

Tol'dot

תולדת "History"

Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

Torah Together



In this *Torah* portion, we read of the pivotal events in lives of Jacob and Esau that determine everything which follows. We come face to face with the idea of God's sovereign choice versus our own free will. We also begin to get to know Jacob, one of the major characters in the book of Genesis and whose life is a good metaphor for the life of anyone who chooses to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

1. Birth of the Twins - 25:19-28

a) How old was Isaac when he married Rebekah? How long since his mother, Sarah, had died?

Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah. Sarah died at age 127 (Genesis 23:1) and bore Isaac when she was 90. So Isaac was 37 when his mother died (3 years earlier).

b) Note that the text reads, "Isaac prayed to God on Rebekah's behalf" and that God "heeded Isaac's prayer." Do you think Rebekah was praying too?

Given the disgrace associated with barrenness, it's very likely that Rebekah prayed fervently to conceive. For whatever reason, God heard Isaac's prayer. It may have been that God didn't act until Isaac had prayed also.

c) The babies fought (or jostled) within her so she "inquired of the Lord" What did the Lord say?

"Two nations are in your womb, striving with one another, and the two peoples will be separated. The older will serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23) Esau is the ancestor of today's Arabs and Jacob of the Hebrews.

d) When they were born, the first one out was red & hairy. What does Esau mean? The second son was grasping the heel of the first. What does Jacob mean?

Esau may mean 'hairy' (completely formed). He was also called Edom, which means 'red.' Jacob means 'to grasp the heel' or 'to supplant'; figuratively, 'to deceive.'

God Speaks to Rebekah

Based on what we know about Isaac, it is clear that he was a follower of God and God alone. However, Rebekah's family was known to practice idolatry. Once they were married, one can assume that Rebekah began to worship the God of her husband and father-in-law, but she would not have had the benefit of the lifetime of experiences that Isaac had. When she "went to inquire of the LORD," (Genesis 25:22), it must have been a life-changing experience to hear His response.

Different Twins

Based on just one verse (**Genesis 25:27**), one can infer great differences between the characters of Esau and Jacob. Esau, a hunter and outdoorsman, was more action-oriented and perhaps less thoughtful than his brother. Jacob, on the other hand, was a quiet man staying among the tents, and was more contemplative and insightful than Esau. We will see that these character differences are demonstrated by subsequent events in the lives of both brothers.

A Deal is a Deal

Esau's response to Jacob's offer ("What good is the birthright if I die of hunger?") clearly indicates how little he valued the birthright. However, the fact that Jacob even thought to suggest the bargain indicates that he valued it highly. It seems clear that Jacob not only knew the value of the birthright and desired it keenly, but was also very aware that it was not his. Later, Esau will accuse Jacob of taking his birthright by deception.

e) How long had Rebekah & Isaac been childless when the twins were born?

Rebekah gave birth when Isaac was 60 and they were married when he was 40. Thus they had been childless for 20 years. There is much debate as to the age of Rebekah with some Jewish sages claiming that she was some 30 years younger than Isaac.

f) Do you think Esau & Jacob were fraternal or identical twins? **Given that they were so different in appearance, it is likely that they were fraternal and not identical twins.**

g) How was the character of the twins different? **Esau was a hunter and outdoorsman. Jacob was quiet, reflective and studious, staying at home.**

h) Note the parental favoritism. Do you think it was right or healthy? **Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau while Rebekah loved Jacob. While this seems to be parental favoritism, there was nothing inherently wrong with it. It may not have been wise for the parents to have their favorites, but it was not necessarily sinful.**

2. Sale of the Birthright - 25:29-34

a) When Esau came in from hunting, he was famished. Was he near starvation? When Esau asked for some of the "red" stew, Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." What does this say about Jacob? **Esau's statement is much like a teenager who may be hungry but says, "I'm starving!" The fact that Jacob offered him some stew if Esau would sell him his birthright shows that (1) Jacob valued the birthright, and (2) that he was often thinking about how he could obtain it.**

What was Esau's response? Does this seem rational or well-thought-out?

