My teaching, Toldot, November 14 2015

First I want to summarize this week's parashah. Abraham and Sarah, who we could say were 'the first Jews, have a son Isaac, who marries Rebecca, who gives birth to twins: Esau and Jacob. Jacob becomes a scholar and a homebody who is favored by their mother; Esau is a ruddy-complexioned

and hairy man, a hunter, who plies their father’s favor with tasty game.

Esau, as the first born, is understood as the inheritor of the bekorah, the birthright, which entails certain economic and religious responsibilities. Jacob, the second born, has his eye on the birthright. One day when Esau returns home famished from a day of hunting, he trades the birthright for a bowl of lentils given to him by his brother.

Then Esau takes two Canaanite wives, which the Torah says were a source of 'spiritual rebellion' to his parents. Now Isaac lies on his deathbed, and he wants to bestow a b'rachah, a blessing, to the firstborn. Rebecca convinces Jacob to impersonate Esau by covering himself in hairy goat-skins and

thereby tricking Isaac, who is blind, into giving him the blessing instead. Esau walks into Isaac's tent just after Jacob has usurped the blessing, and he asks their father, in one of the most tragic lines of Torah, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me? "Bless me, me too!” Esau cries. Isaac responds, “Your brother came and took away your blessing... what am I to do? "Do you have but one blessing?”

Esau implores. Isaac relents, and does give Esau a blessing of his own, but it is clear that something has changed in the family dynamic. Jacob now has both the birthright and the first of their dying father's blessings. Esau becomes angry, and makes plans to kill Jacob. Rebecca gets wind of this and sends Jacob away, presumably to escape Esau's wrath, but she has other motivations as well. She turns to her husband Isaac and reveals her true feelings, saying “I abhor my life because of the daughters of the Hittites [she's referring to Esau's wives]... if Jacob [also] takes a wife from the daughters of the Hittites, what would my life be worth?” Jacob's

final instructions, as he is sent off to Rebecca's family, is to find wives from among her kinship group. This is where our portions ends.

If I had a methodology for creating my d'var torah, it involved a combination of studying historical facts, imagining myself as each of the characters, and using the text of the Torah as hints toward deeper meanings. It was important to me to understand a character’s motivations in the context of what life

was really like for them. And although I understand the danger in reading my contemporary values and judgments into the text, and am acutely aware of all that I do not know about Biblical history, it was also important for me to step inside a character with all of my own biases, in order that I might relate to them, or disagree with them, or learn from them. Why else wrestle with Torah?

Esau's name is synonymous with evil; we seem to know this instinctively, but why? Esau has been interpreted as an evil man, morally corrupt and holding contempt for Jews. Upon closer inspection, this portrayal puzzled me. Esau seems to be cheated left and right by the great matriarchs and

patriarchs. I began to wonder if the dynamic of his family of origin had anything to do with his vilification by the larger Jewish family throughout time. In her extensive commentary on Genesis, Torah scholar Aviva Zornberg proposes that this family lives out the consequences of Isaac’s near sacrifice at the hands of his father Abraham, an event known as the Akedah. Zornberg proposes that Esau is the ultimate victim of the Akedah, and the 'presenting patient' of the family illness. My reasoning is different than hers, but I also see Esau as the person most cheated by an unfortunate family dynamic. In order to see how this is so, I'm going to explore the personalities and motivations of Isaac, Jacob, and, most of all, Rebecca, because it is Rebecca's will that is ultimately carried out from the beginning of the portion to the end.

To start with, Jacob: The name Jacob is derived from the verb 'akav,’ meaning 'to follow, to be behind, or to supplant.' Jacob came out of the womb holding onto Esau’s heel. In this story, Esau is imagined through his limbs, the hands and legs that allow him to hunt, while Jacob is rendered

limbless by his staying home and 'sitting in tents.’ Furthermore, Esau's profession takes him away from home, into a world of his own, where he exercises power through the art of the hunt, and sovereignty as the ultimate predator. Jacob's tents are those of his ancestors, the worlds of his father

and grandfather, not a world of his own making. Jacob understands his identity only as a shadow of others; he wants whatever Esau has just so he

can feel that he has something. (As a little sister myself, I relate to Jacob. A typical story from my childhood: My mom asking me what I want for dinner. “Whatever Emily's having!)

Jacob's life up to this moment is a practice in being other people; that is why it comes easily to him to impersonate Esau and steal the blessing.

