

PARSHAT TOLDOT  
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From the very first verses of our Torah reading this morning to its very last verses Jacob and Esau, two brothers, are in constant rivalry with one another. Whether they are young men, or attempting to receive their father's blessing before Isaac's death, Jacob and Esau struggle with one another. In fact, in later Jewish history they are seen as the most intense of rivals, with Jacob representing the Jewish people and Esau representing Rome, the archvillain of ancient Jewish life. The Torah informs us that "Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebecca favored Jacob." Even the parents became rivals, as one favored one son and the other favored the second. This, of course, leads to the scene where Rebecca asks her son Jacob to become Esau, to dress like him, talk like him, and bring Isaac's favorite food to him, so that he can gain the blessing of the firstborn.

The scene is very dramatic and the messages that emanate from it are quite eternal. Did Isaac really know which young man was in front of him? As Jacob dresses up as Esau and comes forward to his father, Isaac seems to sense that something is awry. The text tells us "He (Jacob) went to his father and said 'Father' and he (Isaac) said, 'Yes, which of my sons are you?'" From that one word "Father", Isaac seems to acknowledge that he is not sure that it is really Esau who is present. Eventually, after Jacob talks to his father, Isaac states, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands of the hands of Esau." The Torah then gives an editorial comment: "He (Isaac) did not recognize him because his (Jacob's) hands were hairy like those of his brother's Esau; and so he blessed him." Jacob gains the blessing of the firstborn. We must ask ourselves: Did Isaac understand the drama that was ensuing? Did he know who was before him? With either a positive or negative response, we have some major dilemmas before us.

The blessing that is to be given to the oldest son we would expect would be one which would serve to emulate the blessings of Isaac's father, Abraham. One would think it would be a spiritual message, one which would encourage the young man to follow Abraham's path, to live as a standard bearer of the Israelite people, and to pattern his life after that of his grandfather. Yet, the blessing bestowed, now to Jacob, is much more about the material than the spiritual. Isaac states: "May G-d give you of the dew of the heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you; be master over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you."

This material blessing is one of prosperity, material well-being, and power. It is not what we would expect to be the blessing given to Abraham's progeny. Perhaps that is because Isaac thought Esau was in front of him. He knew that Esau would not be worthy of Abraham's special blessing and, therefore, granted him this one dealing with material well-being and military strength. Or perhaps, if he did know it was Jacob, he knew that Jacob would have to possess special blessings of power and material necessities to overcome the strength of his older brother and all those who would do him ill.

It is only later when Jacob is told to flee his parents' home and return to the land from which his mother Rebecca had come, that Isaac offers a spiritual blessing to his son. He tells him: "May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which G-d assigned to Abraham." This is the real Abrahamic blessing. Perhaps Isaac knew all along to whom this blessing belonged. It was meant only for Jacob who would follow in his father's and grandfather's path. Only he deserved this blessing. Now that Isaac knew the truth concerning who was in front of him earlier, he was ready to offer the Abrahamic blessing to his youngest son, Jacob, the one worthy of it.

When I look at the blessings granted to Jacob, whether Isaac meant both of them for him or not, I recognize that today, we, the children of Jacob or Israel, need both the blessings of the material and the spiritual. We, of necessity, must be a people associated with power, yet carry the spirit of our ancestors with us at all times. In this day and age when there is a Jewish state, still besieged on all sides with enemies who threaten its destruction, we must be strong and resolute. And at the same time, when we live in lands of freedom and openness and stand to lose our spiritual essence, we need the ability to be strong in this area as well.

As many of you know, I returned two weeks ago from Israel where I attended the Zionist Congress and the Jewish Agency meetings. Many people have asked me: "What was the mood in Israel at that time?" Yes, there was and still continues to be some anxiety. One cannot tell who is an enemy and who is a friend. Without warning people have been knifed, stoned, shot, and been trampled by automobiles. You do watch on all sides of you. When I arrived one of my good friends said to me: "I don't want you walking late at night in Jerusalem, as you often do." So I didn't. But I did take buses, I did walk the streets of Jerusalem and I tried to participate as much as possible in regular life. I did see more soldiers and security personnel on street corners, and you do look around you when you get on a bus or stand at the stop awaiting it.

