

Toldot – 5783

This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. That's the way Parshat Toldot begins. One could ask, in a book so often lacking in detail and marked by very terse language at times, why are we reminded not once but twice, after having read several chapters in which Isaac features prominently, that Isaac is the son of Abraham. Might it be because there is a profound message in that designation that plays itself out in the next several chapters? It is my contention that if read Toldot remembering all the way through that Isaac is the son of Abraham, we are forced to think about the comparison between the two figures.

Indeed, the sages point to several episodes in this parsha in which Isaac repeats many of the things that occurred in the story of his father. Isaac marries Rebecca, who like her mother-in-law, is very beautiful, as suggested precisely by the text. That beauty leads Isaac to do the same thing with Rebecca that his father Abraham did with Sarah, asking that she say she was his sister, rather than his wife, except it was with the Hittites, not the Egyptians. But the King saw him kissing Rebecca and asked why he tried to deceive him. Another equally telling indicator was that Isaac, we are told, was an excellent herdsman and became very wealthy in his own right, just like his father Isaac.

But now I return to what I think is the key difference. To explain where I am coming from, I ask you to remember that when Isaac became old and nearing the end of his life, he had to bless his two sons and anoint his successor. He never intended to give the blessing to Jacob, as the younger, only Esau. We know because the text teaches us that Isaac had a very strong preference for Esau and the sages are at a loss to explain completely why that was so. But it is widely agreed that Isaac strongly preferred Esau.

In order to put my own stamp on this, I want to remind you that the text tells us that Isaac was blind or nearly blind. It was this blindness that enabled Jacob to deceive his father into assuming he was Esau and so entirely deserving of the blessing. It was this blindness that enabled Rebecca to consort with Jacob to deceive his father into giving him the blessing rather than his older brother by only minutes. The sages argue that this was Rebecca's assumption because HaShem had told her that she had two warring nations in her womb when she was pregnant and the younger would rule over the older. But the Midrashic stories differ on just exactly what Isaac was blind. Some of the midrashim suggest that he was blind because the sword Abraham was using to prepare for his sacrifice slipped when HaShem stopped him and so he was wounded. Others suggest it was the tears he shed when he was spared.

I'd like to propose, given our awareness in 21st Century circumstances that perhaps he was suffering from P. T. S. D... The sages argue that Isaac is really only a bridge between Abraham and Jacob but how could that be, really. That makes no sense unless we see Isaac as a wounded soul who was blinded because he did not look at the world clearly. Abraham had insight into what HaShem wanted from him and although he erred sometimes, he came back again and again, to his mission to accept the terms of the covenant and be a partner with HaShem in the process of repairing the world. Isaac had no such insight. He repeatedly made choices that favoured Esau rather than Jacob although Jacob clearly was the one more interested in the heritage. Jacob was destined to create the circumstances that would lead to a large family aware of their heritage and the necessity of believing in HaShem and fulfilling the covenant. Isaac was not at all on that same wavelength. He might have been Abraham's son by

birth, but he was not Abraham's in terms of his understanding of what it meant to fulfill the terms of the covenant. He allowed Esau to marry out of the faith and took consorts from the surrounding Hittite tribe himself. He was blind to the depths to which Esau was prepared to go to deny his heritage.

We can all identify with children who we love and accept in the bosom of our families and into our communities who do not understand or practice according to the dictates of our faith. They are not willing adherents to the tenets of our faith. They are like the children at the seder who according to the Haggadah who know the questions and the answers but deny that they apply to them. Isaac was blind to the deceits of both Rebecca and Jacob because he was unable to see clearly. His experience with his father and perhaps his sense of distrust and unease in his youth not just because of the Akedah but also the way in which Ishmael and Hagar were treated led him to not see clearly, not to have any real insight into what was required of him as the son of Abraham.

It is not unusual for stories to be written about men who struggled an entire lifetime to get out from under the shadow of a very influential, very important father and leader of men. While they have their own very unique issues, living in the shadow of someone who leaves huge footsteps makes the follower's journey through life not at all easy. So, there is weighty meaning in those first words of the parsha. This is the story of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Abraham beget Isaac. Shabbat shalom.