

INSPIRE

TOLDOS 5TH KISLEV -21ST NOVEMBER



DIFFERENT YET IDENTICAL

In introducing us to the patriarchal family of Isaac, son of Abraham, this week's Torah portion of Toldot begins: "And these are the offspring of Isaac, son of Abraham—Abraham begot Isaac." Since Torah is not given to redundancy, this opening passage raises the question: Once we're told that Isaac is the "son of Abraham," what is the point of then stating, "Abraham begot Isaac"? The Midrash explains that the statement "Abraham begot Isaac" represents divine testimony that Isaac was indeed the biological son of Abraham. That in the face of ridiculers and rumor-mongers who sought to claim that Isaac had been fathered by the Philistine king Abimelech, G-d formed the physical features of Isaac in striking resemblance to those of Abraham, so that there would be no room for doubt that "Abraham begot Isaac."

Another Midrashic comment expands upon this point by saying that this physical resemblance between Abraham and Isaac was a reflection of their spiritual resemblance: the merits, the lofty pursuits, indeed the spiritual DNA, of father and son were likewise completely identical. Now this declaration of spiritual similarity—let alone resemblance—is most curious.

We're taught that Abraham's primary mode of service was via the attribute of loving kindness (chessed). This was repeatedly and poignantly demonstrated by his incessant acts of hospitality, compassion and benevolence. He opened his home to hungry wayfarers. He reached out and taught others with delicate softness and patient sensitivity. Isaac's primary service, on the other hand, was via the attribute of severity and restraint (gevurah). He was a much more demanding sort of fellow. This was demonstrated by his defiant and relentless digging of wells. Even as his enemies kept filling and destroying them, Isaac dug away the rocks and the dirt to uncover the waters beneath. With sharpness and strength, he dug away at the shmutz—the evil and the falseness that was seen on the surface—so as to unearth the reservoirs of goodness and truth buried deep within. Indeed, everything we learn about Abraham and Isaac seems to cry out: Different! That if ever there were a father and son who seemed so unlike one another, it was these two highly individualized personalities. Yet the Midrash states that, in fact, Abraham and Isaac resembled one another—in every way! Within this paradox, seen at the inception of the family of Israel, lies the true beauty of our people. Different situations require different solutions. In the days of Abraham—during which unawareness of a divine presence was rampant—the world needed an Abraham-like personality. In the days of Isaac—especially with hostilities looming on the horizon—the world needed an Isaac-like personality. Yet, these very different individuals, firmly embarked on their very different missions with their very different methods and characteristics, are deemed spiritually (and essentially) identical, because their ultimate focus and goals were one and the same. Their core principles, values and underlying devotion to G-d were completely indistinguishable from one another. They blazed different trails, but both trails led to the same place: toward making their environment a more holy and moral place to live. The great chassidic master, Reb Zushe of Hanipoli, once remarked that when he thinks about the interrogation that might await him after his days on earth are done, he is not worried that he might be asked: "Zushe, why could you not attain the heights of an Abraham, a Moses or a King David?" Such concerns did not trouble him. His one and only source of trepidation was that the question would be posed: "Zushe, why were you not as great as Zushe?" You are expected to rise to the heights of your own very special and unique potential—no more, no less. Judaism, and the Torah way of life, celebrates individuality. We are each endowed with our own gifts and talents, our own passions and modes of expression. In terms of personality and character, none of us are truly alike. This is the way G-d created us, for it is only through the diverse expression of the multitudes that His true intent in creating this world can be realized. Each and every Jewish man, woman and child plays his or her own special instrument within the symphony that is Judaism. Within the context and framework of halachah and tradition are endless means and modes of service of the Almighty. From the intellectual to the emotional, from the ritualistic to the artistic, we are called upon to experience it all, even as we shine in some areas more than others. What inspires, stimulates and intrigues some may not do the same for others. Yet, at the pinnacle of it all, is that special place in which we are, and must remain, identical. Within the essential goals of living and being true to the principles of our holy Torah is where there is a beautiful resemblance among all of the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Let each instrument of the orchestra contribute its own special notes, with its own special sound and rhythm. Yet let us make certain that we are playing the same piece of music—as guided by that one and only Conductor—so that rather than a cacophony of disjointed noise, we have a beautiful symphony of harmonious diversity.



