



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

תולדות תש"ף
Toldot 5780

Isaac and Esau

**** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK ****
Love helps heal both the lover and the loved.



PARSHAT TOLDOT IN A NUTSHELL

Toldot tells the story of Isaac and Rebecca's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, who fought with each other even before they were born! Rebecca had been told that although Esau would be born first, Jacob would be the one to continue the Jewish people. But Jacob wasn't sure of this and one day he convinced Esau to sell him the special blessing he was due as the first-born son. Rebecca then helped her son Jacob to dress in Esau's clothes and pretend to be his brother, tricking his almost-blind father Isaac into giving him Esau's first-born blessing.

When Esau found out, he screamed a bitter cry, and even though Isaac tried to make him feel better by giving him a blessing just for him, Esau's anger remained. Rebecca, scared Esau might kill Jacob in revenge, told Jacob to run far away to Charan, where he could stay with her brother Laban.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think Rebecca and Jacob were right to trick Isaac?



THE CORE IDEA

Why did Isaac love Esau? The verse says explicitly "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob" (Bereishit 25:28). Whichever way we read this verse, it is confusing. If we read it literally, it suggests that Isaac's love for Esau came from a taste for a particular kind of food. Surely that is not the way love is earned or given in the Torah.

Rashi, quoting a Midrash, suggests that the phrase, "who had a taste for wild game," really refers to Esau, and should be read "there was hunting in his mouth," meaning that he used to trap and deceive his father with his words. This hints that Esau deceived Isaac into thinking that he was more religious and spiritual than in fact he was. Yet, if we look back at the original text in the Torah, it still suggests undeniably that there was a genuine bond of love between Esau and Isaac.

Here is another way to look at their relationship: Perhaps Isaac, who loved Esau, was not tricked about the nature of his elder son. He knew what he was and what he wasn't. He

knew he was a man of the field, a hunter, impulsive in temperament, a man who could easily become violent and angry, and equally quickly, capable of being distracted and forgetting.

He also knew that Esau was not the child to continue the covenant between God and the Jewish people. That is clear in the difference between the blessing Isaac gave Jacob in Bereishit 27 (believing him to be Esau), and the blessing in Bereishit 28 that he gave Jacob, knowing him to be Jacob.

The first blessing, intended for Esau, is about *wealth* – "May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth" – and *power*, "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you." The second blessing, intended for Jacob as he was leaving home, is about *children* – "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples" – and a *land* – "May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of ... the land

God gave to Abraham.” The patriarchal blessings are not about wealth and power; they are about children and the land. So Isaac knew all along that the covenant would be continued by Jacob; he was not deceived by Esau. What then, was the source of his deep love for Esau?

I believe the answer is that Isaac’s love for Esau was unconditional. He did not ignore who or what his first-born son was. But he loved him anyway, even if he didn’t love

everything he did – because that is how God loves us, unconditionally, even if He does not love everything we do.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do all parents love their children unconditionally? Do all children deserve to be loved unconditionally?
2. Did Isaac love Esau and Jacob differently? Was this good and fair parenting?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

A water-bearer in China had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always carried its full portion of water from the stream back to the house. But by the end of the long walk from the stream to the house, the cracked pot would only be half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to the house. Of course, the flawless pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what felt to the cracked pot like a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. “Why don’t you throw me out and get a new pot, for the other water pot must be your favourite. I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out

all the way back to your house.”

The water-bearer smiled and said to the pot, “I have always known about your crack, and I am very fond of it. Did you ever notice that there were flowers only on one side of the long path? That’s because I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk, you’ve watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.”

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the message of this story and how is it connected to our parsha?
2. Do you think it is difficult for parents to love two very different children, equally and unconditionally?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Isaac’s unconditional love for Esau can be better understood once we examine three extraordinary silences in the Torah. The most pointed one questions, *What happened to Isaac after the binding?* Look at the text in Bereishit 22 and you will see that as soon as the angel has stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac disappears from the story completely. The text tells us that Abraham returns to the two servants who accompanied them to Moriah, but there is no mention of Isaac being there too.

This is a glaring mystery, tantalising the commentators. Some go so far as to say that Isaac actually died at the binding and was brought back to life.

The second silence follows death of Sarah. We read that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and weep for her. But the primary mourner in Judaism is the child. It should have been

Isaac leading the mourning. But he is not mentioned at all in chapter 23 when we read of Sarah’s death and its consequences.

The third missing conversation is in the narrative in which Abraham instructed his servant to find a wife for his son. There is no record in the text that Abraham consulted with Isaac, or even informed him. Abraham knew that a wife was being sought for Isaac; Abraham’s servant knew; but we have no idea as to whether Isaac knew, and whether he had any thoughts on the subject. Did he want to get married? Did he have any particular preference as to what his wife should be like? The text is silent. Only when the servant returns with his wife-to-be, Rebecca, does Isaac enter the narrative at all.

Another detail at this point in the text is significant: “Isaac had come from Be’er Lahai Roi.” What was this place? We have encountered it only once before. It is where the angel appeared to Hagar when, pregnant, she fled from Sarah who was treating her harshly (Bereishit 16:14). An ingenious Midrash says that

when Isaac heard that Abraham had sent his servant to find a wife for him, he said to himself, “Can I live with a wife while my father lives alone? I will go and return Hagar to him.” A later text tells us that “After Abraham’s death, God blessed his son Isaac, who then lived near Be’er Lahai Roi” (Ber. 25:11). On this, the Midrash says that even after his father’s death, Isaac lived near Hagar and treated her with respect.

