

# RABBI JACK'S MESSAGE IN A MINUTE



The nuances of family relationships continue to abound in Genesis, as evidenced in this week's Torah portion, *Toldot*. There is deception, parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, resentment and revenge--all in one narrative. Who needs Netflix?

At the center of the story is the famous scene where Jacob "buys" the birthright away from his twin brother Esau, who came out of the womb first. Not surprisingly tension persists between the two and it reaches a critical stage when their father, the patriarch Isaac is about to die and it's time to bestow his important last blessing upon his sons. According to the custom of the region and historical time, the eldest would receive the greater benediction.

How the father viewed and treated his children was somewhat surprising, given that the tradition almost invariably portrayed Esau as evil and naturally Jacob as righteous. Isaac's prophecies and blessings for *both* of his progeny were extremely positive and loving, which does not fit neatly into the way the sages want us to understand these two biblical icons. Nonetheless, Jacob and Esau proceeded to demonstrate a difficult, often fractious and complicated dynamic between them throughout their adult lives. It fluctuated wildly from near homicide to tender reconciliation at the time of their father's funeral to a cold peace. What does our holy text want us to really learn from the apparent and almost incomprehensible ebb and flow of the emotions of the son and grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah?

Our insightful mystics urged us to start at the onset of the tale, and to examine the oracle received by Rebecca, towards the end of her pregnancy. They believed the underlying lesson was embedded in the voice of heaven. In chapter 25, verse 23 we are told, "*And the Lord said to her, two nations are in you...one is stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger*". This is read commonly as Esau will develop into a mighty people (his descendants became the Edomites), as we were informed early on he was skilled in weaponry and was a fierce hunter. Yet, over millennia, Jacob's tribes would be the dominant nation by becoming the kingdom of Israel and would indeed rule the direct descendants of Esau. This would definitely and plainly explain the vision contained in that sentence. However, typical of biblical language and its encoded teaching, God's words under closer scrutiny are more ambiguous, and less clear when you look more seriously at content and context.

For example, what is meant by "*stronger*"? Not necessarily the physical or military prowess attributed to Esau, maintain the kabbalists. Jacob was determined in character, more disciplined. Jacob was actually "*the stronger*"--more powerful spiritually. Furthermore, "*the older*" serving "*the younger*" is likewise uncertain. Esau was factually first, but Jacob was the legal owner of the birthright, so he could claim to be "*the older*". Now, the words of God's prediction could be interpreted in the exact opposite fashion! That is precisely the point. Jacob and Esau are the same, unique in their traits and personalities, but equal in the eyes of the divine. Both are strong-- in different ways, both could also easily be considered "*the older*" AND "*the younger*".

Once more the Creator of all life is reminding us that each individual is in the image of God. Regardless of outward distinctions, our varying cultures, unusual backgrounds, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, we are indeed all alike. God, through the Torah instructs us to remember, (like Isaac realized by giving both of his disparate children sincere blessings), that Esau and Jacob are both worthy. Adonai does not see us as black or white, brown or yellow, neither are we seen as Jew, Gentile or Muslim, male or female, straight or gay, but rather all of us are human.

The sooner we realize the inherent wisdom in seeing the world in this light, the sooner we will be closer to each other and nearer to God. And the greatest blessing--peace and harmony would assuredly follow.

L'shalom,  
Rabbi Jack