

Synchronizing Heaven and Earth

Parashat Toldot, Genesis, Chapters 25-28 | November 4, 2021

One of the most fascinating phenomena in the world of sports is that of twins playing and competing together on the same team or in the same athletic pursuit. Two separate articles in the *Wall Street Journal* describe the way that these athletes seem to maintain a mental link with one another—a psychological synchronicity that gives them an extraordinary edge. Thus, we are told of Henrik and Daniel Sedin—ice hockey players who were called the NHL’s “telegraphic twins” and seemed to pass to each other without looking—and of Karen and Sarah Josephson, synchronized swimmers and identical twins who won the gold medal at the 1992 Olympics.

Nancy Segal, the psychologist and author of book *Entwined Lives*, informs us that:

Nontwin siblings often propel each other’s performance out of a fierce sense of rivalry. But with twins—especially identical twins—it is often more about camaraderie.

But what if two twins are entirely unlike, utterly opposing characters, born to a family formed for an eternal destiny? Would their parents choose one as heir, or desperately seek some synchronicity between the two?

The tale of Esau and Jacob is enigmatic; countless commentators have offered their own interpretations. Here, I will draw on the rabbinic reading of my own favorite biblical commentator, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin. I will also turn to one fascinating elucidation by a rabbi who also happens to be a chef, highlighting thereby how this tale of twins turns on details that are often overlooked.

We begin back in the previous *parasha* with Rebecca journeying to the Holy Land in order to marry Isaac. Upon arriving, she first encounters him as an

unidentified, mysterious man:

And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide; and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and behold, there were camels coming.

And Rebecca lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she alighted from the camel.

And she said unto the servant: what man is this that walketh in the field to meet us? And the servant said: It is my master. And she took her veil and covered herself.
(Genesis 24:63-65)

The Hebrew here is tricky. Rebecca’s first action upon seeing Isaac is described as “*vatipol me’al bagamal*,” which literally means “she fell from her camel.” Most think this means that she intentionally alighted from her mount in order to meet her fiancé. But the verse makes clear that when she dismounts, she does not yet know who this meditating individual happens to be. Rabbi Berlin therefore reads the phrase literally: Isaac had gone out to engage in spiritual meditation, and Rebecca, startled by the sublime spiritual power radiating from him, fell from her camel, emphasizing the awe Rebecca experienced at this first encounter. Then, upon being told that this was the very man she was meant to marry, we read that “Rebecca covered her face,” highlighting again the reticence, the shyness, in the relationship. This, as Rabbi Berlin explains, will set the stage for all that follows. There will be tremendous love in this marriage, but also awe and, therefore, a lack of candid communication. Why is Rebecca’s relationship with Isaac so different from Sarah’s with Abraham? If Sarah was not too reticent to order her husband to banish Ishmael, why is Isaac different in the impact he has upon his wife? What precise holiness did he have?

Rabbi Ezra Bick builds on Rabbi Berlin’s writings by suggesting that the answer lies in the *akeida* episode.

Isaac had been brought as a sacrificial offering atop Mount Moriah. Indeed, the word “sacrifice” in English is insufficient. The Hebrew word for offering is “*korban*,” whose root is “*karov*,” or “closeness.” Isaac’s life was saved, but an offering he eternally remained. He had, in a certain sense, been more closely united to God than any other individual who had lived thus far. The Talmud takes this notion quite literally and explains that this is the reasoning behind the verse that we come upon soon after, when famine ensues and, unlike Abraham, Isaac is not allowed to travel to Egypt:

And the Lord appeared unto him and said: Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I tell thee of.

Sojourn in this land and I will be with thee...
(Genesis 26:2-3)

Abraham may have been the father of our faith, but he was not a *korban*. But the offering that was Isaac cannot leave the sacred soil of the Holy Land. This sacred nature of Isaac cuts him off from the world. Rabbi Bick notes that unlike Abraham and Jacob, Isaac engages in very few worldly endeavors. When he does, as when he digs up Abraham’s wells in chapter 26, they are always imitations of his father, never anything new.

Having been atop Mount Moriah, Isaac could not truly descend to Earth. Forced to live in this world, he nevertheless remained bound to Heaven. This is the man Rebecca marries. Betwixt the love, there is also a barrier of communication between husband and wife, one which will dominate the future plot.

After twenty years of waiting, Rebecca finally becomes pregnant, and her physical troubles therefrom lead her to seek out private prophecy:

And the Lord said unto her: Two nations are in thy womb, and two people shall be separated from thy innards; and the one people shall be stronger than the other; and the elder shall serve the younger.
(Genesis 25:23)

The elder shall be subordinate; this is the simple understanding of the Hebrew “*verav ya'avod tzair*.” From this, Rebecca understands that her children will not both be part of God’s chosen people, and that the *younger* child will continue Abraham’s path. But her reticence before Isaac remains, and she does not share this with her husband even after the children are born:

And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

And the first came forth ruddy, all over like a hairy mantle, and they called his name Esau.

