

*This Week's Shabbat Message from Rabbi Rheins, Temple Sinai Denver*

## **Family Feast . . . or Food Fight?**

This year our observance Thanksgiving coincides with Rosh Chodesh Kislev, the beginning of the new month. Kislev is that beloved month of Chanukah, our Festival of Lights and a time to recall the miraculous victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucid Greeks and their ruler Antiochus Epiphanes who sought to impose Greek culture and idolatry upon Jews and all the other peoples he ruled (c. 165 BCE).

Thanksgiving, like Chanukah, often brings family together for celebration. But sometimes, a family gathering prompts long held gripes and grudges to break out. This week's Torah portion is ***Toldot*** (Genesis 25:19- 28:9). It begins with the story of Isaac and Rebecca but then highlights the conflict between their sons Esav and Jacob. The family dysfunction is exacerbated by favoritism; Isaac favors Esav and Rebecca favors Jacob. The sibling rivalry intensifies with acts of bravado, trickery, disdain and manipulation. Esav eventually becomes so outraged that he threatens to harm Jacob. Isaac and Rebecca instruct Jacob to flee for his life. So Jacob escapes by going to his Uncle Laban (Rebecca's brother) in Mesopotamia.

*Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esav. (Genesis 28:5)*

The late, great Torah commentator Nehama Leibowitz notes that our ancestors struggled to understand why the Torah included the seemingly superfluous line "Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esav."

Surely, after the preceding chapters and verses we are already well aware that Rebecca is the mother of both Jacob and Esav.

Leibowitz points out that instead of creating a reason for this superfluity, the classic commentator Rashi (French, 1040-1105) admitted: *“I do not know what this teaches us.”*

Now those who have studied Rashi (translations of his Torah commentaries are available in our Temple Sinai library) know that he does not comment on each and every verse. And one can safely presume that Rashi was familiar with many attempts to explain why Rebecca’s motherly status is repeated. In *Kitzur Mizrachi*, the author explains that Rashi wrote that he did not know why the phrase is included because he didn’t find a satisfactory explanation. This, too, is a knowing and perceptive insight.

As family dynamics play out, when things turn badly it may be beyond our ability to find a root cause. There are times when we should simply admit, I do not know why this has happened. Indeed, the search for reasons and the temptation to cast judgement in a family dispute seldom, if ever, leads to a harmonious result. Rather, it is best simply to reflect on that which is most important: that we are family. Yes, spouses and siblings, cousins and others in our family have differences of opinion, moods, and tastes. They have different personalities, and frequently different political, religious and social allegiances. Family members may even have disagreements that, unresolved, can lead to estrangement. It is in this light that I look on that seemingly superfluous phrase: “Rebecca, the mother of Jacob and Esav.” The Torah wants us to remember the bonds of family. Perhaps the Torah is trying to help us understand that even our great matriarchs and patriarchs got so caught up in overheated drama and they, too, had to be reminded that “this one and that one are your children, they are both your family.”

At the end of the day, we are a part of the same family tree. Ultimately, Esav and Jacob do reconcile. And on this Thanksgiving gathering and in anticipation of our

reunions during Chanukah and many other simchas, let us appreciate each as an individual, unique, flawed, and imperfect - -just like you and me!

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving!

**Rick**

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