

ויגדלו הנערים (בראשית כה: כז)

רבי לוי אמר משל להדס ועצבונית שהיו גדילים זה על גבי זה וכיון שהגדילו והפריחו זה נותן ריחו וזה חוחו כך כל י"ג שנה שניהם הולכים לבית הספר ושניהם באים מבית הספר, לאחר י"ג שנה זה היה הולך לבתי מדרשות וזה היה הולך לבתי עבודת כוכבים, א"ר אלעזר צריך אדם להטפל בבנו עד י"ג שנה מיכן ואילך צריך שיאמר ברוך שפטרני מעונשו של זה (בראשית רבה פרשה סג)

And the boys grew (Gen. 25:27).

Rabbi Pinhas said in Rabbi Levi's name: They were like myrtle and a wild rosebush growing side by side; when they attained to maturity, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines. Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Shimon said: A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he must say, "Blessed is He who has now freed me from responsibility for this boy." (Gen. Rabbah 63:9)

Rather astoundingly, this is one of the earliest mentions of what would, over millennia, become the bar/bat mitzvah. Besides equally ancient sources referring to the age of "thirteen and one day" as the age at which boys become obligated to perform religious duties, Rabbi Eleazar ben Shimon's teaching is all we have until the Middle Ages on which to hang our treasured life-cycle ritual.

The bar/bat mitzvah ritual has in our day come to be the moment at which parents stand back and beam at the product of their decade-plus of child rearing. How fitting, then, that the rite should find its roots in the tale of Jacob and Esau, twins reared by the same parents. In telling their story, the Torah gives us no clear answer vis-à-vis the nature-versus-nurture debate. The natures of Jacob and Esau are described from the womb as deeply contentious and, as the boys grow, we see Esau grow to be a "skilled hunter," while Jacob "stayed in camp." On the nurture side is the painful verse 28, "Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob."

This midrash brings us back to the question at the heart of every parenting endeavor: What makes one child turn out to be fragrant myrtle, and the other a wild rosebush full of thorns? And at what point do we as parents relinquish responsibility for the actions of our children?

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Parashat Tol'dot

Genesis 25:19–28:9

November 21, 2009

4 Kislev 5770

Parashah Commentary

This commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, JTS

The evidence stared at us: a hot pink eye embedded in dark skin. "Which one of you did this?" my mother demanded. I, of course, knew the secret, having mashed the Bubblicious bubble gum into a crack in the dark-stained paneling of our family room some hours earlier. My little sister, trying to be helpful, asked with what I knew to be complete innocence: "Well, what kind of gum is it?" Which was all our mother needed to hear to jump to a conclusion that brought her investigation to its end and my sister to her inevitable reprimand.

My first lie (or at least the first one I got away with), in this case by omission.

It's a shameful memory that brings me to a question: What if George Washington had decided to lie about chopping down that cherry tree, rather than insisting "I cannot tell a lie"?

Or, to put it differently, what are we to do with a story about a patriarch who lies, cheats, and steals his way through life?

The most egregious instance of Jacob's less-than-honorable behavior comes in Parashat Tol'dot when, at his mother's suggestion, he dons a costume; appears before his old, blind father; and uses a lie to steal the blessing intended for his twin brother Esau:

"He [Jacob] went to his father and said, "Father."

And he [Isaac] said, "Yes, which of my sons are you?"

Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your blessing." (Gen. 27:18–19)

No cherry-tree virtue here. Of course, interpreters throughout the ages have sought to "correct" the story so as to bolster Jacob's ethical position. Much of it hinges on the exact words uttered by Jacob: "I am Esau, your firstborn; I have done as you told me." Rashi (in an I-did-not-sleep-with-that-woman approach) tries to get Jacob off on a technicality. What Jacob really meant was, "I [am the one bringing you these things]; Esau [is] your firstborn. I have done [many things] as you told me." The midrash in Genesis Rabbah 65:18 moves similarly, but with the added bonus of purifying Jacob's motive: "Rabbi Levi said: I [am the one who will one day receive God's Commandments; but] Esau is your firstborn." At least here Jacob isn't just after the material gains and power contained in Isaac's blessing, but is imagined to desire God's word. And the Hasidic *Noam Elimelech* follows the Zohar's lead, considering Rebecca's voice, encouraging Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing, representing the Shekhinah (God's Presence), guiding Jacob to do what is necessary for

the divine plan of the election of Israel to take place. Far-fetched, but at least it attributes to Jacob the merits of struggling internally over the spiritual cost of receiving Isaac's blessing.

Bible scholar James Kugel describes the dilemma:

Since Jacob was their people's immediate founder, Jewish interpreters were naturally interested in celebrating his virtues—and in stressing the faults of his rival, Esau . . . Believing that the purpose of biblical narratives was to present readers with moral exemplars and role models (either positive or negative), interpreters naturally had a tendency to exaggerate the virtues and vices of the people involved. As a result, readers soon came to expect biblical figures to come with a clear label: "altogether righteous" or "completely wicked." (*How to Read the Bible*, 137)

But what if we don't bother trying to defend him? What if we accept that Jacob lied?

