

PARSHAT TOLDOT
NOVEMBER 26, 2011
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In this week's Torah reading the second Patriarch in our history, Isaac, takes center stage. His father, Abraham, is deceased and buried and now it is up to Isaac and his wife, Rebecca, to be the conduits of Israelite tradition for the next generation. On the one hand, as we read of Isaac's life we find him to pale in comparison with his heroic father. On the other hand, Isaac is his own person and an important cog in the chain of Israelite history.

If we follow carefully the lives of the first two Patriarchs we will see some extraordinary similarities. We find Isaac experiencing the same circumstances of his father and repeating his actions. Abraham and Sarah were childless until G-d miraculously intervened; Isaac and Rebecca are childless until G-d miraculously intervenes. Abraham had two sons, only one of whom would carry on his legacy; Isaac has two sons, only one of them will carry on his legacy. Abraham confronted famine; Isaac confronts famine. Abraham dug wells; Isaac uncovers his father's wells and then digs his own. Abraham asked Sarah to pretend that she was his sister upon entering the territory of the Philistines; Isaac asks Rebecca to do the same upon entering the territory of the Philistines. Abraham contracted a covenant with Avimelech, Isaac does the same.

In many ways Isaac's relationship with G-d seems to be very dependent upon that of his father. Many of the conversations that G-d has with the second Patriarch are mirrored in the words that he spoke to Abraham. It is upon Abraham's merit that G-d offers promises to Isaac and it is based upon Abraham's religious behavior that Isaac bases his own. In fact, the Midrash tells us that Isaac seemed to be a carbon copy of his father in that he looked so much like him. People who came to meet with one of them felt that they were meeting the other.

Yet, though Isaac was overshadowed by his father, he was also his own man. He is the first Patriarch to be born and not leave the Land of Canaan. According to our tradition, Abraham instituted the morning prayer Shacharit, Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, Mincha. While it seems as if Isaac's religious faith was very much like that of his father, each time we recite the Amidah we state: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." This suggests to the rabbis that each of the Patriarchs had his own particular relationship with the Divine.

A little over a week ago, Bryna and I returned from a week in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I serve on the Executive and the Board of Governor's of the Jewish Agency for Israel and normally we meet in Jerusalem three times a year. The current Chairman, Natan Sharansky, has decided that one of the meetings each year should be held in a different place around the globe so that we can interact with Jewish communities there and learn of the activities of the Jewish Agency in those countries. Last February, we were scheduled to go to St. Petersburg, Russia. However, the Russian government denied entry visas to us. Thankfully, the decision was then made to visit Buenos Aires in

November. St. Petersburg, the midst of winter, is not like Buenos Aires in the midst of spring. For our week in Argentina we had glorious sun and the temperature was in the 70's and 80's Fahrenheit. I don't want to think of what the temperature would have been in St. Petersburg in February.

In addition to the meetings, many representatives of the Conservative/Masorti Movement were in Argentina from Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, Peru and Chile for the prior Shabbat and Sunday so that we could be part of a Masorti Olami – a worldwide Conservative Movement -seminar. On the one hand, going to synagogue on Shabbat and experiencing the Jewish community felt to us very much at home, just like Isaac's religion and beliefs were very much like those of Abraham's. On the other hand, the geographical change made for some interesting variances in customs and traditions. Much like Isaac being a little different than Abraham, Buenos Aires and Chicago are different, each in their own way.

Today Argentinean Jewry comprises over 180,000 souls. It is the largest Jewish population in Latin America and the third largest in the Americas after that of the United States and Canada. In the early 1960's there were 310,000 Jews there. Many of them have immigrated to Israel and to other places around the world, especially due to the economic crisis that came to Argentina in 2001. Thankfully the economic situation today is better. While the Jewish community has dwindled in size, those who are involved are exceedingly devoted to the community, to Israel and to the Jewish people.

It is a resilient community. Israel's deputy prime minister, Dan Meridor, and Argentina's foreign minister, Hector Timerman, both spoke eloquently at the JAFI opening dinner. And one of Buenos Aires' leading Jewish philanthropists, Eduardo Elsztain told us: "We were broke 10 years ago, and the Jewish Agency and the Jewish people came through. While we can still improve, we are in much better shape." He went on to say that the Argentinean Jewish community is now positioned to help others.

