

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

In the extended discussion of honor of one's parents in Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31b, Rabbi Abbahu recounts the example of Avimi his son. We're told in the gemara that not only would Avimi run to his father's call, even though he himself had five ordained sons (grandsons to R. Abbahu). On one occasion Avimi was called by R. Abbahu to bring water to drink.

"Before he brought it, Rabbi Abbahu dozed off. Avimi bent over him until he woke up."

It's a touching moment that leads to the reward of Avimi being able to interpret an obscure aspect of Psalm 79. The language of the gemara to describe the dozing of Rabbi Abbahu is *namnem* from the verb נָגַם. The sense of the word is slumber, drowsy, even to be dying. Perhaps, the gemara hints, Rabbi Abbahu is edging towards the liminal world between life and death. And yet we know this verb well from Psalm 121 – הַגִּידָה לֹא יִנָּוֵם – the guardian of Israel does not slumber. Honoring parents is, after all, akin to honoring the Holy Blessed One.

"Yitzhak breathed his last and died, he was gathered to his kin, in ripe old age" (Bereshit 35:29)

Yitzhak does not die immediately after the incident with his sons in Parashat Toledot. Much unfolds before his eventual death, though we hear really nothing about his life of old age. In my experience in Jewish communal life, these years – the hidden, often challenging, beautiful and uplifting, but as frequently full of diminishing health – have become more and more something for us to address as a people. Those who are aging and those who are caring – the direction of care now frequently extends up and down two or three generations. As I reflect on this and the honor and blessing of caring, I am drawn to the touching sentiment of the Bavli in exploring the notion of raising up in holiness. From this Rav Yosef derives the idea that the two tablets which Moses shattered are also placed in the Holy Ark and then:

"We learn from this that a sage who forgets his learning by his own misfortune, one should not treat him with disrespect" (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 99a)

We do not set aside people whose grandeur, on the surface, seems to have been diminished or whose vitality has dulled, who need to feel our presence to know who we are. Rather, we raise up in holiness – this is our vision.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Toledot

November 30, 2019 | 2 Kislev 5780

Annual | Bereshit 25:19-28:9 (Etz Hayim p. 146-161; Hertz p. 93-101)
Triennial Bereshit 25:19-26:22 (Etz Hayim p. 146-151; Hertz p. 93-96)
Haftarah | Malachi 1:1-2:7 (Etz Hayim p. 162-165; Hertz p. 102-105)

D'var Torah: On Aging

Rabbi Neil Janes, Conservative Yeshiva Alum ('03-'04) & Executive Director of the Lyons Learning Project and Rabbi of West London Synagogue

Yitzhak said to Yaakov, "Come closer, that I may feel you my son" (Bereshit 27:21)

Some 18 months ago my 96 year old grandmother broke her hip and was admitted to hospital for surgery. A child refugee from Germany, who had only gone back to university in her later years, the little deafness and macular degeneration have not changed her mental acuity. I think that's what made the post-operative delirium so hard. She felt imprisoned and suspected everyone of nefarious intent, not even recognising her own children and grandchildren. In a semi-lucid moment she said to me, "Lean over Neil, let me feel your beard. I want to be sure it's you."

"I am old now and I do not know the day of my death" (Bereshit 27:2)

I've spent so many years teaching these passages from Torah, perhaps I had become careless in my attention to Yitzhak. But recently I have become attuned once again to the nature of aging, of ill-health and responsibility. We spend many hours discussing whether Yitzhak was going along with the ruse hatched by Rivkah and Yaakov to steal the patriarchal blessing from Esav. Dressed up as Esav, Yaakov approaches his father and pretends to be the older son. Today I read the text differently and become heartbroken in thinking about Yitzhak's vulnerability.

