed him aside. Why didn't she love him? Because he preferred games to study? Because his hair was long and red? Because he always walked around armed? Because he was constantly hungry? She was hostile to him, that seems clear. And unjust." (Messengers of God, Random House, New York, 1976, p. 117)

Steinsaltz



Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz makes a different argument. He explains that, because Rebekah had

grown up in the "wheeling and dealing" corrupt world of her brother Laban, "she had learned the meaning of cheating, of hypocrisy." She was a realist where Isaac was an "easy victim of duplicity; he was neither suspicious nor afraid because there was no dishonesty in his own heart."

For those reasons, Isaac did not notice Esau's weaknesses but only that he seemed well behaved and did what his father requested of him. On the other hand, Steinsaltz explains that Rebekah "was an expert in such matters. She knew that someone like Esau could have another, less pleasant aspect, an aspect that reminded her of her own brother Laban. She recognized her own family in Esau, and she knew his shortcomings and his weak points." As a result of this understanding, "she manipulated Isaac into blessing Jacob instead of Esau out of her love for Isaac, in an attempt to shield and protect him from the emotional shock of his own error." (Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images*, Basic Books, New York, 1984, pp. 46-47)

In other words, Rebekah favored Jacob, not only because she knew that Esau possessed shortcomings like her brother Laban, but also because she wished to protect her husband, Isaac, from making a mistake by giving Esau and not Jacob his blessing. Rebekah's favoritism was a form of saving Isaac from his own stupidity and foolish decisions.

Parents and sibling rivalry

Psychologist Haim G. Ginott comments about how parents handle jealousy between their children. "Some parents are so angered by sibling rivalry that they punish any overt sign of it. Other parents bend backward almost acrobatically to avoid giving cause for jealousy. They try to convince their children that all of them are loved equally and therefore have no reason to be jealous. . . ."

Those who want to be superfair to each child often end up being furious with all their children. Nothing is so self-defeating as measured fairness. When a mother cannot give a bigger apple or a stronger hug to one child for fear of antagonizing the other, life becomes unbearable. . . ."

Children do not yearn for equal shares of love: they need to be loved uniquely, not uniformly. The emphasis is on quality, not equality. We do not love all our children the same way, and there is no need to pretend that we do. We love each child uniquely, and we do not have to labor so hard to cover it up." (Between Parent and Child, Macmillan, New York, 1965, pp. 127-132)

Love them equally

Love equally all your children. Sometimes the favored disappoint, and the neglected make you happy. (Berekiyah Ha-Nakdan, Mishle Shulim, 1260 C.E.)

No favoritism

Play no favoritism: Because Joseph got a multicolored coat, the brothers "hated him." (Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, Genesis Rabbah 84:8)

Each child is unique

Each child carries its own blessing into the world. (Yiddish Proverb)

Interpreters of our Torah portion all seem to agree that the jealousy and bitterness between Jacob and Esau was not simply a matter of misunderstandings between them. Their troubled relationship grew, not only out of the differences in their personalities, but also from the way in which they were treated by their grandparents and parents. Isaac's and Rebekah's strengths and weaknesses, their backgrounds and judgments, the ways in which they rewarded and manipulated Esau and Jacob clearly contributed to the sibling rivalry between the brothers.

Tragically, that rivalry ultimately developed into a distrust and hatred that drove them apart. It poisoned their relationship forever. While later the brothers would meet and make peace, they would then go their separate ways without ever achieving genuine brotherly love.

PEREK GIMEL: *The Issue of Intermarriage*

The subject of marriage is raised twice in our Torah portion.

We are told that when Esau was forty years old he married two Hittite women and that the marriages were "a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah." (Genesis 26:34)

Then, near the end of the Torah portion, it is reported that Rebekah tells Isaac that she is worried that Jacob, like Esau, will marry a woman from among the Canaanites rather than someone from their ancestral home in Paddan-aram. Isaac agrees with her. He sends for Jacob and instructs him to go to Paddan-aram to find a bride among the daughters of Laban, Rebekah's brother. He also blesses Jacob, telling him that God will give him and his children rights to the Land of Israel as was promised to Abraham, his grandfather.

When Esau hears that his father has instructed Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman, has sent him off to Paddan-aram, and has given him an additional blessing, he is hurt and angry. Perhaps to find favor with his parents, he marries his first cousin Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael. He does not, however, divorce his Hittite wives.

As the Torah portion indicates, the subject of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews has been a concern since the beginnings of Jewish history. We are not told what it is that "displeases" Isaac and Rebekah about Esau's Hittite wives nor that they had forbidden him to marry them. Yet it is clear that they are troubled by what Esau has done and, therefore, warn Jacob not to marry from among the Canaanites. They tell him to find a wife from among his "tribal family."

Speiser



Most modern biblical scholars are agreed that the two mentions of intermarriage in our Torah portion were written by authors who believed that religion and nationality could only be preserved through marriages within the tribal group. For instance, E. A. Speiser comments that whoever

wrote these two passages was interested in "purity of lineage." (*The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, p. 216)

Separate for a holy purpose

But there was another factor in Israel that tended to lift what might have been only a fierce instinctive separatism to a higher level of emotion. That was the passionate conviction that Israel was meant to be not only a nation but a theocracy (rule of state by God, and by God's priests). To maintain its racial integrity therefore was to maintain the religious institution of covenant and law and holy faith. (Interpreter's Bible, Genesis, p. 678)

The Christian scholarly commentary, *Interpreter's Bible*, agrees with E. A. Speiser that the authors of this part of our Torah portion were xenophobic. They feared strangers. They were concerned that strangers would marry their children and remove them from their community. As a result, they would not survive as a distinct people. For them, "to marry outside the clan was to mix its blood and to break its solidarity." Fear of others and their foreign ways and beliefs was the primary motivation for the opposition of Isaac and Rebekah to intermarriage. That is the reason they were grieved.