While Shabbat services were extremely familiar to those of us who attended them, they are differentiated by a specific Latin American style. Most of the Rabbis and Hazzanim have been trained in South America at the Seminario Rabbinico Latino Americano in Buenos Aires. Because of that many of their practices follow the customs of their land of origin. Music is a very important part of their orientation and instrumental music is part of all of the services. As the community is Zionist and Israel-oriented, the level of Hebrew, I have found, is much higher than it is in many places in the United States. However, the Bat Mitzvah that we celebrated was very much like the one we are celebrating here at Beth El this morning. While the vernacular was Spanish, the prayers were in Hebrew. Of course, we read the same Torah portion that we read here two weeks ago. Those commonalities made us feel at home, even as we saw some differences which make Argentinean Jewry a unique phenomenon.

The last time the Goone/Levy family celebrated a Bar Mitzvah, Maddy's, my friend and colleague Rabbi Ruben Saferstein, of Comunidad Dor Jadash, in Argentina was our guest speaker. Our group visited Dor Jadash on Saturday night. It was the night

of museums in Buenos Aires where museums are open all night and the Masorti Movement had decided to have a study session and a Cantor's concert during the nighttime hours. After the ending of Shabbat, beginning with Havdalah, from 9:00 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. the synagogue doors were open for song, food and study and over 1,000 people participated. Rabbi Saferstein's synagogue, with which we twin, has undergone some major challenges in the last few years. The economic challenge that came to Argentina was felt there as well. While today they are in better economic shape, many of the families and those who have B'nai Mitzvah need continued support. He again expressed his thanks to our community for our ongoing assistance.

Wherever we went around Buenos Aires we found the strength of the Jewish community. Day schools abound and synagogues and communal institutions attempt to meet the needs of their members. We visited a senior citizen home, Le'Dor Va'Vor, which was extremely impressive in its services to its residents. We visited Jewish educational institutions, Hillel, ORT institutions and Jewish country clubs. One of the nights consisted of a Zionist program put on by the Argentinean Zionist Movement complete with Hebrew songs and dancing, programs about Israel and performances by Zionist youth groups and day school students.

In short, it was a wonderful visit to Buenos Aires and I was most impressed with the community. While I felt very much at home, there are some significant differences between the communities. Zionist youth groups and organizations are much stronger there than they are here in the States; Jewish culture, rather than Jewish religious behavior, is extremely strong and while 5,000 people may attend a Yom Kippur service, as they do in Congregation Bet El, the largest Conservative congregation in Buenos Aires, most of them are not members; the level of Hebrew is higher than it is here in the Midwest and the deep devotion to Israel continues from one generation to the next. While there are significant nuances to Jewish life in Argentina, it was very familiar to all of us.

It seems to me this is very much in line with our story of Abraham and Isaac. On the one hand, Isaac seems to be simply a carbon copy of Abraham. On the other hand, he is his own person. In both the consistency and the divergences we find the strength of Isaac and the Israelite community. In both the consistency and divergence of Jewish communities around the world we find the strength of being members of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith. All of us know, that when we travel around the world we seek out fellow Jews and places where they congregate. All of us know, that whether we are in the Northern Hemisphere or the Southern Hemisphere, our festival calendar is based on that of Israel and the seasons there. All of us know, that the phrase "Am Yisrael Hai," - the people of Israel lives - is a common parlance wherever we are around the Jewish world. All of us know, that deep down even with our divergences, we are part of one family and one destiny and are present for one another.

We are the links in the continuity of the Jewish people. Without an Isaac there would have been no Jacob and we would not be sitting here today. We now represent

those links. Wherever we may reside around the globe, there is much more commonality that divergence and the fate of the Jewish people and of Judaism is now in our hands.

May we be up to the task and may we and our brothers and sisters around the world work towards creating a bright future for Jewish children and grandchildren for many years to come.