

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Charlie Schwartz

Genesis Rabbah 66:1

א ויתן לך האלהים מטל השמים כתיב (איוב כט) שרשי פתוח אלי מים
וטל ילין בקצירי...מה טעם שרשי פתוח אלי מים, אמר יעקב ע"י
שהייתי עוסק בתורה שנמשלה כמים זכיתי להתברך בטל שנאמר ויתן
לך האלהים מטל השמים

“May God give you of the dew of heaven” (Gen. 27:28) . . . It is written in Job 29:19, “My roots reaching water and dew lying on my branches.” . . . What is the meaning of the phrase “My roots reaching for water”? Jacob said, “Because I occupied myself with Torah, which is compared to water, I merited to be blessed with dew, as it is written, “May God give you of the dew of heaven.”

The metaphor of Torah as water has always resonated with me. With Torah as water, the idea of learning, engaging with, and living through our sacred texts comes into focus. Just as we cannot live for long without water, so too will our lives become desiccated and empty without the study of Torah.

But the metaphor goes deeper than this. Water is an intrinsic part of this world, one of the fundamental building blocks of life and creation. In a real, tangible way, the world would cease to exist without the elegant molecule H₂O.

I like to think that the same is true for Torah writ large, which is not just the written and oral Torahs, but also what it means to be a Jew, to be grappling with the moral and religious complexities of modernity while striving to bring holiness into every moment. Without this Torah, the world, existence, would be diminished, would cease in some way to exist.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Toledot
Genesis 25:19–28:9
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold M. Eisen, chancellor, JTS.

At the start of this week's parashah, and again at its conclusion, we confront the complex, conflicted relationship that binds Isaac's twin sons to one another and to their father. The middle section of the parashah, by contrast, is concerned with the no less complex and conflicted relationship that binds Isaac and his family to their neighbors. Both accounts are connected in multiple ways to dynamics set in motion by Isaac's father, Abraham; both examine universal and enduring themes that continue to play themselves out in every generation of families and nations. We witness them still—and participate in them—today.

The Torah takes pains at several key points in the narrative to alert us to continuities we might otherwise have missed. At the start of chapter 26, for example, we read, “There was a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham.” The initial famine had sent Abram and Sarai, as they were then called, down to Egypt, where Sarah's beauty attracted the notice of Pharaoh. The king took her into his household in the mistaken belief that she was Abraham's sister and not his wife. “And because of her it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels” (Gen. 12:15). When Pharaoh's household is afflicted with plagues as a result of Sarai's presence in their midst, the king confronts Abram with his deception on the wife/sister matter and angrily “sent him away with his wife and all that he possessed” (Gen. 20).

A similar drama later played out between Abraham and Avimelekh, the king of Gerar. In that episode (recounted in chapter 20 of Genesis), Avimelekh “had Sarah brought to him.” God appears to the king in a dream and instructs him to ask Abraham's assistance in winning divine forgiveness for what he had (innocently?) done to Sarah. After reproving Abraham for the deception, Avimelekh “took sheep and oxen and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham” (Gen. 20:7, 14).

One wonders if Isaac was familiar with these stories about his father when he, too, prompted by famine, settles in Gerar and confronts Avimelekh, perhaps the son of the one with whom his father had dealings. This king, too, desires the wife of the Israelite and claims to be shocked to discover that she is not his sister. It is God who makes the Israelite patriarch rich this time around and not the disappointed king: “Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The Lord blessed him,

and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy; he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him” (Gen. 26:12–14).

What’s going on? I think the Torah takes such pains to stress Israelite wealth in all three cases because frustrated Gentile desire for Israelite women leads every time (explicitly in the two Avimelekh cases) to added resentment at Israelite wealth. Servants of Avimelekh try on two occasions to take some of it away by force; both times the conflict breaks out over wells—the source of water and so of wealth and of life itself. “And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth” (Gen. 26:15). Once again a king named Avimelekh comes to visit an Israelite patriarch, accompanied by a general, in order to sign a treaty of peace. The Torah is teaching a lesson about the Jewish (and not only the Jewish) political situation that is very difficult to ignore.

“Why have you come,” Isaac demands of his visitors, “given that you hate me and have driven me away?” (Gen. 26:27).

Their reply is equally telling. “We now see plainly that the Lord has been with you, and we thought: let there be a sworn treaty between us . . . from now on, be you blessed of the Lord!”

Avimelekh does not deny his hostility toward Isaac. But he is a practical man. God is obviously on Isaac’s side. The Israelite enjoys palpable divine favor (ever-increasing wealth) and God has obviously stood by him. No lord of the earth can win against a person who has the Lord of Heaven and Earth as his or her ally! Avimelekh prudently seeks to share in the blessing that he cannot acquire by force. He is a realist when it comes to international relations. He makes the best deal he can under the circumstances and forces Isaac to do the same.

