

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

### THANKSGIVING, JEWISH IDENTITY, AND ANTISEMITISM

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Toldot is an utterly terrifying parshah for parents. Yitzchak and Rivkah have two sons. They start fighting in the womb! Their fights – in the womb! – are about both self-interest (who comes out first) and values (idolatry or Torah). Character is determined and destiny. There was nothing Yitzchak and Rivkah could have done to make Esav turn out better, or to prevent eternal fraternal enmity.

Toldot is an utterly terrifying parshah for parents. Yitzchak and Rivkah have two sons. They share a genetic heritage, and an environment – they had the same potential. They fought – but all male siblings fight, especially twins. They had different strengths and weaknesses – like all human beings. But a series of parenting errors put and kept Esav on the wrong path, and cemented childhood roughhousing into adult hatred.

Toldot is an utterly terrifying parshah for parents. Yitzchak and Rivkah have two sons, and each of them grows up obedient and cooperative. Suddenly, at bar mitzvah (according to Midrash Lekach Tov) –

ויגדלו הנערים –

ר' פנחס בשם ר' לוי אמר:

עשו ויעקב דומים לעצבונית והדס שהיו גדלין זה על גב זה  
וכיון שהגדילו - זה נתן ריחו וזה חוחיו.

כך

כל י"ג שנה - לא היו ניכרין מעשיהן

כיון שהגדילו - ניכרין מעשיהן,

זה איש תם, וזה איש יודע ציד

The boys matured –

Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Levi:

*Esav and Yaakov are similar to an itzbonit and a hadas that grew  
one on top of the other*

*Once they matured, this one gave forth its perfume, and this one its  
thorns.*

*So too*

*For the first thirteen years – Esav and Yaakov's deeds were not  
distinguishable*

*Once they matured – their deeds were distinguishable  
This one a man of simplicity, this one a skilled predator.*

Yet even this striking image is tinged with ambivalence, at least for modern readers. Jastrow translates *itzbonit* as wild rose – did Esav still have flowers? (but see also Yeshayah 55:13). In the folk ballad Barbara Allen, the hard-hearted eponym realizes too late, after Sweet William dies of lovesickness for her, that she loved him as well, and has herself buried beside him. A perfumed flower grows out of his grave, a thornbush out of his, but “in the end they formed/ a true lover’s knot/ and the rose grew ‘round/ the briar” (lyrics as sung by Joan Baez). So, too, Yitzchak and Yishmael apparently reconcile at Avraham’s funeral. Is it too much to hope for Yaakov and Esav to do the same? (Maybe, and maybe not – that is a tale for another parshah.)

Toldot is an utterly terrifying parshah for high school Torah teachers. Avraham was buried *b'seivah tovah* = *in goodly old age* – this means that Esav did not begin to sin in Avraham’s lifetime. Avraham died at 175. He had Yitzchak at 100, which means that Yitzchak was 75. Yitzchak had Yaakov and Esav when he was 60 – so they must have been 15 at Avraham’s death, which means that Esav began sinning two years before Avraham’s death! The answer is that Esav hid his sins for the first two years, while Avraham was alive. He was indistinguishable from Yaakov.

When I was Orthodox Rabbinic Adviser at Harvard Hillel, parents or teachers would sometimes bemoan the corrupting influence of the secular campus on their previously innocent children. I don’t deny that the secular campus, like very other environment, can be corrupting. But I also taught high school, and high school students who seemed to all the world like the very model of day school success would confide in me that they had no plans to be frum on campus. Sometimes they would “play frum”

when their parents came to visit, but the charade generally had to end sometime.

They didn't confide in all of their Torah teachers. As the Keeper says to Captain Kirk: "Captain Pike has an illusion, and you have reality. May your way be as pleasant" (Star Trek, TOS, The Menagerie Part II).

There is another explanation of the chronological discrepancy. Minchat Yehudah (a commentary by the Tosafist R. Yehudah ben El'azar, available on [www.alhatorah.org](http://www.alhatorah.org)) reports that ר"ב א"א (presumably Rabbi Yitzchak ben Asher HaLevi) found in a midrash that "Yitzchak was hidden away in the Garden of Eden for two years in order to heal from the incision where his father began to slaughter him." He suggests that those two years were a sort of suspended animation – like Noach on the Ark! – and did not count as part of Yitzchak's life, so Esav and Yaakov were really born 62 years after his own birth, and Avraham died at their bar mitzvah.

I had not previously seen this midrash. It reminded me immediately of Rashi's explanation of the apparent redundancy of the angel's cease-and-desist order to Avraham: "Do not send your hand forth against the lad, and don't cause him an injury." Rashi explains that after the first command, Avraham asked whether he could at the very least draw a drop of blood, so the angel banned even injury.

Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial* made famous the crusade-era interpretation in which Avraham in fact slaughters Yitzchak, G-d resurrects him, and the angel succeeds only in preventing the second sacrifice. In other words, Avraham obeyed the second command but not the first. Minchat Yehudah's midrash seems to have Avraham obeying the first command – "Don't slaughter" – but not the second.

Minchat Yehudah does not tell us whether the bacta tanks of Eden completely renewed Yitzchak's skin. I suspect that he became whole psychologically – not the same as before, but whole – but that he always had a physical scar, and that Yaakov and Esav knew full well where the scar had come from.

What do such children grow up thinking? Some of them are genuinely inspired by both the willingness to sacrifice and to be sacrificed. These are the children of Navaredok – even before the Shoah, in the early Soviet Union – who could endure anything for the sake of keeping Torah alive under oppression. It is a very powerful message, but possibly one that requires continued oppression, or the live memory of oppression, or at least belief in the inevitability of oppression to be effective.

When Avraham dies, Esav and Yaakov have only Yitzchak's experience left. They know what they are giving up for Judaism, but Esav no longer feels that the sacrifices are motivated by idealism, let alone justified by idealism. What kept Esav *frum* was his connection to Avraham, and let's be honest – perhaps also fear of Avraham. The possibility that one will be sacrificed tomorrow concentrates the mind wonderfully. Esav knew that Yitzchak would never be able to punish – to inflict any sort of harm on him – for the sake of religion.

Yaakov connected to Rivkah. Rivkah was a *baalat teshuvah* – she left with Eliezer voluntarily, against her family's will, and in rebellion against the worst parts of their culture. She is attracted and overwhelmed from the start by Yitzchak's capacity for religious experience. No one has ever succeeded in imposing anything on her.

Rivkah never got through to Esav. That doesn't mean that his going astray was inevitable – it just meant that she needed help. But to give her that help, someone had to understand in time that Esav's conformity was shallow, rooted in fear and personality, and find a way for him to develop an autonomous connection to Torah. Too often, I suspect, his teachers, with the best of intentions, tried instead to set themselves up as substitutes for Avraham. To be fair, they probably had success with many similar students. Esav married at 40. If only Avraham had lived another 27 years, Esav might never have broken away.

Yaakov teaches us that Jewish identity can thrive without being rooted in the expectation of oppression. We have not had many opportunities to try the experiment. This Thanksgiving is a time for American Jews to reflect with gratitude on the beauty and fragility of our experience. Let us resolve to both preserve it and deserve it.