Esau's response ("what good is the birthright if I die of hunger?") is immature and impetuous.

c) Tradition has it that this episode occurred at the time of Abraham's death. If this is true, how old would the twins be? Does this seem plausible?

Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born and Isaac was 60 when the twins were born. Abraham died at 175 so the twins were 15 at Abraham's death. The actions described fit very well with 15-year old boys.

"Thus Esau showed how little he valued his birthright."

Genesis 25:34

d) How does this event show “how Esau despised or spurned or valued his birthright”?

Esau did not esteem his birthright any more than a bowl of soup when he was hungry. He had little regard for future promises of his father or of God.

3. Isaac and Abimelech - 26:1-22

a) Another famine strikes the land. What does Isaac do? Where is Gerar from Beer Sheva, where Isaac has been living? Have we run into Abimelech before?

It appears that Isaac was considering moving to Egypt during the famine but God told him to stay in the land of Israel. Gerar is near the coast, west northwest of Beer Sheva. This may or may not be the same Abimelech that Abraham met in Genesis 20. (Abimelech, which means ‘father-king’ may have been a title more than a name.)

b) When God appears to Isaac, what does He say? Why did God say that He was going to be with Isaac and bless him?

God promises to bless Isaac and restates his promise to Abraham to give the land to his descendants. God says that He is doing this because “Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, decrees and my laws.”

c) Why does Isaac try to pass off Rebekah as his sister? How does he get found out? Why do you think Abimelech is so concerned about the deception? What is his response and what does it reveal about his attitude toward Isaac?

Like his father Abraham had done twice, Isaac tried to pass his wife, Rebekah, off as his sister so that he would not be killed. He was found out when he was caressing Rebekah. If this is the same Abimelech, he may have remembered the punishment he received from God for taking Abraham’s wife Sarah. It appears that Abimelech has a healthy fear of Isaac.

d) How successful was Isaac at farming in Gerar? How did this effect his reputation with his neighbors? Why do you think Abimelech asked Isaac to leave Gerar?

Genesis 26:12 says that Isaac “reaped a hundredfold because God blessed him.” He became very wealthy and the Philistines envied him. (It would appear that God blessed Isaac’s obedience.) Abimelech asked Isaac to move away because he had become too powerful, causing him to fear that Isaac would take over the land and overthrow him. He may also have feared the power of Isaac’s God.

Scripture Link:

Is this the same Abimelech that Abraham encountered in **Genesis 20**? Remember that Abimelech in Hebrew means “father king” and may have been more a title than an actual name. While it is certainly possible that this is the same man that Abraham dealt with earlier, it is also possible that this was a son who succeeded his father as leader of this group of people.

Abimelech Fears Isaac

It seems that Isaac had a reputation among the people of Gerar, perhaps based on events that involved his father, Abraham. In any case, as God blessed Isaac with great gain and wealth, Abimelech began to fear Isaac. Isaac could conceivably decide to take over the land and even unseat the king. Abimelech might also fear the God of Isaac.

Wells in the Desert

Wells were extremely important in this desert area, even as they are today. The ownership of a well implied the ownership (or at least the usage) of the surrounding pasture land. So filling up a well had many implications, not the least of which was call into question ownership.

Esau's Wives

Genesis 26:34-35 tells us that Esau married two Hittite women which "were a source of grief" to his parents. Why do you suppose this grieved Isaac and Rebekah? Do you think Esau knew beforehand that this would be a source of grief to his parents? What does this imply about Esau's character?

e) Why do you think the Philistines had filled up Abraham's wells? Why do you suppose that there was quarreling over Isaac's wells? Do you think the names of the wells are prophetic? In what way?