We heard from many of Israel's political leaders, both from the government and the opposition, and all agreed that Israel will win this battle. It won't be simple, as innocent people continue to lose their lives, but we are in Israel to stay and no one will change that fact. There are some who are disconsolate because they don't see peace in the near future. They look at what is currently happening around Israel, with wars in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. They still see violence in Egypt and this week in Jordan. And they remain concerned about Iran and its clients, Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the south. As delegates to the Zionist Congress traveled south to visit those who had been involved in the Gaza war only 15 months ago. We were sitting in a central square of the area with local residents, with food and music around us, and an alert was heard on someone's smart phone - a missile landed not too far away from where we were and we didn't even hear the sirens. Life is lived under these conditions, but the most important fact is that it is lived. We must not, we cannot, and we won't allow terrorists to change us, our way of life, and our destiny. While the restaurants and the streets were a little less crowded than usual, people were still out and about. I visited the Kotel, a symbolic act for me, showing that I was not afraid to be there. And, in a few weeks time, Bryna and I are returning to Israel to show that nothing can keep us away, not only from our family, but from Israel itself.

We need to be strong, we have no choice. We need to take care of our own, that is our lot. This past week we commemorated Kristallnacht, the burning of synagogues and the destruction of Jewish communities in Germany in 1938. We will never allow that to happen again.

We need that first blessing that Isaac offered to his son whether he thought it was Esau or Jacob. The challenges are great but we will survive them.

And we also need the second blessing as well. Here in the United States the Jewish community is involved in a great experiment. We are the most free, wealthiest, and most educated Jewish community of all time. What will be our legacy to the next generation? Are we able to build strong Jewish lives enhanced by Jewish identity, creating a legacy of Jewish knowledge and involvement, as we work toward a bright Jewish future? The verdict is still out.

Last week the PEW Research Center survey on American religion continued studying the American Jewish community. We all read, with some alarm, PEW's landmark 2013 survey of U.S. Jewry. There were some ominous signs for us as we recognized that many people have left not only their religious Jewish beliefs, but their Jewish identity behind, as well.

This study which dealt with beliefs, practices and voting patterns of Americans brought some interesting results. In general terms there is a modest drop in overall rates of belief and practice in the U.S., but religiously affiliated Americans are as observant as before. From a Jewish point of view, the survey tells us that compared with the last time PEW surveyed Americans about religion, in 2007, the percentage of Jews who said that religion was important to them grew from 31% to 35%. Similarly, the percentage of those who said they attend religious services weekly or more often grew from 16% to 19%; the proportion of Jews who said they read Scripture at least weekly grew from 14% to 17%; and the percentage of those who said that they participate in religious study groups or prayer groups at least weekly grew from 11% to 16%.

These are actually better numbers than expected, but the percentages are still quite low. They suggest great challenges ahead for the American Jewish community as we live as a minority in the majority culture of American society.

The verdict is mixed for us. On the one hand there are great challenges of secularity, not only among the American public, but in our specific community as well. Jews have moved away from religious behavior patterns and while Jewish culture may be relatively strong in some places, it is very difficult to translate it to the next generation. On the other hand in some communities, there is a good deal of Jewish knowledge and behavior that is representative of Jewish life.

This coming week the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Convention will be held in Schaumburg. A number of us will be present at that time to study, worship, and challenge one another on the meaning and future of Conservative Judaism in our day and age. The title of the Convention is "Shape the Center". As the movement in the middle of Jewish denominational life we have to work very hard in creating a passion for Jewish life, Jewish

observance, Jewish identity and make our teachings relevant to our communities. In a recent article Dr. Steven M. Cohen, who was our recent Robbin Scholar-in-Residence, reported that while Conservative Jewry's numbers are plummeting, its core engagement is steady. As both quantity and quality are important, the task to ensure a bright Jewish future here in America is squarely on our shoulders.

In short, Jacob needed both blessings and we need them today as well. We need to be blessed with an Israel and a Jewish people that is strong, proud and vibrant. We need to be blessed with Jewish communities that are vital and exciting. And we need to challenge ourselves to support both outcomes so that the blessings given by Isaac to his son Jacob will be present in our lives and in those who follow after us.