

This week's Torah portion, Toldot,
begins with the familiar formula, Eileh Toldot,
'These are the generations of...'

in this case Isaac, son of Abraham.

Usually, what would come next would be –
an enumeration of the descendants of –
the particular individual.

But not this week.

Rather than beginning with Isaac's progeny,
the Torah chooses to invoke his father –

for the second time in the verse –

as if Isaac were not already identified as –

the son of Abraham.

“These are the generations of Isaac,

son of Abraham,

Abraham begot Isaac.”

Why?

A good rule of thumb in biblical scholarship:

If what’s bothering you is –

what’s bothering Rashi,

you're probably on the right track.

Rashi explains this abnormality in the text –

as a means of establishing Abraham's paternity.

But for those of us who did not need to be convinced –

there are deeper moral-mystical implications to –

the character and lineage of the patriarchs.

Each of the patriarchs is –

associated with a particular middah –

a character measure with virtuous potentiality.

Abraham, because of his renowned hospitality,

his advocacy on behalf of his fellow human beings,
and his commitment to their spiritual development
is most often associated to the middah of chesed.

Chesed, lovingkindness, alone is not exhaustive of –
the character traits our tradition hopes to cultivate.

Assuredly, it is foundational.

If asked to teach Jewish ethics on one foot,
an appropriate response might be –
“chesed, the rest is commentary.”

Nelson Glueck, former HUC-JIR president,

actually wrote his doctoral dissertation on –
the word chesed.

But, the Jewish soul is –
necessary more expansive than chesed.

Maimonides, in his discussions of Human Dispositions –
in his seminal code, the Mishneh Torah,
warns that the extreme of –
any measure of character is dangerous.

He advocates instead for a shvil hazahav,
a middle way.

Abraham, typified as lovingkindness,

begat Isaac –

Isaac, son of Abraham, is emblematic of –

a necessary counterbalance to *chesed*.

Isaac, according to Nachman of Bratzlav,

is associated with the middah of judgement. (Likutei Moharan 74:14)

Reb Nachman teaches that this verse from Parshat Toldot –

is proof that the middah of *din*, judgement,

is derived from *chesed*.

If we are to be just in judgement –

it is necessary to base that judgement in loving-kindness.

Cornel West clarified this further when he said

“justice is what love looks like in public.”

Because, if we love our neighbor,

and love the stranger,

like the Bible teaches us to do through –

the example of Abraham,

we want justice for our neighbor,

and justice for the stranger.

Qal v’khomer, all the more so,

We should want justice for our families.

But, this week we must ask ourselves,

where was the *chesed* for Esau?

Where is the good judgement and justice –

in two brothers –

being pitted against each other from birth.

Jacob and Esau shared the womb.

In such close quarters,

It's understandable that the two would quarrel a bit.

When Rebecca felt the two struggling inside her,

She went to inquire God as to why –
The Holy One,
who is sometimes somewhat problematic,
though well-attested,
as a parental figure –
tells Rebecca that her twins –
are really two nations –
and that the older will serve the younger.
Like I said,
This is a problematic example of parenting.

So, it's of no surprise,
that when the boys grow up –
each parent chooses a favorite.

Many of those of us with siblings,
May painfully recognize,
That feeling that you're not your parents favorite.

Even under the best of circumstances,
this insecurity festers and feeds sibling rivalries.

But although I don't agree with the favoritism,
It teaches us about the midah of *ahavah*, love.

The Bible tells us that,

When the boys grew up,

Esau became a skilled hunter,

An *ish sadeh*, a man of the fields,

And Jacob, is described as an *ish tam* –

Who stayed in camp.

We're told,

Va'ye'ehav Yitzchak et Esav ki tzayid b'fiv,

And Isaac loved Esau because –

he had a taste for game.

V'Rivka ohevet Ya'akov,

And Rebecca loved Jacob.

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz,

a mystical-ethicist in the –

16th and 17th centuries in Ashkenaz,

highlights the differences in the way the Bible describes –

the love each parent has for their child.

“Isaac's love was a love dependent on an external factor

Because he had a taste for meat, "כִּי-צִיד בָּפִיו."

Of such a love, we are told,

once the external factor disappears,

the love disappears as well.

Rebecca, on the other hand,

loved Jacob without –

an external factor being the cause of her love.

Such love remains forever.

This is why the Torah uses the form, "אֶהְבֶּת"

- which is in the present, continuous, tense –

to describe her love.

To signify that Rebecca's love for Jacob –

was an eternal one.”

But not a perfect love.

