

# 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?

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?

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

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?

### 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's 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?

f) Do you think Esau & Jacob were fraternal or identical twins?

g) How was the character of the twins different?

h) Note the parental favoritism. Do you think it was right or healthy?

## 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?

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

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?

"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”?

### 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?

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?

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?

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?

#### **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?

#### **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?

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**?

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

#### **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?

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?

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

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?

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?

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

### **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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

## 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"?

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?

### 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?

## 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?

For further study, see

**Haftarah** : Malachi 1:1-2:7

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