

Toldot – Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

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Wrestling and Wells – *Gam Zeh L'Tovah*

Eileh toldot Yitzchak ben Avraham ...

These are the lines of Isaac son of Abraham ...

Isaac has taken Rebecca as his wife. She has trouble getting pregnant. Isaac prays to God on her behalf and she becomes pregnant with twins.

She is having a rough pregnancy, with the two children “*va-yit-ro-tza-tzu*” struggling and almost crushing each other inside of her. She asks God: “*Im kein, lamah zeh anochi?*”

“If so, why do I exist?”

God answers her saying:

“Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other. “*V'rav ya-avod tza-ir,*” usually translated as “the older shall serve the younger,” but, because it is missing the Hebrew object identifier “*et,*” it is actually grammatically unclear which is the subject and which is the object. Is the greater to serve the lesser or is the greater to be served by the lesser? And who is the greater? Who is the lesser? Rebekah thinks she knows.

Esau emerges first, red and hairy.

Then Jacob comes holding onto his brother's heel.

Esau and Jacob grow up. Esau as a skillful hunter, Jacob as an *eesh tam* who stays in the tents. *Tam*, the same word used to describe the “simple” son in the Passover Haggadah. The one who simply asks “*Mah Zot?*” “What is this?” *Tam*, translated in the JPS Tanach as “mild,” translated by the Oxford Hebrew English Dictionary as “innocent.”

Each parent has their favorite. Isaac loves Esau. Rebecca loves Jacob.

One day, while Jacob is brewing a stew, Esau comes in tired and hungry. He asks his brother to please give him some. Yes, Esau even says please “*Hal'iteini Na min ha-adom ha-adom hazeh*” “Feed me please from this red red stuff.” Jacob, not so innocently, demands that Esau sell his birthright

before he can have anything to eat. When Esau agrees, Jacob gives him bread and lentils and something to drink.

Immediately after Esau's meal, we learn of a famine in the land, similar to the famine of Abraham's time. Like father, like son, God gives Isaac instructions regarding where to settle and promises the land, and seed as numerous as the stars, and that the nations of the earth will be blessed through his seed. Like father, like son, Isaac goes to Avimelech. Like father, like son Isaac asks his wife to pretend she is his sister. Like father, like son, Avimelech figures out the deception before anything bad happens and offers his protection.

Isaac prospers, so much so that he earns the envy of the Philistines and is finally told by Avimelech to get out of town. He moves to the wadi and redigs his father's wells that had been stopped up by the Philistines. As he digs wells his neighbors argue with him about them. He keeps digging and naming wells, moving from "*Esek* – contention", through "*Sitnah* – enmity", finally to "*Rehovot* – spaciousness" where there is no more arguing. Isaac is then blessed by God again. Avimelech comes to visit and make a peace treaty. They call the city Be'er-Sheva.

Then Esau takes a couple of Hittite wives, which does not make his parents happy.

Isaac becomes old and his eyesight is failing. He wants to give his blessing to Esau before he dies. He sends Esau out to hunt some game and make him something yummy to eat before he gives his blessing.

Rebekah overhears Isaac's plan and makes a plan of her own. Rebekah, chosen in the previous parasha as Isaac's wife for her generosity of spirit, thinks she knows what God meant by "*v'rav ya-avod tza-ir*," that Jacob should receive the blessing, not Esau. Tricky Rebekah, sister of tricky Laban, makes a tricky plan. She convinces hesitant Jacob to impersonate his brother and trick his father into giving him the blessing. She makes sure that as many of Isaac's senses as possible will be befuddled. We already know that he cannot see clearly. He can clearly hear Jacob's voice but he is confused when he feels rough hairy hands and neck that feel like Esau because Rebekah has covered Jacob's smooth skin with goat skin. He eats yummy meat, this time prepared by Rebekah. He smells Esau's field

fragrance because Rebekah has dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes. And he gives his blessing to Jacob.

Esau comes in as Jacob exits, learns that his brother has stolen his blessing and cries bitterly to be blessed as well. He does get a blessing, but not the one he wanted. He will serve his brother. He is mad. He plans to kill his brother as soon as his father dies.

Again Rebekah finds out about the plan – this time Esau's plan to kill Jacob. Again Rebekah makes her own plan, going to Isaac to complain about Esau's wives so that he will send Jacob away to find a wife from her brother's family. Isaac sends Jacob off to Laban with another blessing.

Esau, still trying to gain his parents approval, takes another wife that he hopes will be more acceptable. This time a wife from among the family – but the wrong side of the family – Ishmael's daughter.

So that is a summary of the Parasha. In it there are so many threads to follow. Tonight, I can only pick up a few.

