

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Toldot)

When Steve Jobs was seventeen he saw a quote:

"If you live each day as though it were your last, some day you will most certainly be right."

In 2005, at a Stanford University commencement address he recounted that after seeing that quote, every day in the morning he would look in the mirror and ask himself: "If today were the last day of my life would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer had been no for too many days in a row, he knew something needed to change.

Remembering we will be dead soon, continued Jobs, is the greatest tool he ever encountered for helping to make the big choices in life, because almost everything (fear of failure, external expectations, pride...) falls away in the face of death.

A year earlier he had been diagnosed with cancer; at 7:30 in the morning they showed him a tumor on his pancreas and told him it was most likely incurable; he was told he had 3-6 months to live.

His doctor told him to go home and get his affairs in order, which means prepare to die. It means to try and tell your kids everything you thought you'd have the rest of your life to tell them. It means to get everything buttoned up so it will be as easy as possible for your family when you are gone; it means to say your goodbyes.

He lived with this all day....

That night they did a biopsy on his pancreas and discovered it was a rare form of pancreatic cancer that is curable with surgery; he had the surgery and survived.

No one wants to die. Even people who want to get to heaven don't really want to die to get there.

But death clears away the old, to make way for the new.

And even if we are young and see ourselves as the 'new', some day not too long from now, suggested Jobs, we will gradually become the old and will be cleared away.

Concluding his now famous Stanford commencement address in 2005, Jobs summarized:

"Our time is limited so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma ... don't let the noise of other people's thinking drown out the sound of your own inner voice.

And most important: have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.

Your time is limited so don't waste it living someone else's life.

This week's portion, *Toldot*, tells the story of an impossible choice: Which of the two sons of Yitzchak and Rivkah should receive the blessing of leadership and be chosen as the next patriarch of the family of Abraham, soon to be the Jewish people?

Yaakov and Esau, despite being twins, are obviously two completely different personalities: one, Esau, is the hunter, the outdoors-man, and the other, Yaakov, is the scholar and introvert, who seems to stay near the tents. Esau is loved by his father, and Yaakov is apparently the apple of his mother's eye.

The Torah shares with us how despite being born first, Esau "despises the birthright" selling it to his younger brother for a pot of soup. Clearly Esau the hunter, who lives in the moment, was not meant to carry the torch of grandfather Avraham's monotheistic new religion. The covenant, as prophesied to Rivka their mother whilst still pregnant with them both, will pass to Yaakov the scholar; he will be the chosen one.

And yet, the Torah dedicates an inordinate amount of time to the struggle Yitzchak seems to have in blessing Yaakov, not to mention the pain Esau experiences in being deceived and missing the opportunity to be 'the chosen one'.

Ultimately Esau, begging his father for some remaining blessing after father Yitzchak explains:

"Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing", breaks down and weeps.

And in so doing, we feel his pain, and even commiserate with his loss. Why does the Torah bother with all these details? Why not just tell us that Yitzchak blessed Yaakov?

And it does not end there: Jewish Rabbinic tradition despite vilifying Esau, will nonetheless ascribe to him tremendous respect for his father to the point that he is clearly troubled by the angst he causes his father (parents?) over his marriage to Hittite (Canaanite) women, and thus takes a wife from the daughters of Yishmael to appease his parents.

Ultimately when the Jewish people journey towards the conquest of the land of Israel, G-d makes it very clear they are not allowed to take even a foot of the land of *Seir* which has been given to Edom, the descendants of Esau.

And there is even a specific injunction *"lo te'taev Edomi, ki achicha' hu"*

"You shall not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother" !

And in describing the generations of Esau (Genesis 36) the Torah takes the time to tell us that the Kings of Edom ruled the land of Seir long before any Jewish king ruled in Israel. In other words Esau too received his blessing, and much sooner than Yaakov!

We love to view the world through black and white lenses: good guys vs. bad guys; the Lone Ranger with the white hat fighting all the villains in black.

But life is not so black and white, it is far more nuanced.

In fact, when the two brothers re-unite after Yaakov's long exile in the land of *Lavan* (the result of his running from Esau's wrath over Yaakov's deception...), Esau falls on his brother's neck and all is forgiven and forgotten, at least in the plain meaning of the text.

So what are we meant to make of all this and how are we meant to view Esau who is still Yaakov's brother? Clearly, Yaakov is chosen, and for the right reasons, but that does not mean there is not a price to be paid.

Way back in the beginning, Hashem chooses Abel's offering which leads Cain to hate him and ultimately kill him. And when Yaakov chooses Rachel as his beloved wife, Leah clearly feels hated, which most certainly plays a role in the brothers' hatred of Joseph and the disaster that ensues.

Perhaps the Torah is telling us, that just because Yaakov is chosen; it does not mean that Esau is not loved. Indeed one of the puzzling details of the story of Yaakov and Esau is Yitzchak's love for Esau. Even though Rivkah has been told by G-d that Yaakov will be the chosen one, Yitzchak still loves Esau.

Is Yitzchak really blind to Esau's shortcomings? Does he not see that he spends his time hunting and killing animals, which seems so foreign to the culture of kindness that is grandfather Avraham's heritage? Does he not sense the contempt that Esau feels for the birthright and Jewish ethical tradition, alluded to by his selling of the birthright (read responsibility?) for a pot of soup?

But then, how should one treat the wayward son? How to relate to the child who is not destined to be the leader, the chosen one? Well, love him of course! And if he resists, love him even more!

In truth, we are all chosen; because we are all created by G-d, in his image. To be chosen does not mean that one is better; it just means we are chosen *for* something, for a purpose, a mission.

And every one of us is created for a purpose and a mission. Our challenge is only to discover what that mission is. And this is not only true for individuals, it is true for nations as well. Hashem created every nation and each nation has a purpose and a mission just as we have ours.

And when we speak of ourselves as a 'chosen nation' it simply means we have a mission that the world needs us to fulfill. And it is for this purpose that we were created, and for this purpose are we still here. But then, every nation, like every human being, was created by G-d, so every nation and every human being is chosen; the only question is what they are chosen *for*.

Yaakov is indeed given the blessing to carry on the message of the Jewish people and be a partner in creating the Jewish people. But that does not mean Esau is not chosen as well; he is just chosen for a different mission. Just as Yishmael, the father of all the Arab tribes was chosen for a different mission than his younger brother Yitzchak.

Four thousand years ago, Yitzchak is basically telling Yaakov and Esau:

Your time is limited so don't waste it living someone else's life. Be who you are meant to be.

The Jewish people have never believed it is all about us: our dream is that one day the whole world will be one and share our values, and respect every other human being as created in the image of G-d. That is why when Jews long to pray on the Temple Mount, they do not wish to do so *instead* of our Muslim cousins, but rather *alongside* them.

As we read at the end of the Musaf prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

"Ki beiti beit tefillah yikareh le'chol ha'amim"

"One day, My House (the Temple) will be called a House of Prayer for all nations"

We are waiting for the day when our cousins will share that dream; until then, while we cannot accept the *actions* of hate, and must fight them with all the tools at our disposal, we should never stop loving the *people* with whom we share this earth. Perhaps one day with enough love, we will yet experience the rapprochement of the joint burial of Avraham, when Yitzchak and Yishmael are finally able to put aside their differences and honor their father together.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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