Toldot: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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Isaac and Rebecca are childless for twenty years, but they pray and their prayers are answered. **God tells Rebecca that "there are two nations in your womb," and that the younger will best the older.** Esau emerges first, then Jacob, holding on to his brother's heel. Esau grows up to be a hunter and a wild man, Jacob the bookish sort who sits in his tent. Isaac loves his eldest best, Rebecca the youngest.

One day, Esau returns home exhausted and ravenous, and agrees to sell his birthright for a lentil stew. Isaac, meanwhile, has to resort to some trickery of his own to protect his family, and he presents Rebecca as his sister, fearing that if anyone found out she was his wife they'd covet her and kill him. He also re-digs a few of Abraham's old wells, and digs a few new ones of his own.

Isaac grows old and blind, and he wants to bless Esau before he dies. **Rebecca orchestrates a ruse**, dressing Jacob in his brother's clothes and covering him in goatskin to make him feel hairy like Esau. **The plot succeeds, and Isaac blesses Jacob instead.** When Esau returns and learns of his brother's deception, Jacob flees, with his father telling him that he will forever live by his sword. And Esau, already married to two women, marries a third—Machalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

> "Esau then asked Isaac, 'Have you not reserved a blessing for me?'"

Take a deeper dive

More than perhaps every other parsha in the Torah, this one goes furthest in stretching what we may think of as fair. Poor Esau, after all, is the eldest, and yet he's foiled at every turn. Returning home, famished and exhausted, he finds a brother who would only feed him in return to a very steep price—his birthright. Later on, that same brother, Jacob, tricks their father, Isaac, into giving him Esau's blessing instead. We feel for the poor Esau, who never stood a chance. **How could he and his brother, we wonder, end up so different?**

The great Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch delivers a fascinating insight, one that applies to every single one of us. **"The deep difference in Abraham's grandsons," he writes, "is due not only to their innate natures, but also due to their bad education.** When they were little, their parents ignored their divergent proclivities; they gave each the same Torah and the same education. **They forgot the greatest rule of educating children: Teach each child according to his or her way.** We must guide each young person according to their own fashion, so that we may awaken the qualities and traits that lie dormant in their soul. He who puts Jacob and Esau on the same school bench and teaches them the same life habits and thoughts can count on one of them being spoiled. Jacob drew from the wellsprings of wisdom, and Esau couldn't wait for the day when he could toss the old textbooks over his shoulder. **Had Isaac and Rebecca peered deeper into Esau's soul**, had they asked themselves how the courage, the power, and the flexibility that lie dormant in his soul—how could all these virtues be harnessed to worshiping HaShem, **this future 'hero' wouldn't have become a heroic hunter but a heroic servant of God, truly.** Jacob and Esau, for all of their different inclinations, would've remained twin brothers in spirit and in their way of life. But it wasn't meant to be: 'And the youths grew up'—only when they grew up and became men, all were surprised to see that these two, who emerged from a single womb, and grew up together, and were educated together, were so different in deeds and in character."

Of course, Rebecca and Jacob knew exactly what they were doing when they conceived of their elaborate plan: Esau, they understood all too well, was too wild, too impulsive, too tempestuous to be the father of a great and Godly nation. But even as we applaud their courage to act and secure our heritage by diverting Isaac's blessing to the son who deserved it most, we should still take a moment and remember Rabbi Hirsch's great lesson. We are each different, and each of us responds to different challenges, different ideas, different modes of teaching. Let us hope we remember that next time we come across another Esau.

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