When I started writing this D'var, other things on my mind included the weekend I recently spent in New York at a Mussar Kallah, the celebration of Thanksgiving, and Rosh Chodesh Kislev which was today.

The first day of Kislev—the Jewish month when the days get the shortest and the darkness gets the longest, and we begin the holiday of Chanukah, dedicating ourselves to kindling light in the darkness.

Since then, other thoughts have been pressing as well.

As you may have picked up from the occasionally suspicious tone in my summary of the parasha, I consider this a somewhat dark story. I was taught in Sunday school when I was a kid that our patriarchs and matriarchs were role models to follow. I was also taught by my parents that it was bad to lie and cheat and steal. It was bad for parents to play favorites. It was really bad to hate your siblings.

I have always found this story (and others in the Torah) problematic because, at least at the surface level, it appears to go against my values.

So ... what to do? I wrestle with this story to find and shine a light on a positive lesson from this parasha. This is my dedication to seeking out light in the darkness. (Get the Kislev connection?)

One of the things that stands out for me in the parasha is the painful internal wrestling that brought Rebekah to the question: “*Im kein, lamah zeh anochi?*” “If so, why do I exist?” For me this invites a personal question – what am I birthing with my own internal wrestling?

I was also struck by the fact that the wells that Isaac digs have names. Rabbi Shefa Gold sees Isaac’s re-digging of his father’s wells as a metaphor for our desire to create a nourishing connection with our source. She describes the problem of Jacob receiving the blessing through deception using the three wells that Isaac digs and specifically names.

Rabbi Gold writes:

In the story of *Toldot* we learn of the tragedy of deception between brothers that results from the narrow belief in the scarcity of blessing. Our family is torn apart because of the conviction that only one of Isaac’s sons can receive his blessing.

This system of limiting blessing and creating hierarchy is born of the belief that love and blessing are finite, that there are winners and losers. This idea is drawn from the well of CONTENTION.

When I deceive my brother or attempt to steal the blessing from my sister, I am drawing on the well of ENMITY (whose waters are poison) which will only drive me to greater thirst.

From the well of SPACIOUSNESS comes the wisdom that our fates are bound up with one another. Your loss, your suffering is also mine, and true blessing is shared. At the well of SPACIOUSNESS I slake my thirst with the knowledge that the source of blessing knows no bounds, and that we are capable of accessing blessing directly.

Jacob will have to go through another wrestling match later in the story to gain that lesson.

I can relate to the feeling of wrestling inside, especially wrestling with the notion that blessing is limited and situations must be manipulated. I have visited the wells of CONTENTION and ENMITY ... and also the well of SPACIOUSNESS, where I am learning to spend more time.

I mentioned that I attended a Mussar Kallah in New York the week before last. For those of you who have not heard of Mussar before, it is a Jewish spiritual practice promoting personal growth in order for us to be more whole and holy people in our daily lives. According to my teacher, Alan Morinis, “It shines light on the causes of suffering and shows us how to realize our highest spiritual potential, including an everyday experience infused with happiness, trust, and love.” (Again shining light – the Kislev connection.) The premise is that we each come into the world with our own individual spiritual curriculum that we need to master in this lifetime. Challenges and issues and wrestling matches that reoccur in our lives give us clues as to what is on our personal curriculum. The work of *Mussar* centers around the cultivation of personal inner traits, or *Middot*, focusing on one trait at a time in order to bring it into better balance. By wrestling with our unbalanced traits and bringing them into better balance we give birth to ourselves, learning to access the spacious well of connection that truly quenches our thirst.

In honor of Thanksgiving I would like to focus on the *middah*, the soul trait, of “Gratitude” as seen from a Mussar perspective.

The Hebrew name for the *Middah* of Gratitude is *Hakarat HaTov*, meaning “recognizing or acknowledging the good.” This is the first step – to recognize the good that is already available to us. We often find ourselves making lists of the things that we lack. *Hakarat HaTov* is an invitation to focus on the good and make an even longer list of all of the good that we have available to us. Whether is it a warm place to sleep, a job or a resume that we can send out to help us find a job, fingers to type with, or a nose clear enough to breathe with.

Hakarat HaTov challenges us, not only to recognize the obviously good things, but also to find the good in the situations that may not feel good to us in the moment. In every situation there is potential for good within it. **It is up to us to seek it, recognize it, and nurture it.**

Sometimes the things that we perceive as “bad” in the moment turn out to be good after all.

There is a story about a Chinese peasant who was fortunate because he had a horse to help him labor in the field. One day his horse ran away, and his neighbors bemoaned his fate. “It’s such bad fortune for you to lose your horse.” “Maybe yes, maybe no,” was the man’s response.