There may have been several reasons to fill up the wells. One would be to make the land less valuable. Another might be to call into question ownership of the well. A third reason might be harassment. The root cause of the quarrelling was probably tribal rivalry. Esek (dispute or quarrelling), Sitnah (enmity or opposition) and Rehoboth (room or space) symbolize Jewish history in the land.

4. Isaac returns to Beer Sheva - 26:23-35

a) Why did Abimelech and his men come to see Isaac? Has something like this happened before? Why do you think it might be happening again?

Abimelech may have feared that Isaac would seek revenge for the contested wells. He may also have noticed that God's blessing on the land of the Philistines left when Isaac left. This is very similar to the situation that Abraham found himself in Genesis 21:22-34. It appears that the Philistines didn't believe the agreement with Abraham was binding on Isaac.

b) It would appear that Isaac's men discovered a well in Beer Sheva. Do you think this is a new well or the same one that is discussed in **Genesis 21:25**?

The well may have been Abraham's old well which the Philistines had filled up with earth.

c) How old was Esau when he took his two Hittite wives? How did his parents feel about this? What does this say about Esau and his relationship with his parents

Esau was 40 when he married two Hittite (Canaanite) women. That this was a source of grief to his parents is an indication that Esau cared little about his parents' wishes.

5. Jacob steals the blessing from Esau - 27:1- 40

a) What was Isaac's condition at the start of this chapter? What did he ask Esau to do? What do you think it meant to give Esau his blessing? How is the blessing different than the birthright? Do you think Isaac knew that Esau had sold his birthright?

Isaac was old and blind, passing away at any time. He asked Esau to hunt wild game and prepare him his favorite meal so that he might bless him. Although Esau had made mistakes (sold his birthright, married Canaanite women), he was still the firstborn and deserved the blessing. The blessing assured that God's promise to Abraham would be fulfilled through Isaac's son.

b) What was Rebekah's plan? What was Jacob's first reaction when his mother told him her plan? How did Rebekah respond to Jacob's objection? Was Jacob obligated to go along with his mother's plan? Why do you think the blessing was so important to them?

Rebekah planned to make a similar meal from goat meat and have Jacob present it to Isaac posing as Esau. Jacob essentially said, "He'll never fall for it and I'll end up cursed instead of blessed." Rebekah said, "May the curse be on me." Jacob could have refused his mother but he wanted the blessing just as he had wanted the birthright. In this way, he would be head of the family.

c) As Jacob carries out the deception, do you think Isaac is suspicious? How does Jacob respond to Isaac's direct questions?

Isaac seemed suspicious as he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" (verse 24). Jacob blatantly lied to Isaac. The goat skins and the smell seemed to fool Isaac.

d) Analyze the blessing that Isaac pronounces over Jacob. Do you see any similarity with other blessings in Genesis? Now that Jacob has both the birthright and the blessing, what is his position with respect to Esau?

Isaac blessed Jacob with the earth's richness (grain and wine) and said that nations would bow down to him, that he would be lord over his brothers. He repeated the portion of Abraham's blessing that those who cursed him would be cursed, and those who blessed him would be blessed. With both the birthright and the blessing, Jacob had completely replaced (or supplanted) Esau as the first born.

e) What was Isaac's reaction when Esau brought him his meal of wild game? What did Esau do when he found out that Jacob had "stolen" his blessing? Consider the actions and words of both Isaac and Esau during this exchange. What do you find interesting?

Isaac "trembled violently" when Esau came in. Isaac said that he had blessed someone else and "indeed he will be blessed." Esau cried out bitterly. By this time, Esau clearly valued the blessing. Both he and Isaac realized that Jacob had deceived them. Isaac seemed resigned to the situation while Esau was very angry.

f) Analyze Isaac's blessing for Esau. Given your knowledge of the history of Edom, does this blessing seem accurate?

Esau was to dwell away from the earth's richness (Edom is in the desert). He was to live by the sword and serve his brother but one day rise up. Indeed, Edom was subjected by Israel for most of its existence but did successfully rebel after the division of the kingdom of Israel.

