

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Toldot

November 21, 2020, 5 Kislev 5781

Torah: Genesis 25:19-28:9; Triennial 26:23-27:27

Haftorah: Malakhi 1:1-2:7

Prayer as Pitchfork

Ilana Kurshan

This week's parsha takes its name from the "generations" of Isaac, but in the opening verses, Isaac is forty and still childless. His wife Rebecca is barren, and Isaac pleads with God on her behalf. Only then does Rebecca conceive twins, ensuring that the generations of Isaac will continue. Isaac's groundbreaking prayer, discussed in the Talmud, offers us a lesson in what it means to sow the seeds for a more flourishing future.

The Talmud considers Isaac's prayer in the context of a discussion in tractate Yevamot (64a) about the case of a married couple who are unable to bear children. The Mishnah teaches that if a man remains married to a woman for ten years and she does not conceive, he is "not permitted to desist" from the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, and therefore must divorce her and/or

marry an additional wife. The rabbis question whether ten years is really the limit, citing the example of Isaac, who married Rebecca at age forty (Gen. 25:20) but did not become a father until twenty years later (Gen. 25:26). They explain that Isaac is different, because he himself was infertile and therefore he knew there would be no point in divorcing his wife. With this example, the Talmud demonstrates that the law stipulated in the Mishnah is not as clear and absolute as it might seem – there are special cases and exceptions, especially when it comes to a matter so difficult and devastating.

In describing Isaac's prayer for a child, the Torah uses an unusual term: "Isaac pleaded (*va-ye'etar*) with the Lord." The Talmudic sage Rabbi Yitzchak, discussing his namesake, explains that this word comes from the same root as the word for "pitchfork" (*eter*): "Just as this pitchfork turns over the wheat from one place to another, so the prayer of the righteous turns over the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, from the attribute of rage to attribute of mercy." Just as the pitchfork turns over the wheat, Isaac's prayer turns over God—moves God, as it were – to make his wife fertile. Of course, as we now know better than ever before, in our modern age of science and technology, prayer is only one way of seeking to alleviate infertility. But the Talmudic rabbis use the case of Isaac to make an argument—provocative and controversial—about the power of petitionary prayers.

"Why were our forefathers infertile?" the Talmudic rabbis ask, and then go on to answer their own question: "Because God desires the prayers of the righteous." How can God care more about eliciting

prayer than about allaying human suffering? And yet perhaps it is the knowledge that God needs our prayers that can begin to allay our suffering. When confronted with situations that seem so painfully beyond our control, we feel our vulnerability and our dependence on God. In such moments, the Talmud teaches, it may be instructive to remember that God, too, is dependent on us – “because God desires the prayers of the righteous.”

This explanation comes up at only one other point in the Talmud, in the context of the fertility of the soil. The rabbis in tractate Hullin (60b) note that whereas the Torah relates on the third day of creation that “the earth brought forth grass” (Gen. 1:12), we are also told on the sixth day that “no shrub of the field was yet in the earth” (2:5). If the earth brought forth grass on the third day, how was there no vegetation three days later? Rav Asi explains that the grass emerged on the third day and stood poised at the opening of the ground, but did not grow until Adam came and prayed for it – which is meant to teach that “God desires the prayers of the righteous.” And so before Adam came along on the sixth day, there was indeed no “shrub of the field.”

The term used in the creation story for “shrub of the field” is *siach ha-sadeh*. The Torah employs a similar phrase later in Genesis when recounting that Isaac went out in the late afternoon “to meditate in the field” (*la-suach basadeh*) (Gen. 24:63) – a phrase the Talmudic rabbis understood as a reference to prayer (Berakhot 26b). Adam prays for the still-barren soil and Isaac prays in the fields and then for the alleviation of his wife’s barrenness. As the Talmud suggests,

their prayers do not just nourish the natural world; they also, as it were, sustain and nourish God.

The connection between the growing blades of grass and the prayer of the human heart is captured beautifully in *Shirat Ha-Asavim*, a song by Naomi Shemer based on sources from Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav:

Know that each and every blade of grass has its own song...

How beautiful and pleasant to hear their song

It is very good to pray among them and to serve God in joy.

Isaac, who prayed among the blades of grass when he meditated in the field, ultimately succeeded in arousing divine mercy – his wife became pregnant with twins. Our parsha teaches that once Isaac became a father, he “sowed seeds in that land and reaped a hundredfold” (26:12). Isaac the infertile patriarch is transformed not just into a father of multiples, but also into a sower of plentiful seeds. From the formerly impotent Isaac we learn about the potency of prayer to coax forth dormant potential – in the earth, and within ourselves.

