

Short Comments and Questions to Consider on Parashat Toldot  
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 6, 2021 2 Kislev 5782

בראשית כ"ה:י"ט וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בְּנֵי-אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם  
הוֹלִיד אֶת-יִצְחָק:

**Genesis 25:19** *Now these are the begettings of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac.* The Torah is signalling to us that we are starting a new story. Compressed into this verse is irrepressible idea that Isaac will always be defined as Abraham's son, and that the pressing dilemma of his life will be to define himself in his own terms. Does he succeed?

כ"ה:כ"ה וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אֶדְמוֹנִי בְּלוֹ פֶּאֶדְרֵת שֹׁעֵר  
וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו:

**25:25** *The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau.* Scholars are divided about the origins of the name Esau. Does it mean covered? Fully formed? We note the three-word-phrases, compressing everything concisely, and we also note that "**they**" name him. Who's the **they**? At the very least, would **they** be his parents, Rebekah and Isaac? Or the midwives? Consider that this hairy baby looks different, startlingly so. From the moment Esau was born, he was differentiated from others simply by his appearance. How would that have affected his life? Would that have contributed to his own identity formation as a young adult? Could his wild, ruddy, coarse, appearance – and his name – have contributed to his character?

כ"ה:כ"ו וַאֲחֵרֵי-כֵן יָצָא אֶחָיו וְגֵדוֹ אֶחֱזָת בַּעֲקֵב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא  
שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּצְחָק בְּנֵי-שִׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֻדֹת אִתָּם:

**25:26** *Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so he named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.* Esau is named by both his parents (at the very least), Jacob is named by a single male person, presumably his father. Isaac defines Jacob's life by naming him. Interesting: the only other character who gets named by both parents is...Ishmael. Coincidence? Maybe, or maybe not. See the last comment.

כ"ה:כ"ז וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַבָּעֲרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדַע צִיד אִישׁ שֹׁדֵד  
וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אֹהֶלִים:

**25:27** *When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in tents.* Like Cain and Abel, the Torah simply glosses over their childhood. But interestingly, they both hearken back to very ancient archetypes. Esau hearkens

back to the only other hunter mentioned in the Torah: Nimrod, descendant of the cursed Ham, cousin to Canaanites, a legendary strongman; Jacob hearkens back to Yaval the legendary *father of tent dwellers and herders* not to mention his extraordinary grandfather, Abraham. What shaped their characters to emerge so differently from each other? Was Esau's innate sense of his 'otherness' a factor in his embrace of the lifestyle embodied by the lineage of the cursed Ham? Did Jacob internalize the ideal of the tent-dwelling pastoral nomad from his parents and grandfather? **כ"ה:ל'** וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל-יַעֲקֹב הֲלָעִיטָנִי נָא מִן-הָאֲדָמָה הָאֲדָמָה הִזֵּה כִּי עָנַת אֲנִי עַל-כֵּן קָרָאתְשָׁמוֹ אֶדְוֹם:

**25:30** *And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished"—which is why he was named Edom.*

What can we gather from this moment? The word **הֲלָעִיטָנִי** (which occurs nowhere else in the Bible) which means *fill my gullet* brings to mind what is now politely called "competitive eating" in which contestants see who can eat the most the fastest. The backstory: Jacob feels cheated out of the birthright by the accident of nature and desperately wants to retrieve what he thinks is rightfully his. By now, Jacob has observed many of Esau's hunts. Jacob knows that Esau, like all hunters, has his good days and his bad days. He bets that Esau will come home empty-handed, exhausted, starving, and at his weakest. He reckons that if he prepares a **red red** stew that looks like meat, Esau will be super tempted and not think twice about it. Jacob could have easily prepared a meat stew, and could have graciously offered it to Esau for free. Why doesn't he? The simplest answer is by doing it this way, he creates the possibility of denying his responsibility for what happens. "*It wasn't my fault that you were too stupid to notice that it was only lentil stew. I didn't take advantage of you. Na! You had every ability to turn me down. You sold the birthright to me fair and square, and if it really mattered to you, you would have thought twice about it, but you didn't. Not my fault! Hairy man!*" Like anyone who has ever bought a defective item where there was a No Refund policy, it's basically too bad for you. It was your responsibility. You are partly to blame for letting yourself be cheated. But Jacob's stealth is undeniable.