These dynamics seemed to hold through many centuries of Jewish exile and dispersion. Jews were never able to bargain for acceptance from a position of strength. They could only plead economic interest—Jewish industry and trade would help make the societies who hosted them more prosperous—and a claim to a special connection to God that was accepted, up to a point, by Christian and Muslim powers. Over the centuries, Jews often felt, with good reason, that they were hated—or at least disliked—by those who tolerated them. They often returned that sentiment. Relations of friendship and true partnership on the national level were rare.

The question is whether this model is still relevant today, when Jews wield real power in the sovereign Jewish State of Israel and exercise tremendous influence in America and several other countries. Yes and no, I think. Jewish leaders in Israel and the Diaspora seem haunted by the fragility of the current situation, with anti-Semitism still widespread in the world, Arab enmity toward Israel as strong as ever, and the Holocaust fewer than 70 years in the past. The virtues of realism and idealism in foreign policy are widely debated in America and many other nations. On the idealist side, there is the fact that Jewish-Gentile alliances are often strong, founded not only on interest but on mutual respect and real friendship. America’s support of Israel is arguably based on shared ideals as much as mutual interests. It seems a mistake—and perhaps a dangerous one—to act as if nothing has changed since Abraham’s day.

Indeed, the Torah seems to suggest, nations that share commitments on the moral/spiritual/religious level have a greater chance of peace than those who do not. Consider one final episode in our parashah. After Jacob connives with his mother, Rebekah, to steal the blessing that Isaac intended to give his other son, Esau, the latter “burst[s] into wild and bitter sobbing.” Esau utters one of the most haunting sentences in all the Torah, “Bless me too, Father! . . . Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

It is as if the Israelite author—never doubting the blessing conferred on Israel, the people of the covenant—is wondering aloud whether it is good for Israel, for God, or for the

human family that only Israel enjoys God’s blessing. Wouldn’t it be better *not* to have a dynamic based on desire, resentment, and inequality of access to the Source of All Good? Shared relation to divinity might be good for the world: multiple faiths and faith communities, each confident of its blessing and its birthright, each group sustained by their love for God and God’s love for them.

The Messiah will come, according to a well-known midrash, only when the tears of Esau are exhausted.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Parashat Toledot continues the ancestral conundrum known as “the paradox of promise.” While Abraham is guaranteed a prolific future, every ancestral pair struggles with the challenge of infertility. Abraham and Sarah wrestle with childlessness in the previous two parashiyot; now Isaac and Rebekah stumble upon the same experience; and then of course Jacob, Rachel, and Leah will together face the same struggle. Isaac, however, seems to rise to the challenge with great sensitivity and soulful reflection. Rather than scolding his partner (as Jacob infamously does with Rachel) or embracing an alternative solution (Abraham turns to Hagar, albeit at Sarah’s urging), Isaac is clearly a partner with Rebekah and turns to God for intervention. We read, “Isaac pleaded (*vaye’atar*) with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived” (Gen. 25:21). As *vaye’atar* is an unusual word for prayer or pleading, it gives us pause to think more deeply about how Isaac approaches God. What is the message communicated by Torah in using this term?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

The word is related to *hatar*, bore into, or *mahteret*, breaking in. Also the forcible pushing forward of a ship against wind and billows (Jonah 1:13). Hence *vaye’atar* relates to a penetrating prayer and request. The pillar of smoke rising straight up is also called “*atar anan ketoret*,” a thick cloud of smoke pierced upward (Ezekiel 8:11). When an enemy kisses us, the kisses are also “forced out of him” as we see in Proverbs 27:6. Pharaoh also says: “let your prayer force (*he’ateru*) its way up” to God; in other words, make it a mighty influential advocate for me. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 422)

Samson Raphael Hirsch’s philological survey of Tanakh convincingly demonstrates Isaac’s gumption and devotion. Far from offering a casual or half-hearted prayer, Isaac focuses his *kavanah* (intent/concentration) in an effort to pierce the silence and demand a response from the Divine. The God who promised a fertile future to his father, Abraham, must now answer the fervent call of the suppliant. Isaac calls upon to God to live up to the Divine oath. And more than that, Isaac’s sensitivity to his wife, Rebekah, is deeply moving. So profound is his love for his partner that he feels her pain and translates this suffering into a forceful, heartfelt prayer destined to reach the gates of heaven. It is Isaac’s *chutzpah* combined with deep sensitivity that makes this ancestor worthy of emulation for generations to come.

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