

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Toldot)

Tibor Rubin was a Corporal in the Korean War when his battalion found itself ambushed by thousands of Chinese troops in the battle of Unsan, North Korea, in the fall of 1950. The Americans' firepower soon dwindled to a single machine gun. The weapon was in an exposed position and three soldiers had already died manning it when Corporal Rubin took charge. He fought until his ammunition was gone. Badly wounded, he was captured and sent to a P.O.W. camp, but his bravery helped many of his fellow soldiers survive. And his valor does not end there. He spent 30 months as a prisoner of war in North Korea, and fellow prisoners later testified about his willingness to sacrifice for the good of others; what gave him the strength to do all this?

Tibor was born on June 18, 1929, in Paszto, a Hungarian shtetl with a reported 120 Jewish families, to Ferenc and Rosa Rubin; his father, who had served in the Hungarian Army during World War I and spent several years as a prisoner of war in Russia, worked in a shoe store. In the days before the Nazi occupation of Hungary in March 1944, his parents sent him with a band of adult escorts in an attempt to reach Switzerland, but they were captured.

Young Tibor, then 14, was sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria, where, on his arrival, a commandant told him and his six comrades that none would get out alive. He barely survived the 14 months before the camp was liberated by American soldiers on May 5, 1945.

In a 2013 documentary film, "Finnigan's War," about veterans of the Korean War, Corporal Rubin recalled, "I promised the good Lord that if I get out of here alive, I'd become a G.I. Joe, to give something back."

He eventually made it to the United States and enlisted in the US army.

He had been steeled for captivity and privation, he said, by his experience in Mauthausen. He even declined the offer of his Communist captors to return him to Hungary, then under the influence of the Soviet Union. Instead, he made a habit of sneaking out of the camp at night and foraging for food, stealing from enemy supplies, and bringing back what he could to help nourish his comrades.

"He shared the food evenly among the G.I.'s," Sgt. Leo A. Cormier Jr., a fellow prisoner, wrote in a statement, according to The Jewish Journal. "He also took care of us, nursed us, and even carried us to the latrine." He added, "Helping his fellow men was the most important thing to him."

Corporal Rubin's father died in the Buchenwald concentration camp; his mother and a younger sister died at Auschwitz. In a long-overdue tribute, more than half a century later, on Sept. 23, 2005, Tibor Rubin, then 76 years old, was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Asked where he found the strength to risk his life again and again for his fellow soldiers he responded: "My mom was very religious, and she always taught us: 'There is one God, and we are all his children.'"

This week we read the portion of *Toldot* which tells the story of the children and grandchildren of Abraham. And in Jewish tradition, every child born of a Jewish mother remains a Jew no matter what; we are all brothers and sisters.

Indeed, the Talmud tells us: “*Yisrael, af al pi she’chatah, Yisrael hu* “

“*A Jew, even though he may transgress, remains a Jew.*”

No matter how far away a person’s path may take him, if he is born of a Jewish mother, he is, and will always be, a Jew.

So... what happened to Esau? This week’s portion, *Toldot*, raises a fundamental question: what makes someone Jewish? Last week it seems Avraham was forced to choose between his two sons: Yitzchak and Yishmael. But one might surmise that a Jewish father is not enough; Avraham’s son will only be the next Jew if he is born of Sarah, who for whatever the reason is Avraham’s Jewish partner.

But this week seems to shatter that hypothesis as both Esau and Yaakov are born of the same Jewish mother: Rivkah. So why was Yaakov chosen? Why isn’t Esau Jewish?

The word *Toldot* seems to mean ‘progeny’, and one might assume as seems often to be the case, that this week’s portion is so named because it begins with the sentence:

“*Eileh Toldot Yitzchak...*” “*These are the progenies (the descendants) of Yitzchak...*”

Yet, a few weeks ago the portion of Noach similarly begins:

“*Eileh Toldot Noach...*” “*These are the progenies (the descendants) of Noach...*”

But we do not name that portion ‘*Toldot*’ rather it is named ‘*Noach*’; why? Why don’t we name that portion ‘*Toldot*’ and this week’s portion ‘*Yitzchak*’? It would seem the essence and the theme of this week’s portion is *Toldot*; the Torah is not just telling us who was descended of Yitzchak (And Avraham), but rather what being a descendant of Yitzchak is all about.

One might think, after seeing Yishmael leave the fold, that we begin the notion that a Jew is someone born of a Jewish mother much as Jewish tradition teaches today.

And yet, Esau is clearly born of a Jewish mother, Rivkah; so why is he not Jewish? It would seem that the afore-mentioned axiom only applies from the time of Yaakov, and in fact as the statement suggests really from the time Yaakov acquires the name ‘Yisrael’.

Perhaps the three generations of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov are a process through which the molding of what it means to be a Jew is still being formed; we have not yet created the essence of the eternity of the Jewish people; we will only have completed that with the ascendance of Yaakov. Only when Yaakov succeeds in becoming Yaakov (as well as Yisrael), will the Jewish people be born. (Indeed, Avraham has only one Jewish son: Yitzchak, and Yitzchak has only one Jewish son: Yaakov. Only Yaakov will achieve the birth of the Jewish family that will become the nation; all of Yaakov’s children will be Jewish.)

So what is it about the struggle between Yaakov and Esau that signifies the completion of this journey and the definition of Jewish progeny? Why indeed is Esau not a Jew?