Can Love be Served on a Plate?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bereshit 27:1-10

(1)And it happened when Yitzhak was old, ... he called Esau his elder son and said to him: 'My son'; and he said to him: 'Here am I.'

(2)And he said: 'Here, I have grown old, I know not the day of my death. (3)Now therefore take, I pray, your weapons, ... and go out to the field, and hunt me some game (4)and make me delicacies, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat; so my soul may bless you before I die.' (5)And Rivkah was listening when Isaac spoke to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for game, (6)And Rivkah had spoken to Yaakov her son, saying: 'Behold, I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying: (7)Bring me game and make me delicacies, that I may eat, and bless you before the LORD before my death. (8)Now therefore, my son, listen to my voice to what I command you. (9)Go to the flock and fetch me from there two good kid goats; and I will make them delicacies for your father, as he loves; (10)and you shall bring it to your father, and he will eat, so that he may bless you before his death.'

- Why does Yitzhak ask Esau to prepare a special meal for him before he blesses him? (And what might the menu that Yitzhak orders tell you about Yitzhak?)
- Compare Yitzhak's intentions, as he states them in v. 4, with what Rivkah repeats to Yaakov in v. 7. Is the change significant?

- Why do you think that Rivkah intervenes in such a way rather than discuss it with Yitzhak?

Commentary: R. Samson Raphael Hirsch Bereshit 27:7

Before the LORD - ...It is my desire to bless you at a time that you are standing "before the LORD", in other words: at a time that you are doing kindness by using your talent.

- According to this reading, why did Yitzhak ask Esau for a special meal?
- What would Yitzhak's request that highlighted Esau's talents mean for Esau?
- Note that this is spoken by Rivkah when she repeats Yitzhak's instructions while speaking to Yaakov. How do you understand her addition?

Commentary: Rashbam Bereshit 27:9

Go to the flock: The place of his occupation, for he was a (Gen. 25.27) "tent-dweller."

- This, too, is spoken by Rivkah to Yaakov (who was a shepherd). After reading Hirsch's comment, does Rivkah manage to "translate" Yitzhak's intentions to his other son?
- What is the value of people bringing of what they are best at to someone dear to them?

Love and Hate

Bex Stern Rosenblatt

The book of Genesis again and again tells the story of sibling rivalry. From Cain and Abel in the beginning through the twelve sons of Jacob at the end, brother is pitted bitterly against brother. But these stories also tell the story of sibling reconciliation. For all the brothers (after Cain and Abel) childhood rivalry makes way for adult friendship or at least adult tolerance. We read touching accounts of growth and forgiveness after tumultuous stories of jealousy and rage. Indeed, reading the stories of rivalry becomes tolerable because we know to expect reconciliation afterward. We've learned the plot and anticipate the happy ending. So it is surprising to find that when we reach Malachi, the very last of the twelve minor prophets, written in the Second Temple period after the Babylonian exile, the story of brothers ends with hatred, not fraternity.

Malachi opens with the following verses: *"'I loved you,' said God. And you said, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau the brother of Jacob?' says God. 'And I loved Jacob and I hated Esau.'"* Here we are at the very end of the history recorded in the Bible, and God is clarifying that the nice tales of love from Genesis do not win in the end. We end on a note of hatred, a call for revenge.

However, the story is a little more complicated. God is not just retelling our story from Genesis with an alternative ending. Esau has come to represent Edom, the nation that descends from him, our brother nation. Just as is the case in all sibling relations, the Israelite relationship with Edom is fraught. Ultimately, we

blame Edom for gloating over and helping in the destruction of the First Temple. They betrayed us and so it is only fair that we should hate them. Moreover, it is the ultimate reassurance to know that God hates them - that if God is playing favorites, we are still God's favorite even if we are not currently doing so well. God proves his love for us by holding up his hatred of Edom. Love is defined and clarified by hate.

We see this pattern elsewhere in the Bible. Back in Genesis, Jacob, the loved child, will repeat this pattern with his wives, 'loving' Rachel and 'hating' Leah. Must love always be defined by hate? Does the existence of love necessitate the existence of hate? Malachi seems to suggest that this is indeed the case. The Genesis narratives of sibling rivalry confirm it. However, the Genesis narratives also suggest that hate is not permanent, but rather a temporary phase we go through. Having experienced hatred, we grow into a position to experience love and to give forth love. In the book of Malachi, we are a scared people, coming back into our land and back into power after years of subjugation and exile. At that moment, we could only understand love as the opposite of hate. Let us hope that as time went on and goes on, we leave behind hatred as an experience of our past, using our memory of it to fuel a brotherly love for the present.