Jacob Lies to Isaac

There are many unanswered questions in this story, all of which can provide insight into the character of the people involved. For example, given that Jacob seems highly doubtful that Rebekah's plan will work, why do you suppose that he went along with it? Do you think that Isaac knew of God's prophecy to Rebekah that "the older [son] will serve the younger" (**Genesis 25:23**)? In any case, there can be little doubt that Jacob lied and deceived his father to obtain the blessing. This single event changed the direction of Jacob's entire life from this day forward.

Esau and Edom

Esau means "hairy" or "fully formed" and Edom means "red" which also may refer to Esau's hair. Esau and his descendants settled the land south and east of the Dead Sea, the area of Petra in modern Jordan. (Edom may also refer to the color of the rocky terrain in this area.) The Edomites were generally under the subjugation of Israel for most of their existence until the division of the kingdom after King Solomon. In Yeshua's time, King Herod was an Edomite (Idumaen in Greek).

Jacob's Visits his Uncle

Isaac's father Abraham had felt that it was very important that a wife be found for Isaac from his own family. (See **Genesis 24**) It seems that both Isaac and Abraham knew the inherent danger of marrying into the idolatrous Canaanite culture. So it makes sense that Isaac and Rebekah would send Jacob to his uncle, Laban, to find a wife. This would be the last time that Jacob would see his mother, Rebekah.

Jacob's Dowry

We know that it was customary in this culture to send gifts and a dowry when seeking a bride, yet there is no record of Jacob taking any such gifts. Jewish tradition holds that Jacob did indeed take a sizable dowry with him when he left for Padan Aram. However, on his first night away from home, he was overtaken by bandits who robbed him of his valuables. It is believed that these bandits were really Esau's brother's-in-law, acting at his request. While this story has no Biblical support, it does seem to answer the question of why Jacob had no dowry with him when he went to Padan Aram to meet his uncle.

6. Jacob Flees to Laban - 27:41- 28:9

a) What did Esau plan to do to Jacob for his deceitfulness? When did he intend to do this? What was Rebekah's response when she heard of Esau's plan?

After their father Isaac had died, Esau planned to kill Jacob for his deception. Rebekah told Jacob to flee to her brother's family in Haran to the northwest.

b) What was the reason that Rebekah used with Isaac to justify sending Jacob away? Why do you think Isaac was agreeable to this suggestion?

Because of their disappointment in Esau's Canaanite wives, Rebekah urged Isaac to send Jacob to her brother's family to get a wife for himself, just as Abraham had done for Isaac. Since Isaac was in agreement with Rebekah on these issues, it probably seemed like a good idea, especially since Jacob now was the heir to the family and to God's promise.

c) Where and to whom did Isaac send Jacob? Do you find anything interesting about the blessing Isaac pronounced over Jacob as he sent him away? What does this imply about Isaac and his attitude toward Jacob's deception?

Jacob was sent to Padan Aram, near Damascus, to the household of Laban (Rebekah's brother). Isaac blessed Jacob with the same blessing God had given Abraham, showing that he realized that Jacob was now the heir. Although he may not have liked Jacob's deception, he appears to be resigned to its result.

d) What did Esau do when he learned of Jacob's journey? Who did he choose for his third wife? What do you think about his reasons for doing this? What does this reveal about his character?

When Esau realized how displeased his parents were with his Canaanite wives, he took a wife, Mahalath, a daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael. It may be that Esau was trying to get back into his parents' good graces. He would have done well to consider his parents' feelings before he chose his wives.

e) When Abraham's servant, Eliezer, went to Padan Aram to find a wife for Isaac, he had a good deal of wealth as gifts and a dowry for the bride (**Genesis 24**). Why do you think there is no record of Jacob taking similar wealth?