Interestingly, Yitzchak seems to think Esau *is* the next Jewish generation inasmuch as he intends to give Esau the blessings; so why was Yitzchak wrong?

It's almost as though G-d creates the perfect experiment: twins, born of the same womb, raised in the same home and even given the same blessings (compare *Bereishit* (Genesis) 27: 28 vs 27:39: they both are blessed with the dew of the heavens, etc.) as if to teach us that there is a characteristic that Yaakov develops irrespective of his genetic lineage that is the final *primatur* of what it means to be a Jew. So... what is that ingredient? What was missing?

Right from the beginning when Rivkah struggles with her pregnancy she is told by G-d that she is carrying two separate nations (ibid. 25:23); clearly Yitzchak and Rivkah will have to choose; but how? As children the boys are not clearly distinguishable (in fact, Rashi points out (ibid. 25:30) that Avraham dies when Esau becomes a teen so that he will not have to see his grandson headed in the wrong direction...).

The first indicator of the difference between Yaakov and Esau is the story of the birthright. The boys 'grow up' (ibid. 25:27) and Rashi explains this to mean that whilst Yaakov pursues study, Esau pursues idolatry. Indeed, when Rivkah is pregnant the Midrash (quoted by Rashi ibid.25:22) suggests Yaakov wanted to get out when they passed study halls of Torah and Esau when they passed temples of idolatry.

Rashi even suggests (ibid. 26:35; 27:1) that Yitzchak's poor sight is caused by Esau's sacrifices to idolatry which cause smoke in Yitzchak's eyes. So, it would seem rabbinic literature is suggesting that the paradigmatic difference between Yaakov and Esau was Torah vs. Idolatry. Indeed, Yaakov is described (ibid. 25:27) as the "*Ish tam yoshev ohalim*", (the 'complete' person who dwells in the tents, which represent Torah....).

The Torah is described as complete as well (*Torat Hashem Temimah*): a total and engulfing reality. As opposed to Esau who is described as the *Ish Sadeh*, the man of the field. Pagan idolatry is essentially the worship of nature, but more than that, worshiping multiple gods creates a quid pro quo relationship: 'If you do what I want, I will worship you, but if not, I'll worship something else'. When the Nile overflowed the Egyptians would offer her sacrifices but if not, they would worship the sun. And the inevitable result of this worship is that the gods were limited; the pagans considered them great, but they were simply bigger than man, in reality.

Judaism came to share a different message: we are not next to G-d in reality, G-d is the *source* of reality; indeed, Hashem *is* reality, and we are simply challenged to see ourselves immersed and surrounded by the reality that is Hashem.

And if all of reality is Hashem then we do not worship based on whether we perceive G-d as doing 'good' for us; rather, it's all good the only question being whether we are able to see it as such....

Indeed, this has a profound impact on all of our relationships as well. If our deities are worshipped conditionally, we will inevitably relate to everything else in the same way. So, we love our children if they do our bidding (ancient pagan cultures actually viewed wives and children as property...) and we will do for our spouses out of an expectation that they will do for us. And when you don't do what I want why should I do what you want.

Judaism introduced a completely different type of relationship: G-d is viewed as our loving father (Christianity learned this idea from its Jewish foundations ...); and we love our children unconditionally; no matter what a child does he or she will always be our child. And we don't do for our spouses because we expect them to do for us; we love (love is all about giving...) our spouse because they are part of who we are; we are meant to become one (ibid. 2:24) and are not meant to be 'other'....

Perhaps that is why this struggle for who will be chosen is presented through the prism of the relationship between parents and children. Note as well that Yitzchak loves Esau *because* he is a hunter (ibid. 25:28), whereas Rivkah simply loves Yaakov, with no reason given, as love is meant to be. Even Esau's relationship with Yitzchak seems to be painted as a quid pro quo; Esau knows what Yitzchak wants of whom and does it so that one day Yitzchak will do for Esau what he wants in return. But the reality of Jewish values is one of convince not conviction. Thus, he has no compunction letting go of the birthright and its inherent responsibility, it is only the blessings that he wants (and gets). Judaism however was not meant to be a role; it is meant to be an all-encompassing reality. (It is for this reason that we are concerned with converts who may be embracing Judaism in times that Jews have it so good; Judaism is an ideal not just a good way of life....)

Yaakov will be the ultimate example of the idea that our love for and relationship with G-d is irrespective of whether it appears we are 'blessed'. He will undergo the most tumultuous life of all the forefathers; struggling with Esau, forced into exile, tricked into a marriage he did not want, forced to run from his own father-in-law in the middle of the night, losing his beloved wife Rachel and even his beloved son Joseph, and yet never abandoning his greatest love: his love for Hashem. (Indeed, when he finally re-unites with his beloved Joseph towards the end of his life, his reaction will be to say the Shema! (Rashi ibid. 46:29)

Perhaps this is why Yaakov is associated with Torah and truth; because the essence of Torah as the source of truth is that we accept Hashem as the source of our all-encompassing reality.

It is this truth that will accompany the Jewish people on our long journey through millennium of exile; and maybe it was this truth that guided Tibor Rubin in the dark cold winters of Mauthausen ... and North Korea.

Now, finally, with this deep understanding and the third Jewish generation, the Jewish people and its message for a better world, is ready to be born.

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem,

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