



בס"ד

Partners In Torah
San Diego
Study Guide &
Take home Dvar Torah

פרשת תולדות

Parshat Toldot

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Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees, thinking is shared, and hearts are inspired.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

BLESSINGS AND LEGACY

And, when Isaac had become old and his eyes dimmed from seeing, he summoned Esau, his older son, and told him, "See, I have aged; I know not the day of my death.... Make for me delicacies that I love and bring it to me and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die." (Gen. 27: 1 – 4)

Let's first consider the relevant background to the momentous events which follow, before seeking to understand them.

Isaac's history with blessings:

[Abraham dies] His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the Cave of Machpelah... And it happened, after the death of Abraham, that G-d blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac settled near the Well known as 'the Well of the Living One Who Sees.'
(Gen. 25: 9 - 11)

Abraham offered no blessings to his children prior to passing away. Why not?

The Medrash offers an analogy: a king took great pride in his garden, watching over it and tending it with great care. In the midst of the garden was an unusual plant, part of which was thorny and dangerous, and part of which was beautiful and fragrant. When the king's gardeners sought his advice in how to care for the plant, the king could only say, 'Desist, and leave it alone, because cultivating it will increase harm and danger, and not cultivating it will cause its beauty to diminish. We have no choice but to leave this plant in the hands of its ultimate Maker.'

Abraham, the paradigm of kindness who saw greatness and a reflection of the Divine Image in every person, could not bring himself to choose between his two sons. He genuinely loved both of

them (22:2 – Rashi). Abraham fully understood their distinct natures and disposition, recognized them for who they really were. Clearly Abraham understood that Ishmael’s descendants would not uphold the spiritual legacy which he had created, and that Isaac’s descendants could fulfill all that he had hoped and prayed for; yet Abraham’s attitude was that I will leave it up to G-d to guide the future course. Hence, Abraham took no action. Immediately following his passing, G-d directly bestowed the spiritual legacy and blessings upon Isaac, as promised to those who carry forward Abraham’s spiritual legacy. As we conclude the first blessing of the Amidah – Blessed are You, Hashem, the Shield of Abraham. G-d has taken upon Himself the responsibility, as he promised Abraham that he would, that Abraham’s legacy, which we call Judaism would never disappear among humankind. This is the essence of blessing offered to Abraham right from the start of his heeding G-d’s command to leave his homeland.

So, it is troubling that Isaac did not follow his father’s example. What did Isaac have in mind?

Also, was Isaac oblivious to the paths his two sons had chosen? Yes, we know that Isaac loved Esau, and Rebecca loved Jacob. In telling us this, the Torah is following a consistent tack of meaning: Isaac’s love for Esau was greater than his love for Jacob; Rebecca’s love for Jacob was greater than her love for Esau. Each one’s viewpoint was biased.

At the age of 40 Esau marries two Hittite women. Both Isaac and Rebecca felt great bitterness at this choice. Their own marriage was the result of Abraham’s insistence that Isaac not marry among the Canaanite peoples. Abraham had thus made it clear that his spiritual legacy could not take root in such a home. The narrative is clear that both parents understood the implications of Esau’s decision.

Isaac and Rebecca could not agree, however, on how to proceed, but their shared reaction to Esau's marriages makes Isaac's decision to convey blessings on to Esau more perplexing.

Let's also consider another earlier incident, the sale of the Birthright by Esau to Jacob, when they were both 15 years old. We are told the following:

Esau said: 'Look, I am going to die, so of what use is this birthright to me?...' Esau ate and drank, and left; Esau **despised** the birthright. (Gen. 25: 32 – 34)

What is Esau referring to when he states 'I am going to die'? The Medrash fills in the in-depth discussion Jacob and Esau had about this Birthright and Abraham's spiritual legacy. They both had seen that their grandfather's life was filled with promises and blessings offered by G-d, none of which had been fulfilled during Abraham's lifetime. (Abraham had just died, and the meal Jacob was preparing was the meal of condolence for his father, Isaac. Certainly it was a proper moment for these two grandchildren to consider this matter.)

The twins also shared a vision of Jewish history, and in Esau's mind, being a lover of hunting and a man of the field, seeking dominance and power over the world around him, Esau fixated on the immense tragedies the Jewish people would endure as the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Yes, they would survive, but look how bloody and challenging their future would be. Esau came to a conclusion: if I take this legacy upon me, 'I am going to die.' Esau despised the life of the future Jew, because his world view was based on taking control of all around him, subduing it, and bending all the world has to offer to his own benefit. In this manner, he is the true progenitor of kings and rulers, as the Torah later describes his

descendants. To such a person, the opportunity to sustain a legacy of kindness built upon connection to G-d and G-d's ways, aka devotion to carrying forward the legacy of an Abraham, was to live lives of contempt. As we will note, Esau's outcry upon not receiving Isaac's blessing later was based on the physical nature of the blessing itself; he felt no agony about missing out on spiritual blessings. It was the promises of plenty, which Esau understood in physical terms which caused him anguish.