WHY DID ISAAC LOVE ESAU?

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Even before they were born, Jacob and Esau struggled in the womb. They were destined, it seems, to be eternal adversaries. Not only were they different in character and appearance. They also held different places in their parents' affections:

The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

We know why Rebecca loved Jacob. Before the twins were born, the pains Rebecca felt were so great that "she went to inquire of the Lord." This is what she was told:

*"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."*

It seemed as if God were saying that the younger would prevail and carry forward the burden of history, so it was the younger, Jacob, whom she loved.

But why, in that case, did Isaac love Esau? Did he not know about Rebecca's oracle? Had she not told him about it? Besides, did he not know that Esau was wild and impetuous? Can we really take literally the proposition that Isaac loved Esau because "he had a taste for wild game," as if his affections were determined by his stomach, by the fact that his elder son brought him food he loved? Surely not, when the very future of the covenant was at stake.

The classic answer, given by Rashi, listens closely to the literal text. Esau, says the Torah, "knew how to trap [yode'a tzayid]." Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth [ki tzayid be'fiv]." Esau, says Rashi, trapped Isaac by his mouth. Here is Rashi's comment on the phrase "knew how to trap:"

He knew how to trap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him, "Father, how should one tithe salt and straw?" Consequently his father believed him to be strict in observing the commands.

Esau knew full well that salt and straw do not require tithes, but he asked so as to give the impression that he was strictly religious. And here it is Rashi's comment on the phrase that Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth":

"The midrashic explanation is that there was entrapment in the mouth of Esau, who trapped his father and deceived him by his words."

The Maggid of Dubnow adds a perceptive comment as to why Isaac, but not Rebecca, was deceived. Rebecca grew up with the wily Laban. She knew deception when she saw it. Isaac, by contrast, had grown up with Abraham and Sarah. He only knew total honesty and was thus easily deceived. (Bertrand Russell once commented on the philosopher G. E. Moore, that he only once heard Moore tell a lie, when he asked Moore if he had ever told a lie, and Moore replied, "Yes").

So the classic answer is that Isaac loved Esau because he simply did not know who or what Esau was. But there is another possible answer: that Isaac loved Esau precisely because he did know what Esau was.

In the early twentieth century someone brought to the great Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, the following dilemma. He had given his son a good Jewish education. He had always kept the commands at home. Now however the son had drifted far from Judaism. He no longer kept the commandments.

He did not even identify as a Jew. What should the father do?

"Did you love him when he was religious?" asked Rav Kook. "Of course," replied the father. "Well then," Rav Kook replied, "Now love him even more."

Sometimes love can do what rebuke cannot. It may be that the Torah is telling us that Isaac was anything but blind as to his elder son's true nature. But if you have two children, one well behaved, the other liable to turn out badly, to whom should you devote greater attention? With whom should you spend more time?

It may be that Isaac loved Esau not blindly but with open eyes, knowing that there would be times when his elder son would give him grief, but knowing too that the moral responsibility of parenthood demands that we do not despair of, or disown, a wayward son.

Did Isaac's love have an effect on Esau? Yes and no. It is clear that there was a special bond of connection between Esau and Isaac. This was recognized by the sages:

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: No man ever honoured his father as I honoured my father, but I found that Esau honoured his father even more.

Rabbi Shimon derives this from the fact that usually people serve their parents wearing ordinary clothes while they reserve their best for going out. Esau, however, had kept his best clothes in readiness to serve his father the food he had gone out to hunt. That is why Jacob was able to wear them while Esau was still out hunting.

We find, much later in the Torah, that God forbids the Israelites to wage war against Esau's descendants. He tells Moses:

Give the people these orders: "You are about to pass through the territory of your brothers the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you but be very careful. Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own."

And later still Moses commands the Israelites:

Do not abhor an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau], for he is your brother.

The sages saw these provisions as an enduring reward to Esau for the way he honored his father. So, was Isaac right or wrong to love Esau? Esau reciprocated the love, but remained Esau, the hunter, the man of the field, not the man to carry forward the demanding covenant with the invisible God and the spiritual sacrifices it called for. Not all children follow the path of their parents. If it was Isaac's intent that Esau should do so, he failed. But there are some failures that are honourable. Loving your children, whatever they become, is one, for surely that is how God loves us.

