Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Toldot

Double Trouble

This week's portion, Toldot, opens with the introduction of the next generation of Abraham's family: the twins Jacob and Esau. Almost immediately after describing their birth, the text emphasizes the differences between the two brothers:

בראשית כה:כד-כז	**Genesis 25:24-27**
(כד) וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ לָלֶדֶת וְהִנֵּה תוֹמִם בְּבִטְנָהּ׃ (כה) וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אַדְמוֹנִי כֻּלּוֹ כְּאַדֶּרֶת שֵׂעָר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו׃ (כו) וְאָחִיו־כֵּן יָצָא אָחִיו וְיָדוֹ אֹחֶזֶת בַּעֲקֵב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וְיִצְחָק בֶּן־שִׁשִּׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֶדֶת אֹתָם׃ (כז) וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה וְיַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים׃	When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born. When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob became a mild man who stayed in camp.

- **Both Jacob and Esau are named for something observed at birth, but their names reflect different kinds of associations. What does each name suggest about the brother who bears it?**
- **Esau is described as a skilled hunter who spends his time outdoors, while Jacob is described as a quiet man who stays in the tents. Which description sounds more like you, and why?**

How did Jacob and Esau turn out so differently despite growing up in the same household? Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, a medieval Portuguese biblical commentator, suggests that each twin inherited different traits from their family's past:

אברבנאל על תורה, בראשית כ"ה:כ"ד	**Abarbanel on Genesis 25:24**
והנה ראתה החכמה האלהית שתהר רבקה שני תאומים התחלפו הטבעים בזה האופן ... שרוב הבנים יתדמו במזגיהם ותכונותיהם למולידים אותם או להורים הראשונים שבהם וכמו שכתב החבר	Divine wisdom saw fit that Rebecca should conceive twins whose natures would differ in this way. Most children resemble their parents or earlier

למלך הכוזר שיש מבני אדם שלא יתדמה לאביו כלל אך הוא דומה לאבי אביו כי הטבע והדמיון ההוא יהיה צפון וכמו שנראה להרגשה כאשר היה צפון טבע עבר בבניו שלא נתדמו לו עד שנראה באברהם בן בנו שנתדמה לו ע"כ. והנה בהזדווג יצחק ורבקה היו בהם שני טבעים מההורים רחוקים זה מזה תכלית המרחק טבע אברהם יסוד המאמינים ראש היושר והכושר וטבע לבן ובתואל עובדי ע"א רמאים אנשי דמים ומרמה והנה לא רצה ית' שיתערבו ויורכבו שני הטבעים ההם כי יהיה היוצא מהרכבתם אם צדיק ורשע בלבד הוא בינוני לא צדיק ולא רשע ולא בחר י"י באלה ולכן רצה שיתהוו שם שני עוברים בבטן רבקה צרופים כצרוף הכסף בכור הברזל כדי שיפרדו סיגיו חלק אחד מהרוע אל עבר אחר והחלק אחר יהיה נקי מפסול' ויצלח למלאכ' ונפרד האחד יעקב לתומו שהיה מתדמ' בטבעו לאביו ואבי אביו ועשו לרשעו שנתדמה לאחי אמו ולאביה מטבע לבן ובתואל.	ancestors in their temperament and traits. As the Kuzari wrote: there are people who do not resemble their father at all but resemble their father's father, because that nature and resemblance was stored away — just as the nature of *Ever* was hidden in his descendants until it appeared in Abraham his grandson. When Isaac and Rebecca were joined, two natures from distant ancestors — utterly opposite to one another — were present: the nature of Abraham, foundation of believers, root of uprightness and virtue, and the nature of Laban and Bethuel, idol worshippers, deceivers, men of blood and treachery. God did not wish these two natures to be mingled and compounded — for the product of their combination would be a mediocre person, neither righteous nor wicked, and God did not choose such. Therefore He arranged for two fetuses to form in Rebecca's womb, refined as silver is refined in the iron furnace, so that the dross would separate — one part of evil going to one side and the other part emerging pure, fit for the work. And so the two were separated: Jacob to his wholeness, resembling his father and grandfather, and Esau to his wickedness, resembling his mother's brother and father, after the nature of Laban and Bethuel.

- **What does Abarbanel's explanation suggest about where evil comes from?**
- **Abarbanel writes that "most children resemble their parents or earlier ancestors in their temperament and traits." Does this fit what you have seen in your own family or other families you know? Give an example.**

Midrash Tanchuma, a collection of interpretations of the five books of the Torah compiled around 500–800 CE, takes a different approach. It suggests that the twins initially seemed so similar that their differences were easy to miss:

Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tetzei 4:1 Both of them were equal until the age of fifteen. R. Levi said, “To what were they comparable? To a myrtle and a thorny plant. As long as they are small, no one [can] distinguish one from the other. After they have grown up, the one gives off its pleasant smell, but the other brings forth its thorns. Thus, so long as Esau and Jacob were small, no one distinguished between them. After they were grown up, ‘Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp.’”	**מדרש תנחומא, כי תצא ד:א** לֹא הָיָה אָדָם מַפְרִישׁ בֵּין זֶה לָזֶה כָּל חָמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה. אָמַר רַבִּי לֵוִי, לְמָה הָיוּ דּוֹמִין. לַהֲדַס וּלְעַצְמוֹנִי. כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהֵם קְטַנִּים, לֹא הָיָה אָדָם מַפְרִישׁ בֵּין זֶה לָזֶה. הִגְדִּילוּ, זֶה הָפַךְ אֶת קוֹצָיו וְזֶה הֵרִיחַ אֶת רֵיחוֹ הַטּוֹב. כָּךְ, כָּל הַיָּמִים שֶׁהָיוּ עֵשָׂו וְיַעֲקֹב קְטַנִּים, לֹא הָיָה אָדָם מַפְרִישׁ בֵּין זֶה לָזֶה. הִגְדִּילוּ, וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יוֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה וְיַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים

