



Choosing Life • Parshat Toldot

Toldot, this week's *parsha*, means generations or progeny. It connotes life and being. Yet, the subversive, perhaps even subconscious, theme that permeates *Parshat Toldot* is death. Isaac, when acknowledging his old age and looming mortality, is motivated to think about the next generation and chooses to bless his son (Gen 27:2-4). Esau, when sensing the possibility of death, squanders his birthright and potential spiritual mission and legacy (Gen. 25:23).

Isaac and Esau were not the first in the *parsha* to confront an existential crisis. After suffering with childlessness, and being blessed with pregnancy, Rebecca experienced immense pain, to the point where she cries out, "If so, why am I?" (Gen. 25:22). Medieval commentaries debate the meaning of this stark, yet ultimately vague, declaration. Rashi writes that the physical pain of pregnancy was so intense, that she questioned why she desired to become pregnant in the first place. Sforno assumes that it was not physical pain, but fear of death that motivated Rebecca's outcry. Because of the intense pain, she was terrified that one of the children would die and that she would also die in childbirth.

Ramban contends that Rebecca was not questioning why she became pregnant but was questioning life itself. In response to the suffering, she intimates, according to Ramban, "that I should die or never have come into existence." Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg calls Rebecca "the philosopher who interrogates life, harshly, skeptically" who presents, according to her reading of Ramban, a "radical challenge to being" (*The Beginning of*

Desire: Reflections on Genesis, p. 159). Rebecca is not just experiencing physical pain, but psychological and philosophical angst, compelling her to ask, "Why am I in the world?"

Yet, the story does not end with a question. Rebecca, according to Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the 16th century Rabbi, better known as Maharal of Prague, is propelling herself toward action. She is self-reflecting, asking herself, "why am I sitting passively in pain?" Instead, she realizes that she needs to investigate and seek out explanations, so "she went to inquire of the Lord" (Gen. 25:22). Rashi, echoing a midrash, writes that she sought sage counsel from the academy of Shem. Alternatively, Ramban suggests that Rebecca prayed directly to God for guidance. According to all, she did not sit alone in existential anguish, but turned outward to help make meaning of her fear, pain, and suffering.

The question that the characters, and by extension, we, the readers, are confronted by, is how does one confront human finitude, mortality, and vulnerability?

In a sermon delivered on December 1, 1962, just one month after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm addresses the palpable sense of fear and foreboding his congregation was feeling at the time, after they had "confronted the awesome possibility of universal apocalyptic cataclysm" (*Dershot LeDorot: A Commentary for the Ages*, p. 123). Acknowledging that "During our lifetime, we shall have to live with that terror constantly"

(p. 123), Rabbi Lamm culls insights from *Parshat Toldot* to help his congregation cope with this new and frightening reality.

Rabbi Lamm contrasts Isaac's and Esau's response to the impending possibility of their respective deaths, as mentioned above. In Rabbi Lamm's sharp formulation, "For Isaac the imminence of death was an incentive to leave a blessing. For Esau it was a reason to feast on lentils" (p. 121).

Turning directly to his audience, Rabbi Lamm challenges the listener to confront the fear of looming doom candidly: "The overarching problem for each and every one of us is, how shall we react to this dread threat of the End? Shall we dedicate ourselves to that which is important and sacred in life and try for a last blessing like Isaac; or shall we conclude that since death is near, nothing is any longer of importance, and hence sell our birthrights and take a last fling at a banquet of self-indulgence in the manner of Esau?" (p. 123).

Judaism does not obsess about death, but it also does not pollyannishly ignore or repress its

possibility. We are challenged to confront our vulnerability by calling out to God in prayer, turning to others for guidance, and dedicating our lives to ensuring that we and our future "*toldot*," generations, perpetuate the sacred legacy of the Jewish nation.

This past Tuesday, in response to the existential threat to the State of Israel, the Jewish people, and most urgently to Israel's soldiers and the captives still being held hostage by Hamas, close to 300,000 Jews from across North America, confronted this threat by rallying in Washington, D.C.

Along with additional hundreds of thousands participating remotely, we prayed, cheered, sang, cried, and embraced, demonstrating our continued support and dedication to the State of Israel and the Jewish people. It is through this continual channeling of our inner Isaac and Rebecca that we can confront the challenges ahead, seeking support from God and each other, and embodying the Jewish values that give us the strength to persevere.

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Character Challenge: What can you do to help channel fear and concern productively in your support for Israel?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "How do you live with the constant threat of violence and war? That takes faith. Israel is the people that has always been sustained by faith, faith in God, in the future, in life itself. And though Israel is a secular state, its very existence is testimony to faith: the faith of a hundred generations that Jews would return; the faith that led the pioneers to rebuild a land against seemingly impossible odds; the faith that after the Holocaust the Jewish people could live again; the faith that, in the face of death, continues to say: choose life." (Israel – Home of Hope CD)