Although it is totally unsupported by scripture, tradition has it that Jacob did indeed leave home with a great deal of wealth as a dowry. However, Esau sent one of his servants (a brother-in-law) after Jacob when he left home and this person robbed Jacob while he was on his journey.

The Birthright and the Blessing

In this story, we are introduced to concepts of the **Birthright** and the **Blessing**, both important parts of the family inheritance.

In ancient near-eastern culture, when a patriarch died, his estate was divided into equal parts according to the number of his male heirs plus one. In the case of Isaac, his estate would be divided into three parts. Traditionally, the eldest son would receive two portions (the **double portion**, or the **birthright**) and each younger son would receive one portion. Since Esau had bargained away his birthright for a bowl of porridge, Jacob would receive the double portion and Esau would receive a single portion of the estate.

The **blessing** on the other hand was the designation of leadership in the family. Traditionally, the eldest son would receive the father's blessing to take over leadership of the family. In this case specifically, the son who received the blessing would provide the continuation of God's original blessing to Abraham, first found in **Genesis 12:2-3**.

So at this point, Jacob has received the birthright (a double portion of Isaac's estate) as well as the blessing from God to take over the leadership of the family and carry forward God's blessing to Abraham.

In general, the eldest son received both the birthright and the blessing from his father. There are cases, however, when the birthright and the blessing went to different sons. As we will see, this is the case with Jacob's sons, as one son received the birthright and a different son received the blessing.

Digging deeper

1. Can you explain the difference between the will of God and the foreknowledge of God?

a) Was Jacob justified in deceiving Isaac because God had revealed to Rebekah that "the older [brother] will serve the younger"?

Even though God had revealed to Rebekah that Jacob would be elevated to a higher position than his brother Esau, this did not give Jacob the right to deceive his father. While it is sometimes difficult to know the will of God when making personal decisions, it is never God's will that one person intentionally deceive another by lying.

b) If Jacob had not stolen the blessing that Isaac intended for Esau, do you think God would have allowed Esau to receive the blessing for the firstborn?

Neither Jacob nor Rebekah were justified in deceiving Isaac to gain the blessing. It should be assumed that even if they had done nothing, God would have orchestrated events in such a way that Jacob would have ended up with the blessing. In his foreknowledge, God knew that Jacob would steal the blessing from Esau even though it was not God's will that it be done in this way.

Free Will versus Predestination

One of the more intriguing attributes of God is that while He knows beforehand what we will do during our lifetime, He has also given us a free will, allowing us to choose to love Him or reject Him. (See **Psalm 119** and **Romans 9** for further insight on this topic.) It is probably not possible for us, as mere mortals, to completely understand this attribute of God. However, it can certainly help us appreciate how much greater God is than us and truly amazing is His love for us.

2. God's sovereign choice, His election

a) Read Romans 9:6-16. What does this say about God's view of Esau & Jacob? Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? Do you think God, in His perfect foreknowledge, knew the character of each of them before they were born?

b) As far as their personal relationship with God was concerned, what are the major differences between Esau & Jacob?

Even though we are free to make decisions based on our own will, God already knows what decisions we will make. He knew that Esau's character was carnal and self-centered while Jacob was focused on God. Esau was born with the birthright and blessing, but didn't value them, whereas Jacob didn't have them but valued them greatly. As it says in Romans, God will have mercy upon whom He will. Even our ability to love God is a gift from God.

3. God's methods

a) Read Isaiah 55:8-9. Do you think we, as human beings, will ever understand God's reasons for His actions? Should we even try?

b) Read I Chronicles 28:9. Here, David is talking to his son, Solomon. Given this, what should our actions and attitude be toward God?

No, we can never understand God completely, but we should try to understand how he wants us to behave and what he wants us to do. We can still learn about His character. The only worthwhile goal in life is to seek God and to serve Him wholeheartedly

For further study, see

Haftarah : Malachi 1:1-2:7

Brit Hadashah : Romans 9:6-16; Hebrews 11:20; 12:14-17