

From Generation to Generation: Toldot 2020

Do you remember the dramatic moment in the classic movie *Casablanca*, when the ill-fated lovers played by Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman share these words of comfort: “We’ll always have Paris?” Recently, I was tickled to come across a poem which makes playful use of that line to make a point. The poem, by Mary Jo Salter, is titled “We’ll Always Have Parents.” In it, the poet notes, “we’ll always have them..they’re in our baggage.” The poem calls to mind what a wise person once told me: that no matter how old we are, and no matter the nature of our relationship with our parents, most of us shape our lives in response to them. We may define ourselves in a positive way by who our parents were and what they taught us, and we may also define ourselves *against* who our parents were and what they taught us. Or most often, some combination of the two, as most of us are driven and shaped by mixed legacies. Whatever those legacies are, “we’ll always have parents.”

Parshat Toldot reflects this truth in its opening lines. “This is the story of Isaac son of Abraham...” who married “Rebekah, daughter of Betuel, sister of Lavan.” As Isaac and Rebekah begin their adult, married life and start their own family, the Torah pointedly recalls their parents and a sibling. These characters are already known to the reader, so we can assume that the Torah repeats them not to inform us about genealogy, but rather to remind us of the family legacies that both Isaac and Rebekah carry. The text is telling us at the outset: read these stories with the characters’ family histories, with their baggage, in mind.

We note too the multi-layered meaning of the parsha’s name, *toldot*. “*Eileh ha-toldot..*” *Toldot*, from the root ‘*yalad*’ – to give birth, evokes a deep meaning: these are the generations, or the birthings; or the begettings, as Everett Fox has it – of Isaac and Rebecca. The word *toldot* reminds us what is true for the story of every person - we all come from somewhere, we do not exist in a vacuum, each of us was ‘begotten.’ We’ll always have parents.

Isaac was born to Abraham, a trail-blazer, a successful man whose covenant with God will be carried by his descendants throughout all time. But that man also traumatized his son in a way that we imagine left permanent wounds. As the blind Isaac is deceived in this parsha by his wife and son, we sense echoes of Isaac the passive son in the Akedah story. He seems destined to live in the shadow of his powerful father, perhaps damaged, a victim.

Rebekah has a core of kindness that we saw when she first entered the story, but we also know that Rebecca was raised in a family of greed and deception. As we watch here how she manipulates her family so that Jacob, her favored son, will obtain his father’s blessing, we

wonder if Rebekah is stuck forever in the patterns of deception and selfishness that she learned from her family of origin.

We view these characters through the lenses of their past and we may explain their behavior by the baggage we know they carry. And yet... Rebekah and Isaac, and their dramatic stories in *Toldot*, are, like life itself, not so simple. In this Torah portion, family legacies are present, but the Torah's brilliantly ambiguous storytelling invites us to stay open to more nuanced views of Isaac and Rebekah.

Rebekah's choice to resort to deception reflects her upbringing, but her behavior may not be motivated purely by self-interest. It may express her sincere desire to carry out God's will as she has heard it, to have Jacob surpass his brother. And, as a woman, in her culture deception may be her only recourse to achieve her goal.

Isaac, as a blind old man, appears to be in his familiar role as passive victim of Rebekah's scheme. But in the scene where he blesses his sons, it is not fully clear that he is duped. Perhaps he actively makes use of his apparent passivity to uphold God's plan. The text is unclear; we do not know for sure. But we *do* know that out in the world, Isaac is no passive victim. Prosperous and successful, he digs wells, in a land where water is the prime commodity. When the local Philistines harass him and close up the wells of his father, he stands up to them, prevails, and re-opens those wells.

Are Rebekah and Isaac fully defined by the legacies of their families? Yes and no. Isaac and Rebekah are on the one hand prisoners of their origins, but the Torah leaves open the possibility that they also define themselves in ways that resist and break away from their family legacies. So we see that *toldot* is not only about who begets us, about the baggage we are born with. *Toldot*, generations, also means that each of us generates something of our own, we generate our own lives. We create our *toldot*. Yes, we'll always have parents; but each of us can choose what to keep from our family legacies and what to leave behind or transform.

And, if we see the stories of our founding family as paradigms for the stories of nations – as is clear here in the story of Jacob and Esau – the global lessons parallel the personal ones. Nations are shaped and formed by the past, but they also have the ability and responsibility to evolve and modify the negative pieces of their inheritance.

Both in our families and in our communal and national lives, one of our tasks is to keep open the wells of the generations before us. Then we can choose what to draw from our fathers' wells, to draw what will nourish us, nourish the people in our lives and nourish the human family. Shabbat Shalom!