

Toldot and the case against equality.

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Benji Rosen

A huge part of my life at the moment, is spent prioritising one child over another. The resources we have in the NHS are limited, and often I'll be the only paediatric doctor in A&E. When faced with a list of sick children, it's crucial that I find a way to identify the sickest and see them first. But often the sickest children have only just arrived, so understandably, parents who notice I'm seeing a child who arrived long after they did can be furious.

I'll never forget the mother who tearfully told me how many hours she'd been waiting, accused me of being unfair and made me feel awful for prioritising another child over hers. And even though I shared her frustration, even though I sympathised, it was heart-wrenching to hear her say: "How can you do this, to children?"

Parashat Toldot opens with Isaac and Rivka waiting for their child. Isaac prays in-front of his wife, and to his credit, unlike Avraham and Jacob, he does not take another wife and sticks to Rivka. They wait for 20 years.

Rivka finally gets pregnant, but then feels lots of movement within her, and enquires of God אֲנִי אֵיךְ אֶהְיֶה אֲמַרְךָ לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי which most translate as: "why is this happening to me?", but I prefer the more philosophically worded "why do I exist?" Which is a fair question to be honest. One I contemplate often. But unlike most philosophers she goes to enquire of the Lord. Going, implying she went somewhere. Rashi interprets she goes to a yeshiva. Wherever she goes, God replies with a prophecy: she will have twins, they will give rise to two great nations, and that the elder will serve the younger.

They are not identical twins and it's clear that each parent is focussed on a different child. The text says clearly: Isaac loves Esau and Rivka loves Jacob. They prioritise one child over another. But why? And what are we to make of this?

Let's start with Rivka who loves Jacob. The prophecy favours him, and this is the traditional reading of why Rivka does too. But we also know he dwells in tents and is tam. Some translate this as "innocent" but where else in Jewish writings have we heard of a son who is described as "tam"? The four sons. The simple son. I'd argue that Jacob doesn't have much going for him. He's not the bechor and though later in life is clearly a smart guy and he meets Laban and genetically engineers sheep, often boys blossom late academically, and maybe as a child he's a little simple. Something perhaps only a mother would sense. On second glance, is it so unfair that Rivka tries to help him? Perhaps he needed the birth right and the blessing more? Without it, who is he?

So why does Isaac love Esau? Well, the torah explains he is a great hunter and Isaac enjoys the meat he catches. And maybe this is true. I've been trying to have a vegetarian wedding, but my dad loves meat. He's put his foot down. Maybe all Jewish dads just want a steak and

see the world through that prism? But Isaac is a man who speaks with kings and with god and is a fabulously successful farmer in Gerar, there must be something deeper going on.

Rashi, explains that Esau is a trapper, and Esau trapped his father with his mouth, with words of piety. The late Rabbi Sacks and very current Rabbi Dweck run with this and interpret that, and I'm paraphrasing here, Isaac is never taken in by Esau's smooth talking, and focuses his love on him precisely because of his short comings. Isaac sees a son who has murderous tendencies and lacks self-control, throwing away his birth-right for some red lentils.

Here's some more evidence for this: Esau commits the worst crime imaginable to Jewish parents. He marries Hittite women, he marries out. And it really vexes his parents. And yet in the very next sentence of the parshah, he decides to give Esau a blessing. Surely this is a father trying to help a son in need?

And we all know what happens next. Rivka eaves-drops and picks up that Esau is about to be blessed, dresses Jacob up as Esau and because his father is blind, he doesn't notice and blesses Jacob.

So by the end of Toldot we are left with this question: is it wrong, as a parent, to prioritise one child over another? To, in one's actions at least, love one more? Many of us would say: Yes. We should treat children equally.

But these twins show us that life is more complicated than that. What if one of the child is tam, simple? Or has learning difficulties? Or perhaps one is impulsive, violent and has threatened to kill a member of the family? Surely it makes more sense to spend additional time and love on the child who you feel you can help, and who needs it.

I think Rivka and Isaac do this. They ignore equality and go for equity. They spend more time on the child they think needs it. And if they hadn't, where would we be? Jacob could have never pulled off the deception on his own. He is so scared about deceiving his father, he doesn't want to go through with it, is scared about being cursed, and Rivka practically pushes him through the door of the tent. And without the blessing, who is Jacob? No wrestling angels, no Israel. No us.

And Esau. Somehow, probably thanks to all that attention from Isaac, he grows enough spiritually to forgive or at least not kill Jacob when they meet again. By supporting their children in this way, they both reach their potential and become great nations.

What I've taken away from Toldot, put simply, is that we shouldn't treat every person the same. Instead, we should if we can, support them according to their needs. And it sounds obvious, but it's hard work. In A&E I've had a lot of schtik for this, especially because as a hospital we can be fined for missing waiting time targets. But for me, a successful shift is not a shift in which my patients didn't have to wait too long to be seen, although that would be great! It's a shift in which I prioritised the children who were most in need, and as a result was able to help them. But this concept applies to more than just the NHS or even children. Perhaps it's fitting that today Tanya and Cheryl have organised a refugee lunch. It applies to decisions we make every day about what and whom we choose to focus on.

So, in my best Rabbi Joel impression, I thought I'd end by encouraging you to ask yourself the following question: Who in your life is most in need? Who needs you the most?