

Toldot and the Underdog
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Shabbat shalom.

My kids often tease me when something interesting happens, saying: “Abba, is this going to be a sermon?” Sometimes, this comes with a roll of the eyes.

Sometimes, something breaks at my house or something else does not go well, and it can be a sermon. Just a few weeks ago, after that October nor'easter when a tree hit our house, that did become a sermon.

In that sense, a rabbi is no different from a writer or poet or any person who utilizes his own experiences and the world around him to reflect and, hopefully, to be inspired. It is my belief that “Torah” writ large (meaning the entire corpus of the Jewish texts and ideas), should touch on every aspect of our lives – whether it is a moment that has clear significance or something that is seemingly mundane.

So, as I sat down at Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday night, I was looking forward to a delicious meal with my family, but at the same time there was a part of me that was also thinking about this morning’s sermon.

The first course that my wife Sharon lovingly prepared was a delicious bean and barley soup. Its reddish-brown hue reminded me of Jacob’s red lentil stew that Esav wanted when he returned from the outdoors famished, presumably from a hunt. Luckily, there was a difference, as Sharon did not demand an exorbitant price for my partaking of it!

The main course – a large free-range, kosher, pastured, non-factory-processed Turkey from www.growandbehold.com (please don’t even ask about the price!), was delicious with a different taste from the usual poultry we eat that spends its days eating corn. Leaner, more flavorful and a bit more gamey, this Turkey reminded me that Esav was a hunter who brought his father Isaac meat to eat. As the Torah states, “*ki tzayid b’fiv* – because [Isaac] (he) had a taste for game.” (Gen 25:28)

But a deeper connection occurred when we took a break between dinner and dessert and turned on the football game between the Ravens and

the 49ers. The announcers were painting a picture of the sibling rivalry between the two coaches – John and Jim Harbaugh. John is the coach of the Baltimore Ravens and 13 months older than his younger brother Jim who is the coach of the San Francisco 49ers. As they faced off on Thanksgiving, each team played with an extra measure of effort to help their coach defeat his brother.

As Terrell Suggs, who had three sacks for Baltimore, said “Coach tried to downplay it — act like it's not me against my brother, [...] — but it was really important to him. We as a team went out there and really wanted to win for him.”

While these brothers clearly love each other, their strong rivalry immediately reminded me of the intense jealousy that Jacob and Esav must have had. How must Jacob, a few minutes younger than his twin brother, have felt when his older brother had a much closer relationship with their father? How did Esav feel sensing that his own mother seemed to prefer spending time with his brother Jacob? And, why would Jacob demand the birthright from his brother when he returns home starving? Perhaps as our *Etz Hayim Humash* comments, “Jacob may resent Esav’s privileges, based on his being older by a matter of minutes.”

Here the Torah is making a revolutionary and radical statement. While in the ancient world it was a given that the oldest child was given preferential treatment – in fact, he would inherit a double portion of his father’s estate – here, the Torah introduces a new idea. The entire book of Genesis has us reconsider that bias, teaching us that perhaps that bias is unfair. And that is why the younger child often becomes the dominant heir; think of Isaac over Yishmael or Jacob over Esav.

But the deepest connection that I found on Thanksgiving to the parashah was actually in the manner in which I watch a football game, or really any competition. For some reason, if I do not have a vested interest in one of the competitors, I will always root for the underdog. Perhaps that is a Jewish tradition. Since we have usually been smaller in number and the underdog in many situations from Hanukkah to Israel's War of Independence, I may more readily identify with the underdog.

So who is the underdog in this morning's *parashah*? There are really several: Jacob, as the younger brother; Esav, as the brother whose mother

does not favor him; and Rebecca, who, as a woman is naturally the underdog – especially in the ancient world. So who is the underdog?

In reality, all three of them are underdogs. But both Jacob and Esav come out on top in various ways. Jacob is able to abscond with the blessing and the birthright, and Esav is clearly more powerful; Jacob's fear of him at the end of the *parashah* leads him to run away. But I think it is Rebecca who is both the underdog and the champion of the narrative.

Women in general were, and to some extent still are, the underdogs in any given society. Sometimes we look at the Torah through the lens of our own time, and we think about how old-fashioned its perspective seems to be. But to appreciate the Torah means that we need to understand the context in which the Torah came into being. In the Torah's world, women had almost no rights, and thus the Torah's innovations – from giving women rights within a marriage to allowing women to inherit land in certain situations – were radical and revolutionary for their time.