Between the account of Esau selling the birthright to his twin, Jacob, and the decision Isaac makes in his old age to bless him, we have an accounting of Isaac's living among the hostile environs of the Philistines. Here again the narrative is consistent. (see Chapter 26) G-d offers Isaac abundant blessings, promises which support faith in a distant future, but on a daily basis Isaac and his household struggle mightily. Their family life is intruded upon by Abimelech's designs to take Rebecca from him, and Isaac's persistence in digging wells to advance society is greeted by hostility, only to have these wells filled in by the surrounding Philistines. In a profound way, the future course of Jewish history throughout the Diaspora is indicated in these sketchy events. The greatest moment of achievement seems to be:

And they dug another well; they did not quarrel over it, so he called its name Rechovot, saying: For now Hashem has granted us space and we can be fruitful in the land. (Gen. 26: 22)

Even in a moment of harmonious treaty making with Abimelech, all the powerful king can offer to Isaac and his household is:

We have indeed seen how Hashem has blessed you... we have not molested you... (Gen. 26: 29)

Does this not hold so true for the descendants of Isaac as well, that our most precious times have been when we have been given the opportunity to live our lives unmolested, able to 'dig wells' for the benefit of all, secure that there is still space for us within the host nation? And how fleetingly these opportunities have proven to be.

Now let's consider something about blessings: what is a blessing, bestowed by a mortal human, other than an expression of prayer that G-d should consider echoing my sentiment, and that even beyond my lifetime G-d's kindness and mercy should envelop you? By blessing, we hope to provide to another that which I, in my limited scope and lifespan, believe you most need, but cannot offer you.

This is why blessings are specific to the person receiving the blessing - expressing a viewpoint. The one offering the blessing, in consideration of their understanding of the recipient, offers a blessing which will most fulfill the potential of the recipient. And in bowing our head to receive a blessing, we indicate our deference to the viewpoint of the one offering the blessing, valuing a fellow person's prayer to the Almighty that a specific benefit will be of ultimate good for me.

Can one steal a blessing? Impossible.

It is not a thing that can be intercepted, taken away forcefully by another. After all, it is a sentiment. Fulfillment is entirely in G-d's hands. In Jewish tradition, even the blessing of a simple person is considered to be important; certainly a blessing coming from a great person, and conveyed through a channel of love and family connection has special significance. But it is ludicrous to think that were I to jump between the one conveying the blessing and its recipient, that I can intercept it, steal it for myself, and then expect

that the Almighty, whose seal is Truth, will now cooperate with my theft.

So now we are doubly in doubt: what was Isaac thinking in not leaving the blessing up to G-d, and what was Rebecca thinking in creating a scenario which would deceive her now blind husband?

Tune in next year...

Just kidding.

However, due to time / space constraint, let's this evening consider a framework for understanding, so that we can go back to the words of the Torah later. Many details will have to remain for further study.

From their birth, Esau was born 'complete / done' hence his name given by all. He came into the world hairy, mature, already able to shape the world around him to suit his interests. Esau – fully made. Jacob was named by his father alone, based on his clinging to Esau's heel. Although identical, Jacob lacked the physical maturity and development of his twin brother, and hence could only be named as seemingly dependent on, or tied to, the destiny of his twin. This set a pattern and belief in the mind of Isaac. Jacob, the man of the tents who devoted his energies to studying and putting into practice the legacy of Abraham, could not endure without maintaining his connection to his powerful brother. Clinging to Esau's heel at birth left Isaac with the impression that only by staying connected to him would Jacob endure, and thereby keep alive through human history the spiritual legacy forged by Abraham and continued by Isaac.

So Isaac felt compelled to act: let me bind the futures of my two twin sons together, he decided. I will reinforce Esau's physical supremacy, and in doing so guide him to appreciate that all his blessings originate in our Creator from Above. In this way Esau will understand that at

least a portion of his spoils of triumph should be set aside to sustain and support the rich spiritual legacy of his righteous twin. Isaac's plan was to enable Jacob to thrive under the protection of Esau:

May G-d give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth... peoples will serve you... (27:28)

Rebecca, having grown up in a home alienated from all spiritual concerns and dominated by her brother Lavan (who we will get to know in the weeks to come) understood that such a partnership would be spiritually destructive. These twins could never thrive side by side, in partnership with one another. Rebecca set out to demonstrate the correctness of her viewpoint to her husband through a charade. Rebecca understood that if Isaac could fathom that it is possible that:

The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau (Gen. 27:22) and

Isaac drew him close and kissed him and smelled ... 'the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed ...

Such a revelation of possibility would certainly startle Isaac (*Isaac trembled in great perplexity – 27:33*) and then, upon reflection, Isaac concludes: *Indeed he shall remain blessed!*

After this study, we are left to think again about ourselves and our many achievements. What is primary and what is secondary in our lives? What is it we are really working to support and sustain within our families? Within the world? Are we balancing our spiritual selves and our physical selves correctly?