And after that came forth his brother, and his hand had hold on Esau’s heel. And his name was called Jacob...’ (Genesis 25:24-26)

Each name is linked to the moment. Esau, or *Esav*, refers to his hairiness, and *Yaakov*, Jacob, is rooted in the Hebrew word for “heel,” *ekev*. Another physical feature of Esau is important: he is, we are told, “*admoni*,” which means reddish or ruddy. The boys grow, Esau into a hunter, and Jacob a man who stayed in the tent. Isaac loved Esau, for, we are informed, “*tzayid befiv*,” “his venison was in his mouth.” Perhaps this means that for the spiritual soul that was Isaac, Esau emerges as his constant connection to the physical world. But Rebecca, we are informed, loves Jacob.

The two twins are thus entirely different. But how does this relate to the continuity of the covenant? All, I believe, turns on a small, seemingly strange tale, one that requires our attention because it is actually about something very significant to Judaism: food. Esau comes home famished from hunting and discovers his brother stewing a pot of red lentils.

And Esau said to Jacob, Let me swallow, I pray thee, some of this red, red, pottage for I am faint. Therefore was his name called Edom.

And Jacob said, Sell me first thy birthright.

And Esau said, Behold, I am going to die and

what profit shall the birthright do to me?
(Genesis 25:30-32)

Jacob offers to give Esau the lentils in exchange for the cultic ritual preeminence of being firstborn, and Esau agrees. Then, in a rare moment, the Torah offers a comment: “*vayivez Esav et habekhora*,” “Esau spurned his heritage.”

The nation Esau will father will be known as Edom, which, we are informed by this text, is linguistically linked to the word “*adom*,” “red.” This, because once when he was hungry, he beseeched his brother for “red, red, stew.” This seems exceedingly odd. The nation derived from Esau was forever known as “red” because once Esau asked for red stew? Is he not known as Edom because his appearance was, as we know, “*admoni*,” reddish? Imagine learning that Wilt Chamberlain was known as “Wilt the Stilt” not because he was tall, but because once he happened to buy a pair of stilts. It would be bizarre. Yet, that is what Scripture seems to apply to Esau here.

The story becomes clear when we appreciate that lentils are red when they are raw. Properly stewed, they take on another color. As the late chef and rabbi Gil Marks writes,

Esau wanted the stew before it was even fully cooked, which for red lentils is a relatively short time, in as little as ten minutes once the water is boiling. This corresponds to the tenor of the rest of Esau’s demand to literally “pour the red stuff down his throat,” not even taking time to chew or savor it. And, in fact, since red lentils tend to turn pink or golden as they cook, a red hue would seem to indicate an underdone state.

Esau, Rabbi Marks further writes, was,

[B]egging to wolf down an undercooked... dish...an act of animalistic gratification, far from a spiritual expression...

The redness of the lentil is the very symbol of Esau’s inability to wait another ten minutes. He can live only

in the now, and that is his stated motivation for selling his birthright. Behold I am going to die, why do I need the birthright?

Esau is a man who sees only transience. Give me the lentils now. The name “Red,” therefore, implies Esau’s inability to look forward to the future, and he is named for it because this flaw invalidates him from the Abrahamic covenant. Such a man cannot connect present to posterity, cannot merge finitude with eternity, cannot serve as a link in what will become the Jewish generations. Indeed, we are further informed that unlike Isaac and Abraham, he takes inappropriate wives, and we are informed that:

They were a bitterness of spirit unto Isaac and Rebecca. (Genesis 26:25)

Esau is clearly the wrong candidate for continuity. Nevertheless, the now-blind Isaac asks his elder son to bring him meat from the field, and he will then bestow upon him the blessing of national greatness, which is apparently at least part of the Abrahamic promise. Rebecca therefore disguises her younger son, placing goat hair upon his arms, and ensures that the patriarch, while Esau is still on the hunt, blindly bestows the blessings upon Jacob instead.

Isaac’s resplendent spirituality might indeed explain why Rebecca might have had difficulty discussing her own point of view with him as well as the prophecy she received. But how could Isaac have thought to grant Abraham’s covenant upon his unworthy elder son? The answer can perhaps be discerned in the precise wording of the blessing bestowed. When Isaac still thought that he was speaking to Esau (though it was really Jacob), no reference is made in his words to a spiritual calling. What is spoken of is prosperity and political power:

May God give thee of the dew of the Heaven and of the fat places of the Earth, and plenty of grain and wine.

