SUMMARY OF PARASHAT TOLEDOT

HAVING A CHILD (OR TWO)

Parashat Toledot tells us that our second patriarch, Isaac, prayed for his wife, Ribka, who could not have children. God answered his prayers, and Ribka became pregnant. Through a prophecy, Ribka learned that she was carrying twins who would become the founders of two nations: “one will overpower the other, and the older will serve the younger.” When she gave birth, the first baby came out covered with hair, and they named him Esav. The second came out holding his brother’s heel (‘akev), so they named him Ya’akob.

VIVE LA DIFFERENCE!

The boys grew up and went different ways. Esav became a hunter, while Ya’akob “dwelt in tents,” that is, he spent more time at home than out in the field. These differences teach us something important about raising children: same parents, same genes, a similar upbringing, and still children can have completely different, even opposite, personalities. The Torah also tells us that Isaac preferred Esav, while Ribka loved Ya’akob more.

NOW OR LATER?

One day Esav came back from hunting, exhausted. He saw Ya’akob cooking a lentil stew and asked for a plate. Ya’akob agreed, but asked for the birthright in exchange. Esav agreed. Before giving him the stew, Ya’akob offered him bread, so that Esav, no longer starving, could think it over and reconsider. But Esav didn’t care about the future, and he gave up his birthright for an immediate pleasure. Ya’akob, by contrast, stands for the idea of sacrificing in the present (studying, saving, working hard) to secure a better future.

ISAAC IN GERAR

A famine struck the land of Canaan, and Isaac moved with his family to Gerar, ruled by the Philistine king Abimelekh. God told Isaac not to go down to Egypt. And so Isaac is the only one of our patriarchs who never left the land of Israel.

In Gerar, when the local men asked about his beautiful wife, Isaac said she was his sister, afraid they would kill him. Abimelekh discovered the truth and rebuked him for the deception. Once that was behind him, Isaac prospered in Gerar, but the Philistines, envious of his success, forced him to leave. Isaac dug several wells in the area and found water, but the Philistine shepherds claimed the wells as their own. In the end, Isaac settled in Beer Sheba, where he made a non-aggression pact with Abimelekh.

TELL ME WHO YOU MARRY, AND I'LL TELL YOU WHO YOU'LL BECOME

Against the values of his family, Esav married two Hittite women, the equivalent today of marrying non-Jewish women. This caused his parents deep pain.

When Isaac grew old and the time came to bless his sons, which included naming the spiritual leader who would carry on Abraham's legacy, he called Esav and asked him to go hunt and prepare a meal, so he could bless him before he died. Ribka overheard the conversation and came up with a plan for Ya'akob to receive the blessing: she prepared the meal, and Ya'akob, dressed in Esav's clothes, brought it to his father. Isaac, who was blind, didn't recognize him and blessed Ya'akob.

When Esav came back and found out what had happened, he swore to kill his brother. Ribka, fearing for Ya'akob's life, told him to take refuge with her family in Charan until Esav's anger cooled. Before Ya'akob left, Isaac said goodbye and, this time knowingly, blessed him with the blessing of the land of Israel and the continuation of Abraham's legacy.