PARSHA SUMMARY

Isaac and Rebecca endure twenty childless years, until their prayers are answered and Rebecca conceives. She experiences a difficult pregnancy as the “children struggle inside her”; G-d tells her that “there are two nations in your womb,” and that the younger will prevail over the elder.

Esau emerges first; Jacob is born clutching Esau’s heel. Esau grows up to be “a cunning hunter, a man of the field”; Jacob is “a wholesome man,” a dweller in the tents of learning. Isaac favors Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning exhausted and hungry from the hunt one day, Esau sells his birthright (his rights as the firstborn) to Jacob for a pot of red lentil stew.

In Gerar, in the land of the Philistines, Isaac presents Rebecca as his sister, out of fear that he will be killed by someone coveting her beauty. He farms the land, reopens the wells dug by his father Abraham, and digs a series of his own wells: over the first two there is strife with the Philistines, but the waters of the third well are enjoyed in tranquility.

Esau marries two Hittite women. Isaac grows old and blind, and expresses his desire to bless Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father’s favorite food, Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father. Jacob receives his father’s blessings for “the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land” and mastery over his brother. When Esau returns and the deception is revealed, all Isaac can do for his weeping son is to predict that he will live by his sword, and that when Jacob falters, the younger brother will forfeit his supremacy over the elder.

Jacob leaves home for Charan to flee Esau’s wrath and to find a wife in the family of his mother’s brother, Laban. Esau marries a third wife—Machalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

Malachi 1:1-2:7. This week’s haftorah opens with a mention of the tremendous love G-d harbors for the children of Jacob, and the retribution He will visit upon the children of Esau who persecuted their cousins. This follows the theme of this week’s Torah reading, whose two protagonists are Jacob and Esau. The prophet Malachi then rebukes the kohanim (priests) who offer blemished and emaciated animals on G-d’s altar: “Were you to offer it to your governor, would he be pleased or would he favor you? . . . O that there were even one among you that would close the doors [of the Temple] and that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain!” The haftorah ends with a strong enjoiner to the kohanim to return to the original covenant that G-d had made with their ancestor, Aaron the High Priest. “True teaching was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. In peace and equity he went with Me, and he brought back many from iniquity.”

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Levene, Samuel Shmuel ben Hershl Saturday 21/11/2020 Kislev 5, 5781 Levene, Ian father
Gray, Philip Ephraim Shlomo ben Yaakov Sunday 22/11/2020 Kislev 6, 5781 Wiseman, Susan father
Curtis, Alf Avraham ben Shalom HaCohen Monday 23/11/2020 Kislev 7, 5781 Curtis, Geoffrey father
Curtis, Philip father
Green, Sheila Sheindle bas Mordecai HaCohen Tuesday 24/11/2020 Kislev 8, 5781 Green, Mitchell mother
Green, Clive mother
Rosen, Yehuda Meir Yehuda Meir ben Moshe Aharon Tuesday 24/11/2020 Kislev 8, 5781 Rosen, Sylvia husband
Bien, Jacqueline Yaffa bas Ze’Ave Ha’Cohen Friday 27/11/2020 Kislev 11, 5781 Gee, Audrey sister
Haskal, Reg Yitzchak ben Moshe Aharon Friday 27/11/2020 Kislev 11, 5781 Reuben, Beverly father

JEWISH HUMOUR

A priest, a minister and a rabbi want to see who’s best at his job. So they each go into the woods, find a bear, and attempt to convert it. Later they get together. The priest begins: “When I found the bear, I read to him from the Catechism and sprinkled him with holy water. Next week is his First Communion.” “I found a bear by the stream,” says the minister, “and preached God’s holy word. The bear was so mesmerized that he let me baptize him.” They both look down at the rabbi, who is lying on a gurney in a body cast. “Looking back,” he says, “maybe I shouldn’t have started with the circumcision.”