Let peoples serve thee, and nations bow down to thee. Be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee...
(Genesis 27:28-29)

The blessings are material and political, part of what was bestowed upon Abraham, but here no spiritual component is mentioned.

Thus, an interpretation of Isaac presents itself. Isaac sought to divide the Abrahamic inheritance. Isaac, the heavenly man who had been an offering to Heaven, who experienced the physical world primarily through Esau, sought to give material blessing to his older child. To Jacob, who “dwelled in the tent,” was to be given the spiritual blessing of Abraham, of perpetuating the monotheistic mission. Isaac, the man whose soul had soared as high as the heavens atop Mount Moriah, thought to keep the encounter with the world of the spirit entirely pure, unencumbered by the concerns of the physical world. And so he decided to split his heritage: to give physical bounty to Esau, and to leave spiritual encounter with Jacob. Blessed by God with two children, he intuited that their gifts were entirely different. Why, he thought, ought he to encumber Jacob, the spiritual personality, with material matters? With two children, why not give the physical aspects of the blessing to the child less religiously inclined, and allow Jacob to focus on the world of faith? This, Rabbi Berlin argues, can be seen from what follows: Esau vows revenge and Jacob prepares to flee. Then, before Jacob departs, he receives another blessing from his father. And then, when Isaac is utterly aware that it is Jacob he is addressing, the blessing bestowed is different:

And may He [God]...give thee [Jacob] the blessing of Abraham to thee and thy seed with thee, that thou mayest inherit the land of thy sojournings... (Genesis 28:3-4)

This was the Abrahamic blessing of the spirit and the link to the Holy Land. This was the blessing which Isaac had intended for Jacob all along.

Isaac’s approach then may be more understandable, for if the Almighty had given him twins, should he not seek some synchronicity, some way in which they could work in tandem? But he was mistaken, and rightly understood it is Rebecca who saves the future of Judaism. For as we discussed in our exploration of *Parashat Bereishit*, Judaism asks us to unite Adam 1 and Adam 2, to join our physical creative capacities with our faith. Judaism seeks not to

shut out the world, but rather to sanctify it. Thus, the many laws of the Torah apply to all aspects of daily life. In Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik’s words:

[T]he Bible speaks of an existence this-worldly centered—“When thou buildest a new home; when thou cuttest down thine harvest; when thou comest into thy neighbor’s vineyard”—yet theoretical and unqualifiedly committed to an eternal purpose.

Perhaps Isaac indeed saw a sign in Jacob and Esau’s twinship. A heavenly hint that each should receive part of Abrahamic promise. But a nation can be built only if unified in both political and spiritual endeavors, and for this to happen, Jacob must also become someone else. He must also become Israel, so that the physical and spiritual unite and a nation can be formed not from Isaac’s twins, but from Jacob alone.

The destiny, the divinely declared calling, of sanctifying the physical world, and of joining Heaven and Earth, is what bonds Jews together in metaphysical union. Strikingly, the most fascinating story in the articles about twins in sports did not concern twins at all. It is about the synchronized swimmers named Carolyn Waldo and Michelle Cameron, who competed against the identical Josephson twins in the 1988 Olympics. The *Journal* tells us that:

Waldo and Cameron were anything but twins. They have different heights, ages, hair colors and personalities and hail from different ends of the country. To compete against the Josephsons, Waldo and Cameron decided to try to be more twin-like. They began warming up at the same pace. When they weren’t swimming, they would look at each other and align movements, sometimes with music playing. They played thinking games to see if they could tell which part of the routine the other one was visualizing. Minutes before competing, they synchronized heart rates.

They won the gold in 1988, with their coach describing their bond as a wireless connection. The *Journal* further tells us that though they moved to different parts of the country, strangely, different events throughout their lives seemed somehow linked, occurring at the same time so that throughout, as one of them put it, “We have been on the same page since we left swimming.”

The metaphor is profound. At Sinai, the Talmudic sages say, Jews all stood “*k’ish echad, belev echad*,” “as one person with one synchronized heart.” Jews are not all twins, but we are all connected, through rituals and beliefs that sanctify our existence, and metaphysically and mentally link us all over the world, so that all of us children of Jacob are bound together wherever we are. That surely is more extraordinary than a gold medal ever could be.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik argues, based on Rabbi Gil Marks, that a small story about stew actually tells us a great deal. What, in the end, is the role of food in Judaism? When do the pleasures of eating figure prominently in Jewish life, and how do we prevent this prominence from becoming hedonistic in nature?
2. If the story of Isaac and Jacob teaches us that Judaism believes in joining the spiritual and the physical, in engaging the world and sanctifying it, what are the challenges involved in such a calling? What unique opportunities for engagement and sanctification might exist in our age?

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