It’s counterintuitive to think that –

one can love too much.

Maybe one can love sweets too much –

But not a person, right?

Johnny Cash warned that love is a burning thing.

And the flame of Rebecca’s *ahavah* for Jacob –

obscured her *chesed* and clouded her *din*.

When Isaac is on his deathbed,

with eyes too dim to see,

Rebecca overhears him tell Esau

to go out and hunt some game –

so that Isaac can bless Esau.

While the older brother is out,

she instructs Jacob to trick his father –

in order to receive the blessing himself.

Jacob deceives his father with relative ease –

by donning Esau's clothes and –

covering himself with kid pelts.

So why is Isaac associated with *din*,
with judgement?

Two reasons,

both born out of his capacity for *chesed*:

First, when there was a great famine in the land –

Isaac did as God commanded –

and remained in Gerar –

the land of the Philistines.

Of course, God blesses him and –

he has an excellent harvest.

Abimelekh, the king of the Philistines,

Sees this and tells Isaac to get lost.

Which Isaac does pretty magnanimously.

He moves first to Wadi Gerar,

and begins to dig anew the wells dug by Abraham.

But when he finds water,

The Philistines come and drive him out.

So, then he digs another well –

and finally another –

Until there's no disputation –

Between him and the Philistines.

We see that this is good judgement when –

Abimelech comes to him and –

they are able to make a pact of peace.

Isaac doesn't get sucked into the fallacy of scarcity –

And has *chesed* for his neighbors –

Even when they are oppressing him –

Even during a famine in the desert.

Because of this he is able to –

make peace with the Philistines.

The second example of Isaac's good judgement –

being based in *chesed* –

is when Esau returns from his hunt –

to find that Isaac has given away his blessing.

Isaac meets his distressed son with *chesed* and,

even though he cannot take back the blessing he gave Jacob,

he again showcases the middah of *din*,

having the good judgement to impart on his oldest son –

a blessing that seems to indicate –

that he finally has cultivated his capacity for *ahavah* –

and loves his son, not for his eldest status or hunting ability –
or who he chooses to marry,

but rather, simply because he is his son.

Even though at the end of his life –

Isaac may have had a lapse in judgement –
we do not allow that to define him.

He is neither the victimized child –

nor the confused old man –

but rather,

his character is derived from –

the totality of his life experience.

Thus, we associate him with the middah of *din* –

because he derived *chesed* from his father Abraham –

and realized it in the decisions –

he made throughout his life.

The cultivation of *middot*,

which we call *Musar*,

is a lifelong endeavor.

Like Maimonides tells us,

certain people are predisposed –

towards certain *middot*.

But, predisposition alone is not enough.

We have to work on our character with intention –

like a good gardener –

we must weed and prune to –

cultivate the *middot* we wish to embody.

Jacob is a good example of this.

Reb Nachman tells us that Jacob –

is representative of the *middah* of wisdom,

which we call *chokhmah*.

In Parshat Toldot –

when we are first introduced to Jacob –

we see the pitfalls of unguided wisdom.

Jacob takes advantage of his brother –

tricks his father –

and puts himself in a deathly predicament.

It is only in the coming weeks –

that we'll watch as Jacob hones –

the *middah* of wisdom which –

he is so predisposed to.

Only when he is able to incorporate –
the *chesed* of his grandfather, Abraham,
the *din* of his father Isaac,
the *ahavah* of his mother Rebecca,
only then does he merit –
being known as Israel.

It doesn't come easy to him –
he has to learn and grow –
and wrestle his way towards becoming –
worthy of the namesake of our people.

So,

because I won't have the pleasure of –

seeing you again until next month,

I have a challenge for you.

Choose one of these middot –

Whether it be lovingkindness; judgement; love; or wisdom

and develop your own Musar practice.

Experiment with lovingkindness towards –

someone you have don't necessarily agree with,

like Abraham did when he advocated for –

Sodom and Gamorrah.

Practice judging someone favorably –

even when their ends seem opposed to your own –

like Isaac with the Philistines.

Find a way to show someone in your life –

that you love them just because they are who they are –

like Rebecca did for Jacob.

Use your wisdom to someone else's benefit –

Rather than their detriment –

Unlike Jacob does this week.

Maybe use it to find a way –
to celebrate Thanksgiving in –
a safe but meaningful way.

Cultivate one of these aspects of your character –
and together we'll grow towards –
being the best Israel we can be.

It's not easy,
and nobody is perfect,
but there's something beautiful –
in the journey towards becoming –

the self-actualized,

best possible version of ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.