But that was not the only reason. It was not just fear but also a positive conviction of faith. The authors of the *Interpreter's Bible* also point out that those who created the story of the opposition of Isaac and Rebekah to intermarriage did so for a more important reason. They believed in the special covenant or *berit* between the Jewish people and God and that the best way to preserve it was to permit marriages only between Jews. Mixing with other peoples meant abandoning their relationship with God and their responsibility to live as a "holy" or "separate" people dedicated to God's service.

The way to idolatry

Twice more the Torah warns about intermarriage. In Exodus 34:16 the Israelites are told:

"And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods."

In Deuteronomy 7:3-4 the Israelites are commanded: "You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons; for they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods. . . ."

Not only do we find other warnings against intermarriage in the Torah, but we are also told that, because King Solomon, in his old age, married non-Jewish wives who "turned away Solomon's heart after other gods," his sons were not eligible to inherit his throne. (I Kings 11:1-13) The opposition to intermarriage within the Torah seems to have been based on the belief that it led to idol worship and to disloyalty to the faith and covenant of the Jewish people with God.

Rashi



Rashi seems to agree with that argument. In commenting upon the "bitterness" of Isaac and Rebekah at Esau's marriage to the Hittite women, Rashi explains that it derived from the smell of the idolatrous offerings that the wives burned each day. He suggests that both Isaac and Rebekah realized that the wives' loyalty to their traditions would, eventually, influence Esau away from his faith and, ultimately, endanger the survival of Jewish tradition and the Jewish people.

Opposition to intermarriage

"From the very beginning . . . Jewish opposition to mixed marriage was based not on any notion of racial superiority but rather on realistic recognition of the fact that such matches posed an ominous threat to the survival of the Jewish people and its faith." (Roland B. Gittelsohn, Consecrated Unto Me, p. 193)

Group identity

"Jewish group identity is generally defined in terms of both religion and ethnic background. . . . Children of conversionary marriages were more than three times as likely to identify as Jews than were children of mixed marriages. The overwhelming majority of the children of conversionary marriages were identified as Jewish at birth, and virtually all continued to identify themselves as Jewish. . . ." (Egon Mayer, Love and Tradition: Marriage between Jews and Christians, Plenum Publishing Corp., 1985, p. 253)

Other commentators trace Isaac's blindness to the stress and unhappiness he suffered over Esau's intermarriages. They argue that God blinded him in order to relieve the pain he felt each time he saw his son or the smoke of idolatry rising from his home. (*Midrash Tanchuma, Toledot 7*)



Hirsch

Some Jewish interpreters, however, take the matter one step further. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argues that "with this marriage with two Hittite women Esau set the seal on his complete unfitness to be the one who was to carry on the mission of Abraham. In a home where even two daughters of Heth ruled, the Abrahamitic principle was just buried." By intermarrying, Hirsch contends, Esau became a house divided between Abraham's belief in one spiritual God and the many idol-gods of his wives. This disqualified him from inheriting the leadership of the Jewish people from Abraham. Hirsch reasons that a home where two religious traditions are practiced or where there is not a joint commitment to a single faith by both parents is often the cause of confusion, misunderstanding, and trouble between parents and children. Children may wonder which tradition they should follow. Sometimes, without being aware of it, a parent will signal that "if you love me, you will do it my way." Grandparents

may reward children for showing a preference for their faith. Instead of providing them with a common tradition to practice and to share, religious tradition may become a source of arguments and bitter family division.

The role of religion

Ritual "serves as a bridge from the past—across the present—to the future. It reminds us of the imponderables, the spiritual values by which our actions should be guided. We Jews are especially fortunate because our faith provides us with a rich treasury of beautiful ritual. The most important moments and emotions in life—birth, growth, adolescence, love, marriage, and death—are enhanced by rituals that grow out of our people's past and express our hopes for the future. The sharing of rituals—precisely because they are poetic symbols appealing to the emotions—can do more to bring husband and wife together than any intellectual sharing." (Git-telsohn, Consecrated Unto Me, p. 214)

For the teachers of Jewish tradition, sharing a single religious tradition in the home is meant to unite husband, wife, and children. It is meant to provide a common identity and a rich resource of rituals and traditions for emotional and intellectual enrichment. Through sharing a historic faith, family members are bonded to one another and also to the Jewish community beyond their home. For all these reasons, Jews today continue to promote marriages where bride and groom strengthen their love and commitment to each other by sharing the joy and meaning of building a Jewish home.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How, according to the discussion of this Torah portion, do stereotypes and histories of hatred develop? Are there acts or words spoken by others for which there can be no forgiveness? Are there some strategies we might develop

- for promoting forgiveness and the end to cycles of suspicion and hatred?
2. List the reasons given by the commentators for Rebekah's favoring of Jacob and for Isaac's favoring of Esau. Are these common factors in families you know? In your own? What can be done about such bias in relationships?
 3. The Torah presents two statements critical of intermarriage: Exodus 34:16 and Deuteronomy 7:3-4. Compare these to what our commentators say about the subject in Perek Gimel. Are these observations still justified? Should we oppose interdating? How shall Jews preserve their tradition and their community in a free and open society?