TOLEDOT: Choosing the Next Patriarch

RIBKA

In this week's Parasha, Toledot, we meet the second generation of the Jewish people: Isaac and Ribka. Ribka, Isaac's wife, had the finest moral qualities. She practiced Chesed, extreme generosity, the kind you see when someone helping you gives or does more than you asked for. In this sense, Ribka was a clone of Abraham, the man who was the very model of Chesed.

Ribka's extraordinary kindness came with great intelligence and a very strong personality when it came to standing by her convictions. Here too she was like Abraham, who held on to his principles even with the whole world against him. That firmness pushed her to step into a decision that was crucial for the destiny of the Jewish people.

ALIKE AND DIFFERENT

Isaac and Ribka had twin sons, Ya'akob and Esav. Ya'akob was gentle, very decent and kind, a man who stayed home, drawn to the spiritual and the intellectual. Esav was the exact opposite: pure adrenaline. A man of battle. A skilled hunter. A warrior. A military leader.

And then came the time to choose an heir. The question was not who would inherit Isaac's property. It was something much more important: who would lead and preserve the way and the values of Abraham Abinu? And on this point, Isaac and Ribka did not agree!

SENSING ANTISEMITISM

For Ribka, Abraham's successor had to be like Abraham: kind, sensitive and generous to strangers. Esav had a violent

personality, very useful in war, but incompatible with Abraham's sensitivity. For the mother, the chosen one had to be Ya'akob.

But for the father, Isaac, the obvious heir was Esav. Why? Isaac assumed that Abraham's faith, so controversial, would be violently opposed by the idol-worshipping nations, which would surely try to wipe out Abraham's descendants for such radical ideas. Let's not forget that Abraham's faith, monotheism, is "exclusive." It doesn't say "my gods are stronger than yours." It says "there is only one God, my God, and your gods are a fraud."

With a message so revolutionary, ideologically (and politically), Isaac knew that if his descendants stayed faithful to Abraham's belief, they would have countless enemies (and he was right!). So the bearers of that faith would have to know how to defend themselves and fight for their convictions. Esav, Isaac thought, had the ideal qualities to defend Abraham's faith. He was a powerful fighter, and he could organize and lead an army against future enemies.

THE FIGHT TO SURVIVE

Esav was an expert at spotting and exploiting his enemies' weaknesses. He specialized in deceiving his prey, animal and human. He was a cunning warrior whose mind was always on how to defeat the other. That talent is very important in war. But how did it shape Esav's character? How generous to strangers would this expert hunter and warrior turn out to be?

DON'T LEAVE FOR TOMORROW WHAT YOU CAN ENJOY TODAY

Esav, like every warrior, lived as if the next battle would be his last. So he enjoyed the present without thinking about the future. Esav showed he was willing to sacrifice his future to satisfy his immediate needs when he traded his birthright for a plate of lentils. How would that trait affect his ability to

keep Abraham’s way? Abraham’s values are, to a large extent, about being willing to sacrifice the present (desires, needs and appetites) for the sake of the future.

Esav was also ambitious and materialistic. That is a useful quality in a warrior, because material dissatisfaction is the best motivation to go out and conquer other nations, seize their wealth and become more powerful. But that quality, which drove the Vikings and every conquering people, doesn’t necessarily go hand in hand with the values of Abraham Abinu. For Abraham, what mattered most was not what you have or whom you conquer. What mattered was sharing, giving to those who have less, acting as God’s representative to help those in need.

RED LINES

Isaac saw Esav’s aggressive personality as the guarantee of the physical survival of Abraham’s people. Ribka, on the other hand, doubted that Esav, with his violent character, could represent the values he was supposed to defend, even if he formally promised his parents to adopt them.

Unlike Esav, Ya’akob was kind and generous. For Ya’akob, the future matters more than the present, and material things must serve a purpose beyond oneself. For Ribka, Ya’akob was the natural heir to Abraham’s way.

BLINDED BY A FATHER’S LOVE

Like many fathers, Isaac didn’t see Esav’s flaws. And since he had already suffered the attacks and provocations of the Philistines, he wanted his people led by the best warrior among his sons. But Ribka, with a woman’s intelligence and a mother’s wisdom, knew very well that Esav was not the right candidate. And at the end of the story we see that Isaac recognized his wife was right, and sent Ya’akob to take a wife from Abraham’s family.

Ribka’s crucial intervention shaped, directly or indirectly, the nature and character of the Jewish people. We were never known as fearsome conquerors, like the Huns, the Mongols or the Vikings. And the price we paid for that lack of aggression and military strength was very high. Jews have always talked about peace, never about conquest. We take no pleasure in bloodshed or in the death of our enemies. In that sense, we were the perfect victims, easy to abuse, and for the last 2,000 years we were never able to defend ourselves.

AT LAST!

Today, thank God, 4,000 years after Isaac and Ribka, I believe we have reached that delicate balance between the spiritual and the material in Medinat Israel. On one hand, there are more yeshivot, academies of Torah study, in Israel today than at any other time in Jewish history. And although there is still a lot to do, everything suggests the trend will keep growing. On the other hand, after 2,000 years we not only have our own independent state, but also a very powerful army to defend us from those relentless enemies that our patriarch Isaac, in his wisdom, foresaw.

I am sure Isaac and Ribka would be very proud of our Jewish state.