**כ"ו:כ"ו** וַיָּרִיבוּ רֵעֵי גֵרָר עִם־רֵעֵי יִצְחָק לֵאמֹר לָנוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם־הַבְּאֵר עֵשֶׂק כִּי הִתְעַשְׂקוּ עִמּוֹ:

**26:20** *the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, "The water is ours." He named that well Esek, because they contended with him.* In a previous story, Abraham's and Lot's shepherds fought over **territory**; here Isaac's shepherds and the shepherds of Gerar are fighting over **water**. Isaac's shepherds have dug the well, but the Gerar shepherds claim it. They dig another well, and the Gerar shepherds claim that one too. Isaac digs a third well over which they don't fight. By employing a strategy of non-confrontation, Isaac is inconvenienced, but ultimately able to establish a territory of his own. What does this strategy say about him?

**כ"ו:כ"ד** וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי ה' בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱבֹרָכָה אֲבִיךָ אֶלְתִּירָא אֶל־תִּירָא כִּי־אָתְּךָ אֲנֹכִי וְגִבְרַתְּכִיִּד וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ בְּעִבּוֹר אֲבֹרָכָה עַבְדֶּי:

**Genesis 26:24** *That night the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham."* On the one hand, it's great to be blessed. On the other hand, how must he have felt knowing that he was blessed by God only because of Abraham? Is he not deserving of God's blessing in his own right? Or will he always be measured against the colossal example of his father's devotion to God?

**כ"ו:ג'** וַעֲתָה שְׂאֵ־נָא כְלִידֶיךָ וְקִשְׁתְּךָ וְצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה וְצוּדָה לִי צֹד:

**27:3** *Take your weapons, your quiver and bow, and go out into the field and hunt me some game.* It would have been sufficient to say, *Go and hunt me some food* but instead we get all the accoutrements. Blind as Isaac might be, he likes to imagine the trappings of hunting and trapping. He gets vicarious pleasure not only by imagining what Esau does but by imagining how Esau looks. Compare this: The superhero always gets costumed before going out to save the day. (Recall in the movie, *The Incredibles*, a key theme is the special uniforms of each of the heroes. Is there something similar going on here?) **כ"ו:י"ז** וַתִּתֵּן אֶת־הַמַּטְעָמִים וְאֶת־הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂתָה בְּיָד יַעֲקֹב בָּנָה:

**27:17** *Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared.* What is the significance of **the bread**? Bread is both functional and symbolic. Isaac probably did

not use a fork and a knife. Bread functions as a useful accessory for eating. But bread also elevates this meal to a ceremonial feast. In Judaism all ceremonial feasts require bread. But examine the story more closely. When Isaac tells Esau to prepare **מטעמים** he doesn't include bread. When Rebekah reports this to Jacob, she also doesn't include bread. But when the meal is finally delivered to Isaac, it includes **the bread that she had prepared**. Would Esau have served bread? Imagine the pressure he would have been under, given the possibility of a failed hunt. Would he have thought about it, let alone take the time to bake it? The presence of bread, functional and symbolic as it is, is also a signal! Every loaf of bread is unique to its baker. Having now been married to Rebekah for 60 years, even a blind Isaac would have been able to distinguish her bread from everyone else's! Is she trying to tip him off that this is Jacob and not Esau?

**כ"ו:כ"ט** גַּעֲבֹדוּהָ עַמִּים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהּ לְאֲמִים הִנֵּה גְבִיר לְאֹחֶיךָ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהּ בְּגַי אִמְךָ אֲרִיזָה אֲרִיזָה וּמִכָּרְכִידָה בְּרִידָה:

**27:29** *Let peoples serve you, And nations bow to you; Be master over your brothers, And let your mother's sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, Blessed they who bless you.* We hear an echo of God's first promise to Abraham (12:3). It is premised on the idea that he will live among people and interact with others. Likewise, the recipient of this blessing will also interact with others and establish relationships with them. Potential contact will create potential conflict. But this blessing expresses a fundamental truth that we observe to this day: those who bless Jews are blessed and beloved. Those who curse Jews are vile, disgusting, repugnant and loathsome.

**כ"ח:ח-ט'** וַיֵּרָא עֵשָׂו כִּי רָעוּת בָּנֹת כְּנָעַן כְּעֵשָׂו בְּעֵינָי יִצְחָק אָבִיו: וַיֵּלֶךְ עֵשָׂו אֶל־יִשְׁמָעֵאל וַיִּקַּח אֶת־מַחֲלָתָא בַת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל בֶּן־אֲבֹרָהָם אֶחָת מִבָּנוֹת עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ לִוְיָאִשָּׁה:

**28:8-9** *Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth.* Why did he marry Canaanite women in the first place? Was he yearning to differentiate himself from Isaac and aspire to Canaanite-ness? And why does he marry Mahlat? To win back his father? Or to replace his (feeble) father with a new (strong) father? A man with whom he has some things (double parent naming) in common? Lots to think about. Shabbat Shalom!