In a recent op-ed column in the *New York Times*, David Brooks wrote of our ability to choose the stories we tell about ourselves: "Among all the things we don't control," he wrote on November 10, "we do have some control over our stories. We do have a conscious say in selecting the narrative we will use to make sense of the world." Having selected, generations ago, a story about a patriarch who lies to his father at the expense of his brother for his own gain, and having selected—in every generation since then, including our own—this year, this week, to retell that story, what do we gain if we accept the story at face value?

What we gain is a mirror. I wonder if our discomfort in reading Jacob's moral failure here (and elsewhere) is a reflection of the discomfort we feel internally as we struggle with our own morality. We all learned, at some point in life, that we could lie. We all got away with it at some point (in our childhood at least), and had to teach ourselves to refrain from such behavior. Reading the story literally and accepting Jacob's lie means that we don't have to pretend that we are all as innocent as George Washington, who "could not tell a lie," and frees us up to focus inward. Rather than project a holier-than-thou expectation onto Jacob, we can use Parashat Tol'dot as an invitation to scrutinize our own lies and sibling rivalries.

We descend from a patriarch who struggled with his *yetzer ha-ra*, his own temptations to do wrong. So too, each of us struggles. Reading this story without rushing to defend Jacob reminds us that each of us has the capacity to be a liar and a cheat, or a person of integrity and honor. When we hear of the latest scandal involving a bribe, a swindle, marital infidelity, whichever vice *du jour* lands on the front pages, we are incensed, indignant. But when we read Tol'dot, we remember—if we choose *not* to exonerate Jacob—the adjuration of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai (BT Berakhot 28b): "May you fear heaven more than you fear one another." Each of us is tempted every day in so many ways, and the integrity that comes from a life of honesty is sacred because it is so difficult to achieve.

The important thing is that Jacob outgrows the behavior we see and dislike. By the time he matures into the father of twelve tribes, he has struggled with God and come to the realization that God dwells in "this place" in ways he did not know in his youth. We don't need to pretend that Jacob never lied; we need to realize that Jacob did lie and cheat, and that he successfully struggled to abandon those behaviors. That is what makes him worthy of being our patriarch.

George Washington may not have told a lie, but most of us have. We were thrown out of Eden to live in the world, and we were given Torah to keep us holy. We choose to tell Jacob's story because Torah teaches us that we can grow wise over time, that we can learn from our mistakes, and that we are always on the path toward self-improvement and self-refinement. For "its ways are ways of truth, and all its paths are peace."

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 25:22–23 But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the Lord, and the Lord answered her, "There are two nations in your womb, two separate peoples will issue from your body; one people will be mightier than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

B'khor Shor, "But the children struggled," "Struggled" (*v'yitrotzetzu*) is related to the expression of "a bruised reed, *kaneh ratzutz*" meaning that which is injured or broken—for Rebecca thought she was experiencing labor pains though she had not carried to term, and she feared that she was having a miscarriage. **And she said, "If so,** if it is my fate to lose these children, then **why** did I conceive and why did God accept our prayer, if not to help and bring this to fruition? And so **she went to inquire of the Lord** through prophets. **There are two nations in your womb**—that is to say, you did not lose these children, because two nations will emerge from you. **And two separate peoples will issue from your body**—two separate peoples are strengthening themselves against one another and so there will not be peace between the two of them. Therefore, it is a sign that they appear to be fighting one another—for this is the way of newborns, that they make some sign that prefigures their destiny, like "his hand grasped (Esau's) ankle" which is said of Jacob, it looked as if he was preventing Esau from gaining the firstborn's status, and so too "what a breach you have made for yourself, so they named him Peretz," and from him came the kingdom of David.

Once again, another ancestral couple confronts the pain of infertility. Unlike Abraham, Isaac takes a more proactive and sensitive role—praying to God on behalf of his wife Rebecca. God answers Isaac's plea and Parashat Tol'dot opens with the conception of twins. Rebecca feels her children "wrestling" with one another and turns to God for answers. God's response is at once comforting and enigmatic, declaring that "two nations" are in Rebecca's womb.

Joseph B'khor Shor imagines a compelling dialogue taking place between Rebecca and God. Rebecca, concerned that she is about to lose the children she so desired, asks God about her fate: "why did I conceive and why did God accept our prayer, if not to help and bring this [pregnancy] to fruition?" God's response is telling, namely that this pregnancy will be successful and that the pain Rebecca feels inside of her is that of two nations "against one another." The pain of emptiness and the absence of life gives way to a new reality—the pain of fullness and conflict. Two nations are indeed destined to enter this world.

But even more notable are God's words that "*rav ya'avod tzair*," which is traditionally translated as "the older will serve the younger," meaning that Esau (the older) will serve Jacob (the younger). A number of years ago, Dr. Diane Sharon shared a very different reading of this text, pointing out that the *peshat* (literal interpretation) is not so definitive. Not only can the Hebrew be read as "the older will serve the younger," but also "the older—the younger will serve" (Esau—Jacob will serve). In other words, God's words are ambiguous—sometimes Jacob will have the upper hand and, at other times, his perceived enemy Esau will indeed triumph. The pendulum of Jewish history reflects the ambiguity of God's words. And just as Rebecca's experience of emptiness and fullness are plagued by uncertainty and searching, so too do we continue to wrestle with Rebecca's fate. Our sacred tasks in the world today are to ask difficult questions, as our foremother Rebecca did, and to listen closely and sensitively to the answers. God's ambiguity could be the key to a new, hopeful reality—for ourselves and for humanity.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.