Then one day his horse returned, only it brought with it another horse. This time the villagers congratulated him. “How lucky you are!” they said, to which the farmer replied, “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

Soon after, as his son rode the new horse, he fell off and broke his leg. “What a tragedy,” the villagers exclaimed, and again the farmer answered with, “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

A few days later, the army of the local warlord marched through the village conscripting all the young men to fight in a bloody war. They left the farmer’s son behind, of course, since he was of no use to them with a broken leg.

I find this story a potent reminder that we can’t know how to interpret events because we do not know what is coming next in the story.

I find an even more powerful example in a friend of mine who was diagnosed with Thyroid cancer before Rosh Hashannah. I have been honored to be part of her support network as she travels her journey from diagnosis, through surgery, radiation isolation, now working to bring her body back into balance and regain her strength. She made a commitment to use this time for soul blooming, rather than despair. She is recognizing the good of having a cancer that has a good prognosis, having doctors that she

has confidence in, being able to effectively utilize the spiritual practices that she has been learning, and opening to the love that is pouring in for her from so many directions. She has been teaching me *Hakarat HaTov*, recognizing the good, at a new level – not only seeing it, but in the seeing and recognizing, helping to create more goodness – for herself and for others – me included.

There is a suggested practice that whenever something “good” happens to us we say “*Gam zeh l'tovah*,” “This is also for good.” And whenever something “bad” happens to us we also say “*Gam zeh l'tovah*,” “This is also for good.” **This is a helpful reminder that whether we perceive what has happened to be good or bad, what really matters is what we do with it, that we use it for good.** Even when the wrestling is painful, what good can we give birth to?

To bring this back to Isaac’s wells – we need to keep digging for that nourishing connection, and be willing to change our position in order to find the perspective that is spacious, untainted by contention or enmity.

This is not always easy. There are many challenging situations in our world today – many sources of contention and enmity.

On the eve of our holiday of Thanksgiving, terrorists attacked in 10 locations around India’s city of Mumbai, killing at least 160 people and injuring more than 300 others.

How do we respond to these situations that cause so much pain and unrest with *Gam zeh l'tovah*, “this is also for good?” I don’t know what the answer is. I only know that it is an important question. Some of the answer must come with time and the unfolding of future events. Some of the answer is for us here and now, today, to create, in our attitudes and actions that could have an impact on the unfolding of future events.

We are brothers, still wrestling, that have not yet learned to embrace, that have not yet learned that blessing is not limited, that have not yet learned to respect each others boundaries and dig our wells in a more spacious place where the blessings can flow. What good can we bring into the world out of this wrestling? What light can we shine in this darkness?

Also in the news today is the release of a new feature length movie about the life and death of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician, who was assassinated 30 years ago. One of the good things that this movie is helping to bring out from that dark day 30 years ago is that people, including me, are learning about this man and his important role. Harvey Milk was someone who understood that it was important to shine light in the darkness, to be a visible role model of possibilities for young gay and lesbian children at a time when there seemed to be so few options available to them. Out of his work some are learning to stop wrestling and embrace. One example is the Mayor of San Diego, Jerry Sanders, who “wrestled” (his word) with his previous stance against gay marriage and decided that he must do what is right and sign a resolution in support of Gay Marriage. You can see his emotional press conference on youtube.

With *Hakarat Hatov*, in addition to recognizing the good, there is also acknowledgment – saying thank you.

Rabbi Micha Berger, one of the teachers I met during my weekend in New York discussed the the Hebrew word for thanks, “*todah*” in the context of a couple of other words taken from the same Hebrew root: “*vidui*” meaning to “confess”, and the mishnah’s use of the phrase “*hakol modim*” meaning “all agree”. Rabbi Berger teaches that these three words, taken from the same root, have something in common.

He says:

When I thank someone, I acknowledge his actions had an impact on me. When I confess, I am admitting that my actions had an impact on him. And when we are *modim*, we realize that an idea isn’t mine or yours, but ours. The point in common in the three uses of the root is a realization of connectedness.

Rabbi Berger further points out that we Jews are called “*Yehudim*” from the name of Jacob’s son, Judah “*Yehudah*” meaning “I am grateful,” Says Rabbi Berger: “To be a Jew is to be a thanker, to acknowledge the connection.”

So in conclusion, on this Thanksgiving weekend at the beginning of the month of Kislev, I want to express my gratitude to this community of Or Chadash for opening your hearts to me, embracing me, and encouraging me to find and share my voice. And thanks also to the Source of All Blessing for Your many gifts, both those I label “good” and those I wrestle with and label “bad,” and for all of the times that You have illuminated my path so that I can take the next step toward the well of SPACIOUSNESS and connection.

Todah Rabah. Thank you very much.
Gam zeh l'tovah. This also is for good.