But the idea has to be first suggested to him by Rebecca. Why does Rebecca want Jacob to receive the blessing of the first born? Savina Teubal is a contemporary scholar of ancient Near Eastern societies, and in her books Sarah the Priestess and Hagar the Egyptian, Teubal proposes that the

early women of the Hebrew Bible came from non-patriarchal social traditions, and that the actions we see them performing were attempts to maintain this tradition during the rise of patriarchal monotheism. Defining characteristics of these non-patriarchal traditions include matrilineal descent, endogamy (this is marriage within the descent group), and ultimogeniture (this is succession by the youngest child, as opposed to succession by the oldest child, which you see in patriarchal traditions). Therefore, the expectation would have been upon Rebecca that she, not her husband, is the definer of lineage, that her sons marry from within her family unit, and that the youngest son

inherits the household.

Rebecca's purpose is strong, and her path is clear. Isaac is blind; we can interpret this literally or symbolically, as some post-traumatic consequence of nearly being killed by his own father. He was part of the beginning of the rise of a patriarchal society, but I think he was frail and manipulable, and had a very strong-willed wife. I know I'm not alone in feeling sympathetic toward Esau as he cries,“exceedingly loud and bitter.” I've been learning recently how sometimes, maybe the Torah 'wants' to evoke our sympathies

for people who are 'bad, or difficult to like. Esau out-married; this was condemnable not only in early Judaism, but is still debated today, as we saw in recent controversy over the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College admitting rabbinical students in inter-faith partnerships. But Esau is not described

as a 'bad' person; in fact, when he and Jacob are reconciled some twenty years later, Esau displays a great deal of forgiveness and good-will toward his brother.

I wondered if there was anything Esau could have done to redeem himself in Rebecca's eyes, or if her personality and set of beliefs were such that she could ever forgive him. Couldn't she, as a mother, have stretched herself, just a little more, to accept Esau on his own terms? For that matter, could Esau, as a son, have stretched himself a little more, to respect his mother’s customs? Could Isaac have offered Esau a blessing with just a little bit less of all of that pleading? Could Jacob have offered more brotherly solidarity? The Jewish line was ultimately saved, but at what price?

The name of my Torah portion is Toldot. It means generations. To me this hints at the mystery of how the Jewish tradition gets passed l'dor v'dor, from generation to generation. It seems we still contain this ancient impulse to fear or reject people who are unlike us. How do we find, and express, our authentic selves, within our responsibilities to our families, our faith

communities, our work environments, our country? How do we live aligned with our own beliefs, while still respecting others who think and live differently? How can we not outcast or dehumanize people who are different from us? How can we prevent ourselves from seeing anyone as less deserving of a blessing? What do we do when someone has already been outcasted? How do we go about the process of individual and collective accountability, as well as reconciliations for those who have been slighted? How can we show respect to a person or a body of people we may disagree with, without

feeling diminished ourselves?

It is a well-known teaching in the Jewish world that Rabbi Hillel was asked by someone to summarize Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel said, “Love your neighbor as yourself. All the rest is commentary. Now go and study.” Study, indeed. The empathy I feel not only with Esau's situation, but the life circumstances of all of the family members, causes me to ask these questions. And also when I think about loving another as myself, these questions come up for me. I don't think there are any blanket answers for these questions; I think the answers are complex, specific, perhaps inconsistent from one situation to the next, and I think it is up to us to study and apply and try.

Words are tricky in that they constrict reality, they define one, while excluding others. It is difficult to come up with any one message because I think the beauty of Torah is that it is anything but constricted. Just because I criticize Rebecca, Jacob, and Isaac, does not mean they are without merit: Rebecca senses there is a larger purpose in life and raises poignantly universal

questions: Why am I here? What is this all for? Jacob eventually leaves home, faces trickery and deception himself, and wrestles an angel, thus earning himself a new name and a shift to a more autonomous identity. Isaac did bless both sons, in defiance of some implicit agreement that there

was not enough to go around.

The Torah remains with imperfect people, doing questionable things. I think it is like this so that we can see ourselves in them, and use their stories as tools for the introspective work that is necessary for being a conscious person, an adult, a bat mitzvah, in the world. This is how I understand the phrase 'taking on the yoke of Torah.’ I am equally thrilled as I am frightened, in a good way, of taking on this work today. And I am blessed to be accepted and loved by the Jewish community here, and I am honored to be supported by the people here who know me from other contexts, and I wanted to

thank you all for listening to my teaching!