- **In the Midrash’s comparison, what might the myrtle’s pleasant smell and the other plant’s thorns tell us about Jacob and Esau? Why might the two plants look alike when they are young?**
- **Does the Midrash suggest that Jacob and Esau became different as they grew older, or that growing older revealed differences that were there all along? Could you read it another way?**

Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, a prominent figure in Israeli Orthodoxy until his death in 2020, expands on this midrash in an essay discussing a parent’s culpability for their child’s sins:

Responsa Benei Banim 2:18 This is analogous to a myrtle and a thornbush that grew up alongside one another… That is to say, Esau's sins are not the fault of Isaac, who raised him and Jacob equally, and both were properly educated. Yet when they grew up, Esau turned away to idol worship — and the blame rests on him, not on his father. And immediately following this, the Midrash states: Rabbi Elazar said: A person is obligated to attend to his son until the age	**שו"ת בני בנים, ב:יח** משל להדס ועיצבונית שהיו גדלים זה ע"ג זה ... כלומר שחטאיו של עשו אינם מאשמתו של יצחק שטיפח אותו ואת יעקב בשוה ושניהם נתחנכו כראוי ואף על פי כן כשהתבגרו פרש עשו לעבודה זרה והקולר תלוי בו ולא באביו. ועל זה מיד אמרו במדרש אמר ר' אלעזר צריך אדם להטפל בבנו עד י"ג שנה מכאן ואילך צריך שיאמר ברוך שפטרני מעונשו של זה עכ"ל, וכולו מוסב על הקודם שיצחק טיפל בעשו בעודו קטן ובהגיע עשו לגיל עונשים על אביו לברך ברוך שפטרני מעונשו של זה על שאינו נתפס בחטאי בנו.

	of thirteen. From that point on, he should say the blessing, "Blessed is He who has exempted me from punishment on his account."

- **How does Rabbi Henkin use the midrash from the previous source to support his larger claim?**
- **Rabbi Henkin quotes Rabbi Elazar's view that after a child reaches the age of thirteen, their parent is no longer responsible for their misdeeds. How would you respond to this view?**

Rabbi Henkin argues that Isaac was not responsible for Esau's sins. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent nineteenth-century German rabbi, takes the opposite view. His Torah commentary, originally written in German, combines traditional interpretation with fresh insights. Here, he suggests that Isaac and Rebecca's mistakes in raising Esau helped shape his character:

Rabbi Hirsch on Genesis 25:27
Our sages, who never objected to draw attention to the small and great mistakes and weaknesses in the history of our great forefathers, and thereby make them just the more instructive for us… They point out that the striking contrast in the grandchildren of Abraham may have been due, not so much to a difference in their temperaments as to mistakes in the way they were brought up. As long as they were little, no attention was paid to the slumbering differences in their natures, both had exactly the same teaching and educational treatment, and the great law of education, "bring up each child in accordance with its own way" was forgotten: — That each child must be treated differently, with an eye to the slumbering tendencies of his nature, and out of them, be educated to develop his special characteristics for the one pure human and Jewish life. The great Jewish task in life is basically simple, one and the same for all, but in its realisation is as complicated and varied as human natures and tendencies are varied, and the manifold varieties of life that result from them…To try to bring up a Jacob and an Esau in the same college, make them have the same habits and hobbies, want to teach and educate them in the same way for some studious, sedate, meditative life is the surest way to court disaster.… Had Isaac and Rebecca studied Esau's nature and character early enough, and asked themselves how can even an Esau, how can all the strength and energy, agility and courage that lies slumbering in this child, be won over to be used in the service of God… then Jacob and Esau, with their totally different natures could still have remained twin-brothers in spirit and life; quite early in life Esau's "sword" and Jacob's "spirit" could have worked hand in hand, and who can say

what a different aspect the whole history of the ages might have presented.

- **How might Isaac and Rebecca have helped Esau use his love of the outdoors and his hunting skills for good?**
- **Have you ever been taught in a way that didn't suit your interests or how you learn best? How did it affect you?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Rabbi Henkin and Rabbi Hirsch draw very different conclusions from the same Midrash. Which reading, if either, comes closer to how you first understood the comparison of the two plants?
2. Think about your own siblings or siblings you know well. How are they alike, and how are they different? What do you think has shaped those similarities and differences?
3. What is one idea from these sources that will stay with you, and one question you still have?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Toldot, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Toldot page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Toldot topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Jacob, Esau, Jacob and Esau, and Siblings.

The source from the Abarbanel discussing the differences between Jacob and Esau is just the first of three answers he brings to answer the question of why Rebecca had twins. You may be interested in reading his other answers, and considering how they relate to the ideas discussed on this sheet.

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