

Dvar Torah: Toldot
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Howard Husock

We are fortunate to have in our shul a great many accomplished professionals. A good thing, too-because our Torah portion today, from the Toldot section of Genesis, cries out for commentary from a wide range of fields. Attorneys may offer us insight as to the question of whether Rebecca and Jacob were engaged in fraud when they dressed Jacob up in furs to trick Isaac into giving his "innermost blessing" to his younger son, not the hairy Esau. Psychologists might guide us toward understanding the relationship between the two siblings. Gerontologists may wish to comment as to whether Isaac, aged and blind, was in any condition to determine to whom his blessing should go. Perhaps we'd even want to bring in a family therapist to help us understand the dynamics at work here.

Indeed, Toldot merits such concentrated attention. It tells the story, after all, of what one of Jewish people's founding families, if you will-and, in Jacob, the man whose progeny would prove central to our history.

Which is why, one might say, that Toldot is too big a story for any one profession, too big a story to be reduced or compared to ordinary circumstances. It raises, in other words, transcendent questions that belong to all these fields and more. It tells us of a mother who not only is willing to favor one son over another, a wife who is willing not only to trick her husband but who is willing-eager-to favor the physically weaker offspring over the stronger one. Thus, the question: What could be the good in favoring the weaker over the stronger? Rebecca's actions are especially curious in the context of the time and place in which she lived. This was a society-although it had a growing pastoral dimension-was still one in which strength mattered, in which hunting was a necessity. And yet, from the moment of his birth, as a fraternal twin, Rebecca appeared to be cognizant to the need to pay special attention to Jacob, whose very name, the commentary tells us stems "from a Semetic verb, Akov", to protect.

One could say that Rebecca was merely acting on instructions. We are told, after all, that the Lord, in response to her question, 'why do I exist', told her of the two nations in her womb, one mightier than the other-and that the older shall serve the younger.

But even this foretelling of events does not dictate a specific series of actions for Rebecca. Having the older, mightier Esau serve his younger brother need not imply securing Isaac's blessing for Jacob; it need have implied helping Jacob to flee to her brother's home for protection. No, Rebecca goes far out of her way to protect the physically weaker of the two brothers.

It is tempting to place her acts in the context of our contemporary political discussions-in which protecting the weak is judged by many to be a central role of the state. Thus, it is said to be a mark of civilization for a society to take the steps necessary to help those in need-as arguably Jacob was in the face of the "grudge" held by his swindled brother, robbed of his birthright and his father's "innermost blessing".

The same events can be viewed in a slightly-but profoundly-different way, however. Rebecca, this founding mother of the Jewish people, can be said, indeed, to have helped move us toward a civilized state, one in which might does not make right. But one has the sense that she did so not because Jacob was the weaker of the two brothers but notwithstanding the fact that he was. In protecting the physically weaker of her sons at a time when strength was a crucial virtue, Rebecca was, in effect, imagining, envisioning a civilized society-a society which protects the weak because there are strengths other than the physical which deserve to flower, from which human progress flows and on which a great "assembly of peoples" depends-the skills of the son, like Jacob, who "was a mild man who stayed in camp", even while Esau "became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors."

This is what the economists-yet another relevant profession-among us would recognize as the theory of comparative advantage: each brings his own talents to the world and, when things go right, those talents

complement each other. This, as a wise parent, not unduly influenced by one set of talents compared to another, Rebecca understood, although she also appeared not to have cared too much for Hittite women with whom Esau had thrown in his lot. In protecting Jacob by arranging for him to receive the blessing she may have judged the stronger Esau not to have needed as much, Rebecca foreshadows momentous events yet to come in the Torah. The commandments Moses will receive on Sinai-with their proscriptions against murder and theft-will lay the foundation for a society in which physical strength does not rule, in which the maternal actions of Rebecca are codified as law.

And yet the facts remain: Rebecca and Jacob did conspire to trick Isaac and rob Esau of what was his by right, Did noble ends justify surreptitious, even underhanded means? To explore such a question, we may need to call on yet another professional, the ethicist. I'm sure we've got several in our congregation-thanks to the path blazed by Rebecca and recorded in Toldot!