What does all this mean? We can only speculate. But if the silences mean something, they suggest that *even an aborted sacrifice still has a victim*. Isaac may not have died physically, but the text seems to make him disappear, literarily, through three scenes in which his presence should have been central. He should have been there to meet with the two servants on his safe return from Mount Moriah. He should have been there to mourn his departed mother Sarah. He should have been there to at least discuss, with his father and his father’s servant, his future wife. Isaac did not die on the mountain, but it seems as if something in him did perish, only to be revived when he married. The text tells us that Rebecca “became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”

That seems to be the message of the silences. The meaning of Be’er Lahai Roi seems to be that Isaac never forgot how Hagar and her son – his half-brother – Ishmael had been sent away. The Midrash says that Isaac reunited Hagar with Abraham after Sarah’s death. The biblical text tells us that Isaac and Ishmael stood together at Abraham’s grave (Ber. 25:9). Somehow the

divided family was reunited, seemingly at the instigation of Isaac.

If this is so, then Isaac’s love for Esau is easily explained. It is as if Isaac had said to himself: I know what Esau is. He is strong, wild, unpredictable, possibly violent. It is impossible that he should be the person entrusted with the covenant and its spiritual demands. *But this is my child*. I refuse to sacrifice him, as my father almost sacrificed me. I refuse to send him away, as my parents sent Hagar and Ishmael away. My love for my son is unconditional. I do not ignore who or what he is. But I will love him anyway, even if I do not love everything he does – because that is how God loves us, unconditionally, even if He does not love everything we do. I will bless him. I will hold him close. And I believe that one day that love may make him a better person than he might otherwise have been.

In this one act of loving Esau, Isaac redeemed the pain of two of the most difficult moments in his father Abraham’s life: the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael and the binding of Isaac.

I believe that love helps heal both the lover and the loved.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How did love heal and redeem Isaac?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“Love is the energy God has planted in the human heart, redeeming us from narcissism and solipsism, making the human or Divine Other no less real to me than I am to myself, thus grounding our being in that-which-is-not-me. One cannot love God without loving all that is good in the human situation.”

Ceremony & Celebration, p.225.



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Do you think Isaac and Rebecca were good parents?
2. What was the source of Isaac’s pain? How did love help to heal him?
3. Do you think Isaac was being critical of his father by parenting differently?



QUESTION TIME

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IN A NUTSHELL

1. This is a tricky one! Clearly, this is a case of choosing between competing values, and they believed they were doing what was in the best interest of the (future) Jewish people. There does not seem to be any suggestion this was for personal gain. Judaism believes in the values of truth and honesty and when it comes to relationships, honesty is always the best policy. Furthermore, according to the way Rabbi Sacks reads the story, Isaac had more awareness of the situation than Rebecca and Jacob gave him credit for. In the end, both Jacob and Esau received the appropriate blessings for them, and Jacob ultimately became the next of the forefathers of the Jewish people. According to Rabbi Sacks, that was Isaac's plan all along.

THE CORE IDEA

1. While we would like to believe there is an inherent human inclination to be a good and loving parent, some parents struggle with this. All humans are fallible, and all parents make mistakes. The norm in all societies (including in the animal world) is that parents find it natural to care and love for their children. Of course every single child deserves (and needs) to be unconditionally loved, and in cases where this is not the case, the state will often intervene in order to provide a nurturing and loving environment from somewhere else.
2. Sometimes this story is interpreted in a way that suggests that Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob and Rebecca loved Jacob more than Esau. Rabbi Sacks is suggesting a significantly different approach. Isaac's love for both his sons may well have been the same, but his parenting of them was different. And this is the ideal approach to parenting. Every child is different and has different needs, and a good parent will understand that and work hard to parent for each of their children in a unique way for them, to meet their individual needs.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. This beautiful story illustrates an example of a difference being appreciated not as a flaw but a value. If we see this story as an allegory for a parent with two children, it shows how a parent can love differently but equally, something the child will probably not be able to fully understand until they themselves become a parent. Unconditional parental love is at the centre of the way Rabbi Sacks understands the story in our parsha.
2. While good parenting takes hard work and effort, parental love is a force of nature, and the norm in human (and animal) society is that love governs parent child relationships in a natural and powerful way. The difficulty may be in remembering to observe the children as they grow and change, and adapt to their different needs, appreciating that each child is on a different journey, and their gifts may need to be nurtured in individual ways.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The silences identified in the Torah text suggest that Isaac was broken from his experience of the Akeidah (Binding of Isaac). It was only through ensuring that he showed unconditional love to his own son, that he felt vindicated and redeemed from his own pain. He expressed this in his unconditional love for Esau.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. It is important not to judge others when we are not in a position to understand their reality. However, we do hold up our forefathers and foremothers as role-models, despite their flaws (which the Torah does not shy away from highlighting). Rabbi Sacks' approach to the story here highlights Isaac's good parenting approach – taking a tailored, unique parenting approach to each child, based on unconditional love.
2. We cannot be sure, but it seems implied that Isaac's brokenness, expressed in his disappearance from the text until he re-enters the story with his marriage to Rebecca, was due to the experience of almost being sacrificed. Perhaps the knowledge that his father Abraham was willing to sacrifice him, and prioritise his love for God over his duty as a parent and love for his son, caused his silence and absence from the story. Isaac's pain was only redeemed when he himself had the chance to be a parent, and prioritise his love for his sons above everything else. This was a cathartic closure for him.
3. Implied in the approach we are taking here to the story is an implicit critique of Abraham's parenting. Perhaps Abraham did not show unconditional love for his son, and Isaac believed that the basis of parenting must be unconditional love. It is a common phenomenon that children choose to parent differently from their own parents, even while showing compassion and understanding to their parents' "mistakes".