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

**My first can be seen extensively
from outer space
My second may originate from an
arid place
My whole is a good companion
while running a race
What am I?
Answer for last week
A leg (still attached to a living body, of
course).**

STORY TIME

It was not uncommon for Rabbi Yehuda Ben-Attar (1655-1733), chief rabbi of Fez, Morocco, to receive visitors of all sorts, seeking his wise counsel. Many local Muslims would consult with the rabbi on personal matters and ask him to arbitrate their business dealings. But when a Muslim businessman showed up having traveled all the way from distant Tunis, it was an anomaly indeed.

The visitor was extremely wealthy and had many holdings in his hometown, including a partnership with a Jewish fabric dealer. The wealthy Muslim would provide the money for the fabric dealer to buy various textiles. He would then sell them, and share the profits with his benefactor. Their partnership remained harmonious for many years, and both men prospered.

Over time, complete trust developed between the two, and the magnate would deposit large sums of money with the fabric merchant with no written contracts or records of any sort.

One day, the businessman deposited a substantial sum, and the fabric dealer, who had never handled such vast amounts, was blinded by temptation. He calculated that it would take 10 years of ordinary business for him to earn such a sum of money.

Several weeks passed, and the wealthy man came to pick up his share of the profits. The fabric dealer welcomed him graciously. As soon as the guest was seated and served a glass of tea, the host spoke. "I am surprised, my dear partner. It is already a few weeks that I have not been working on your behalf, as I am waiting for a deposit. Where have you been?"

At first, the businessman did not understand. Then he thought his partner was joking with him. But it soon dawned on him that he had fallen into a trap.

His mind raced as he contemplated his next move. He sorely regretted having trusted the merchant so much that he hadn't even recorded the transaction; now he would be unable to take legal action.

Suddenly, an idea popped into his head. Like many citizens in Morocco, he had heard about the great and pious Rabbi Yehuda Ben-Attar. "You know what," he said to the fabric merchant, "swear to me in the name of Rabbi Yehuda Ben-Attar that you did not receive any money from me in the past few weeks, and that you do not have any money of mine."

At first, the fabric merchant was shocked. He tried to excuse himself with all sorts of ruses, but the wealthy businessman continued pressing him to swear. Realizing that his continued refusal was tantamount to admitting guilt, he paled and shook with fright as he took the oath, especially when he mentioned the name of Rabbi Yehuda. The wealthy man was highly disappointed and left the home of his erstwhile partner, knowing that he had no further recourse.

Time passed and the thief's pangs of guilt were replaced with feelings of joy.

Now, he was richer than he had ever hoped to become, and he threw a party for all his friends. As the wine flowed like water, he recounted how he had struck rich in a "good deal" and that his strong business acumen and good fortune guaranteed that he would have enough for the rest of his life.

As the evening wore on, he went to the cellar to fetch some fine wine. The cellar also served as his warehouse, in which he stored his fabrics. There were also barrels of oil, lumber, and adhesive materials there. Standing in the cellar and inspecting his great wealth gave him untold joy.

When he returned to the party with his wine, he forgot the candle he had brought with him. Soon the strong smell of smoke filled the house. Before he had a chance to look for the source, pillars of fire were coming from the cellar. The candle had fallen on a bolt of fabric, and in a short time, there was no trace of any merchandise.

"I came to honor the holy rabbi, to tell this story and express my gratitude," continued the rich businessman who had traveled all the way to Fez to see Rabbi Yehuda Ben-Attar. "I am certain the ruin of my ex-partner is because he used your name to swear falsely."

The visitor took out a purse full of money and tried to give it to the rabbi as a token of his gratitude and admiration. But Rabbi Yehuda, who worked as a silversmith and never took any public funds for himself, declined the gift. "Firstly, I don't take gifts from people. Second, I cannot benefit from money coming as a token of thanks for the downfall of another, however deserving he may be of Divine punishment."

Rabbi Yehuda directed him to the charity director in Fez, and the money was distributed among the poor.

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

How do you heal a brother?

By entering inside him and experiencing what it is like to be him. And then you can heal together. How do you heal any problem in this world? By investing yourself within that chunk of the world, so that the problem becomes your problem. And then you can heal your world. Because, in truth, you can only heal yourself, and that to which you tie your destiny.