

Parashat Toldot 5781

This Shabbat's Parashah, Toldot, is brimming full with events. It begins with what appears to be a somewhat redundant opening line. The word "Toldot" is related to the word *yeled* which means "boy" or "child" (because there's no neuter in Hebrew). Toldot can mean generations, but it's also the word for "history." Toldot Yisrael means "Jewish history" in Hebrew. The entire Parashah and for that matter, most of the book of Genesis, is about family relations. It's establishing the family of our patriarchs from whom the Jewish people descend. From a literary point of view, it's beautifully written. As always, there's a great deal of economy in the way the story is told, by which I mean that a great deal is communicated in very few verses.

The Parashah starts out saying that these are the generations of Yitzchak ben Avraham, i.e. Yitzchak the son of Avraham and the very next words are that Avraham begot, as they say, Yitzchak. The redundancy makes the rabbis question why it's there, of course because there are not supposed to be any unnecessary, redundant, or extraneous words in the Torah. Some commentators explained that there were scoffers who thought that Avimelekh might have been the real father since Sarah and Avraham had been together for so many years without children that they doubted the paternity of Avraham, but the text responds to them saying clearly that Avraham is the one.

Once again we have a story of a couple who cannot conceive. It takes Yitzchak and Rivka twenty years (if you follow the text) to conceive and when they do, they have twins, both of whom will be the father of nations. They unborn twins apparently are struggling with each other already in the womb. The Torah tells us that this is what Rivka is told by G!d when she is suffering during her pregnancy. But she's also told that the older will serve the younger. The two are distinguished in the text with the elder, Esav (Esau) being characterized as a man of the fields who know how to hunt while Ya'akov (Jacob) is described as an "*ish tam yoshev b'ohalim*" – *tam* could mean innocent, pure, simple, honest – so the description means a simple or pure person who dwells in tents i.e. not a hunter. Then the text tells us that Yitzchak loved Esav because the game Esav hunted was in Yitzchak's mouth. The next phrase is that Rivka loved Ya'akov.

I feel like there's so much in that short phrase to comprehend. I'm always struck that Yitzchak's love is explained with a reason, a condition, whereas Rivka's love is not explained

with a reason or condition – it seems unconditional. Even though the other son is not mentioned explicitly in the description of each parent’s love for a particular son, it doesn’t mean that they don’t love the other son. But it still seems crucial to our understanding of the story that one love is described as conditional and the other is not.

Immediately after this verse we read the story of Ya’akov cooking lentil stew and Esav coming in from the field famished asking for some of that “red stuff,” because of which we’re told that Esav was also known as Edom (which has the same root as *adom* – *aleph, dalet, mem* – for “red” i.e. the red lentils). Ya’akov won’t give the stew to Esav until he sells Ya’akov his birthright. Esav has the birthright as the first born because Esav was born with Ya’akov holding on to Esav’s heel (“*akev*” in Hebrew, which shares the same three letter root as the name Ya’akov i.e. *ayin, koof, vet*). Esav, as the elder has the birthright, though, interestingly, in the Torah many of the people who become the leaders are not the first born – for example Moses has an older sister and brother, King David is not a firstborn, nor is Abraham. Esav feels like he’s about to die of hunger so what does he need the birthright for, so he sells it. The text tells us that Esav despised his birthright i.e. the narrator steps back from the story to comment upon it. Literally: “Esav ate, drank, got up and went – and Esav despised i.e. treated without respect, his birthright.”

Immediately after, in the very next verse the Torah speaks about a famine in the land of Israel. We just went from a famished Esav, the microscopic story if you will, to a macroscopic story of famine in the whole land. Yitzchak is told by G!d not to leave the land.

I want to return to another little literary element of the story. When the Parashah begins, it talks about the two children in her womb with the word “*b’kirbah*” which has the same letters in a different order of the name of the mother Rivka (*vet* and *bet* are one letter – pronounced as a “b” if it has a dot in it and as a “v” without the dot). Back in last Shabbat’s portion, Chayyei Sarah, it starts with the *k’vurah* (the burial) of Sarah which also has the letters of Rivka’s name – and in that Parashah, we go from the *k’vurah*, the burial, of Sarah, to the search for the worthy spouse for Yitzchak, i.e. Rivka.

We have an important episode near the end of the portion of Yitzchak bestowing his *brakha*, his blessing, upon Ya’akov and Esav. Yitzchak’s described as blind – which he clearly is in certain ways. Rivka recognizes that Ya’akov is the worthy heir to Avraham and Yitzchak.

Lastly the love of children for parents is prominent in this Parashah. The portion ends with Ya'akov obeying his father and his mother and leaving for Paddan-aram to both escape Esav and to find a wife from among his mother's kin. Esav sees that Ya'akov was sent away being told not to marry a Canaanite woman and therefore marries (in addition to his other wives) Makhalat, the daughter of Ishmael, Yitzchak's half-brother (i.e. Abraham and Hagar's son) because of what his father said.

Shabbat Shalom.