For the most part, women were powerless. A woman could not tell her husband what she wanted or, for example, her feelings about her own children, influencing him in a certain direction.

According to biblical scholar Dr. Tikva Frymer Kensky, z"l, “in the world of the ancestors, a father could determine who is going to be his ‘firstborn,’ his chief heir, and could change his mind even on his deathbed. Family documents from the Syrian city of Nuzi, from around 1600 B.C.E., include several documents in which a man promises another that he will be the firstborn. Nevertheless, one of the documents shows that the man's family came to him on his deathbed to tell him to designate his firstborn.” (Reading the Women of the Bible, 18)

We have a similar situation in our Torah reading. While Esav has already sold his birthright, the rights and privileges of being firstborn, Isaac's blessing on his deathbed can change all that, negating the sale and giving Esav a double portion.

So Rivka is confronted with a major dilemma: given the prophecy she has while she is pregnant, she knows that Jacob is supposed to “become” the firstborn and, if Isaac blesses Esav, that prophecy will not come true. The problem is that, as a woman, what can she do to influence the outcome? In

addition, she knows that her husband favors Esav, since he is a hunter. If she's going to change the destiny of her children/of Jewish history, she must act quickly and decisively.

That is not to say that she does not have her own biases: she prefers Jacob, he is more domestic, and perhaps he will care for her better in her old age. As Frymer Kensky points out, “motives are rarely unmixed. Moreover, even people who operate purely for selfish reasons may unwittingly be carrying out God's plan, like the brothers who sell Joseph into Egypt or Potiphar's wife who gets him into the dungeon where he can come to the attention of Pharaoh. Actions have consequences whatever their motives. And whether or not Rivka is thinking of the oracle at this particular moment, the oracle has shown her and the reader what God's plan is. Isaac must bless Jacob. Only he has the right to bestow the blessing. Rivka knows that he has made his decision and she will not be able to persuade Isaac to change his mind. And so she decides to trick him and turns to persuade Jacob of the plan.”

Rivka then takes great risks to ensure her plan's success: she devises an elaborate ruse with the skin of young goats and she reassures Jacob, telling him that if the plan fails and he is cursed, the curse will be upon her.

In ancient times, the belief was that a curse could not be erased, but it could be deflected, and Rivka intends to protect her son by doing just that.

Rivka is quite a woman – though she is part of a world where women did not have great opportunities, she decides to make sure that God's larger plan is fulfilled, deceiving her husband and taking on any potential ramifications of her actions. She allays Jacob's fears so that he can be successful.

As a woman, she is relatively powerless and thus must use deception to be effective. While later readers – and perhaps we – may think that her behavior is immoral, readers of the Torah thousands of years ago were impressed by her cunning.

Rivka has one final deception to carry out. She tells Jacob that Esav is out to kill him and, in order to survive, Jacob must run away until Esav's anger subsides. But to Isaac, she says that Jacob must leave so that he does

not marry one of the local women, so Isaac sends Jacob away to marry a cousin from Paddan-Aram.

Here, she again displays her powers of persuasion; she never tells Jacob about the marriage issue and she never tells Isaac about her trickery – utilizing explanations to each that further her plan.

Even more than Sarah, it is Rivka who demonstrates skillful abilities in getting what she wants. This is a new model of a woman; though still an underdog in society, these women exercise power and authority in a way that was unique in the ancient world (really, until recent times).

When we read the Torah, it is critical to understand the context of its time and see how it is making changes in the world. While we may take values like Shabbat, justice, ethical monotheism, democracy, egalitarian learning, the concept of the week, women's rights, and more for granted, it is the Torah that introduces these into the world.

The entire book of Genesis plays off of ancient understandings and biases in a subtle way – issues like the preferential treatment of the firstborn and the powerlessness of women remain, but these narratives have framed them quite differently. Ancient readers began to question these assumptions because of these texts – which, over time, allowed those biases to evolve and change.

That may explain my need to root for the underdog. Whether it is the younger child, a woman, or even the weaker sports team, our Torah's tales have hard-wired us to question those (and other) assumptions, perhaps even predisposing us toward the underdog.

So next time you find yourself rooting for or helping the underdog, think of Rivka and the Torah.

Shabbat shalom.