

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rheins
Shabbat Tol'dot 5781

Our Secret of Immortality

One-hundred twenty-one years ago, Samuel Clemens (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910), known by his pen name Mark Twain, pondered the secret to the amazing place of Jews and Judaism in the long history of civilization.

He wrote:

He [the Jewish people] has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Harper's Magazine, September 1899

The answer may very well be found in this week's Torah portion, *Tol'dot* (Genesis 25:19-28:9). It is here that we find the extraordinary lengths to which Isaac and Rebecca persevered against the taunts and challenges of

their neighbors. They did so not by fighting them, but by building trust, building friendship and making room for all to succeed (Genesis 26:18-33).

They did so by believing passionately in the sacredness of their covenant with God and the vision of building a better world. It is in this Torah portion that we are introduced to Jacob who would eventually be called Israel, the father of our people. Jacob/Israel believed so intensely that he could not stand idly by while his twin brother, Esav, cavalierly waved off the significance of a birthright and sold it for the fleeting comfort of a hot lunch (Genesis 25:29-34).

For some, the seemingly intangible value of a birthright covenant is superseded by the physical scramble to survive tumult and depression during times of defeat, setback and disappointment. For others, the worth of an ancestral birthright can seem delusional, fool's gold in comparison to the tangible wealth of that which glitters, shines and sells. The spiritual satisfaction of a sacred relationship to God can seem too humbling to those attracted to the self-congratulatory giddiness of wit, and the intoxicating thrill of power. Too many of our *mishpocha*, our family, have forsaken their *brit* only to discover later in life that their lineage to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah is at the very core of their soul. Truly, it is never too late to discover or rediscover the immortal spirit of our Jewish

faith, family and heritage. The significance of the Jewish story was expressed powerfully by Paul Johnson, a non-Jewish historian. He wrote:

The historian should take into account all forms of evidence, including those which are or appear to be metaphysical. If the earliest Jews were able to survey, with us, the history of their progeny, they would find nothing surprising in it. They always knew that Jewish society was appointed to be a pilot-project for the entire human race. That Jewish dilemmas, dramas and catastrophes should be exemplary, larger than life, would seem only natural to them. That Jews should over the millennia attract such unparalleled, indeed, inexplicable, hatred would be regrettable but only to be expected. Above all, that the Jews should still survive, when all those other ancient people were transmuted or vanished into the oubliettes of history, was wholly predictable. How could it be otherwise? Providence decreed it and the Jews obeyed. The historian may say: there is no such thing as providence. Possibly not. But human confidence in such an historical dynamic, if it is strong and tenacious enough, is a force in itself, which pushes on the hinge of events and moves them. The Jews believed that they were a special people with such unanimity and passion, and over so long a span, that they became one. They did indeed have a role because they wrote it for themselves. Therein, perhaps, lies the key to their story. (A History of the Jews, pp. 586-7)

We are still writing our story. In the darkness of a pandemic and the shortness of the winter day, we dare to kindle lights of faith and hope.

When others despair, we look to our Jewish heritage and rediscover and reaffirm the tenacity, will and determination to hold even tighter to the dream of a better future for all.

Now is the time to renew and strengthen our connection, our possession, and our inheritance of Jewish faith, family, and heritage.

B'vrakhah,

Rick

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