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

“Then his father Yitzhak said to him [Yaakov]: Come close and kiss me, my son” (Bereshit 27:26)

D’var Haftarah: The Triumph of Yaakov

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Some might find the opening verses of this week’s haftarah disconcerting. It broadens the brotherly conflict between Yaakov and Esav into a national struggle between two nations - Israel and Edom (considered the descendants of Esav), while maintaining the primacy of Israel. Just to make things clear, at the time of this prophecy, when the Jews had just returned from Babylonian exile, the Jews harbored enormous animosity toward the Edomites who had sided with the Babylonians in their conquest of Judea. So, when one reads a prophecy where God promises that He will requite what the Edomites had done, you should not expect any complaints from a Jewish audience. Malachi makes a theological point from this promise: “And your own eyes shall see and you shall say, ‘May the Lord be great beyond the region of Israel.’ (1:5)

This message, namely, that God’s realm of action extended beyond the narrow borders of the nations of Israel and Judea became Judaism’s normative message after the return from exile. Still, this message encapsulated in geo-political violence did not characterize later rabbinic thinking and consequently, this verse underwent a transformation in meaning as characterized in the following midrash: “‘And your eyes shall see and you shall say, the Lord is great’ – And the Holy One Blessed be He said to Israel: My children, study much Scripture and learn lots of Mishnah, until I (God), Myself, come and say to you what is pure and what is impure.” (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah chapter 13 end, Ish Shalom ed. p. 68)

Implicit in this message is the recognition that God’s greatness in the world will be achieved not through great military triumphs or world-historical events, but through the serious and diligent study of Torah. This idea represents what Professor Gerson Cohen, the late Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, noted as one of the preeminent contributions of rabbinic Judaism to world civilizations, namely, the universal study of religious texts as a discipline for communing with God. The more people study, the greater the recognition of God’s greatness.

This recalls a debate the Talmudic sages had over the preeminence of Torah study over deed: “Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper floor of Nitza’s house, in Lod, when this question was raised before them: Is study greater, or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Deed is greater. Rabbi Akiba demurred, saying: Study is greater, for it leads to practice. Then all [of the sages present] responded: Study is greater, for it leads to action.” (adapted from Kiddushin 40b) The bottom line, for the Jew, is that Torah study not only shapes the way a person thinks but also leads us to shaping the world as God envisions it.

Parashah Study: Toledot

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In the last parashah Yitzhak married Rivkah.

TEXT - Bereshit 25:24-27

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb... When the boys grew up Esav became a man who knew the hunt, a man of the outdoors; while Yaakov was mild/plain man who stayed among the tents.

- What do you think is the significance of Esav and Yaakov being twins, born with no time nor physical distance between them? What might we expect from twins, and to what extent does it seem to be fulfilled here?
- We meet them again when they have grown up. What is the significance of the different directions that each of them took? What personality traits are developed in each profession? (Commentators mostly assume that 'staying among the tents' means that Yaakov was a shepherd.)

COMMENTARY - R. Samson Raphael Hirsch on Bereshit 25:27

"And [the lads] grew up..." ...While they were young they [Yitzhak and Rivkah] did not pay attention to their hidden inclinations. They gave the same Torah and the same education to both, forgetting a great rule of education "educate a child according to his ways". (Proverbs 22:6)...

- One who places Yaakov and Esav on one school bench, and ... educates them as one to a life of learning and thought - is guaranteed to be ruining one of them. Yaakov will draw from the well of wisdom with growing desire, while Esav will only wait for the day that he can throw away the old books and with them – a great life mission...
- Would Yitzhak and Rivkah have looked deeply into Esav's soul, if they would have asked themselves early on how the courage, strength and agility that are latent in Esav's soul - how can all this lend a shoulder to the worship of God; then the "hero" of the future would not become a hunting hero but 'a hero before the Lord'.
- Esav is frequently painted negatively in Jewish sources. What does Hirsch consider to be the cause of Esav's rejection, despite seemingly having all the opportunities that Yaakov was given?
- According to Hirsch, what is the cost of a failed Jewish education?
- How would you suggest educating today's "Esavs"?