

D'var Torah: Tol'dot

December 3, 2016

My grandfather's Yahrzeit is coming up in a few weeks, and while reading this week's Torah portion, Tol'dot, I've been thinking about my grandfather's early life, how he left his home and family to come to America, and about the last words he ever heard from his mother and father.

My mother's father, Yitzkhak Portnik, was born in a stetl called Berezhino in the province of Minsk, and he learned the wagon-builder's trade from his father. In 1908 Yitzkhak was 19 years old—draft age. He went into the Tsar's army, received basic training, and got his orders: he was being shipped out to Siberia.

Everyone knew what it meant to be stationed in Siberia: it was a 20-year hitch, and there would be no Jewish community, no Jewish wife or children, no Shabbos, no kosher meals; and most likely no coming home. When he got leave to say goodbye to his mother and father, the family quickly raised what money they could and burned his wonderful fur coat—it was government issue, a necessity for Siberia, and would instantly identify him as a deserter.

Yitzkhak had an older brother, Abraham, who had come to America—here, to Buffalo, New York, of all places—and with his wagon-building skills, got a job building auto bodies for the Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company.

So the family knew what it meant to go to America, too. Not the *goldene medina*, as some said, and not a paradise for Jews, but a place where you could live, a place where you could keep your Jewish identity if you really tried. They kissed Yitzkhak goodbye. The last words his father spoke to him were, *Zei a Yid*: Be a Jew. Yitzkhak never saw his mother and father again.

He “stole the border” (his words); made his way to Rotterdam and sailed for New York. He came to Buffalo, where Yitzkhak Portnik became Benjamin Plotkin—that's a story for another day—and worked at Pierce-Arrow alongside Uncle Abraham. The brothers saved their money and tried to bring their family here, but then World War I intervened, and then a revolution in Russia, and then a civil war. By 1922 they were able to bring three sisters and their families to America. The parents would have come too, but the father died as they set out, and the mother, disheartened, went back to the village. I never learned how, or where, or when she died.

Last words. Departures. Reunions promised, and sometimes fulfilled. These are some of the themes we find in this week's Torah portion, as in the more recent history of my family, and perhaps many of your families too.

Like my grandfather, Jacob has to get out of town in a hurry. The conflict with his brother Esau began even as they were twins in their mother's womb; increased when Jacob talked Esau out of his birthright, the *b'chorah*; and threatened to become mortal combat when Jacob deceived their father Isaac to gain the blessing, the *b'rachah*. And Rebekah, who plays no small part in the deception, speaks her last words to Jacob:

Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban. Stay with him for a while, until your brother's fury

subsides...and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will fetch you from there. Let me not lose you both in one day!
—Page 159; Gen 27:42–45

Last words. Words of desperation; words of conflict; words that promise a reunion that is never to be fulfilled. As with my grandfather and his mother, events intervene; a mother dies; how and where and when, we do not know.

Isaac too has spoken words of conflict. In his blessing to Jacob—the blessing intended for Esau—he says:

Let peoples serve you,
And nations bow to you;
Be master over your brothers,
And let your mother's sons bow to you.
Cursed be they who curse you,
Blessed they who bless you.

—Page 157; Gen 27:28–29

But after hearing Rebekah's bitter words, after realizing that Jacob must go away, Isaac at last gives Jacob a different sort of blessing:

Go to Paddan-aram...and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban... May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham.
—Page 160; Gen 28:1–4

Last words, but not at all words of desperation. Words of promise and of hope. Like my great-grandfather, Isaac is saying, *Zei a Yid*. Be a Jew, and be a father of the Jewish people. Take the *b'chorah*, the birthright, and inherit the land God gave to Abraham. Take the *b'rachah*, the blessing that God gave to Abraham.

What do these last words tell us about Isaac? We know that Isaac is old and has lost his sight, but in these last words he has vision beyond mere sight, a vision of the future.

Really? When did Isaac ever have true vision before?

As a boy, when Abraham takes him to a certain place in the land of Moriah, Isaac says,

Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?

—Page 119; Gen 22:7

Isaac sees what is in front of him clearly enough, but does he know what it means? Does he suspect? Does he go willingly to be slaughtered as God commanded? If so, how can we understand the blessing that God gives to Isaac:

I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands...inasmuch as *Abraham* obeyed Me and kept my charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.
—Page 150; Gen 26:4–5

In another era Isaac might have said, What am I, chopped liver? Didn't I obey God as much as my father did? Don't I too deserve some of the credit?

No, it seems that Isaac never sees much beyond the present moment, and that is precisely why Abraham's servant chooses a wife for Isaac who has the gift of foresight. When he asks Rebekah for a drink of water, she knows immediately that men and camels need water and food and a place to sleep, and she provides what they need.

When Laban wheedles the servant to stay a little longer, it is Rebekah who says, Let's go. When they get to where Isaac is staying, Isaac looks up and sees...*camels coming*. But Rebekah look up and sees...*Isaac*. When Rebekah feels a struggle inside her womb, she knows it's more than just twins moving inside her, and with God's help she realizes that the future of nations is at stake.

It is no surprise, when the twins grow up, that Isaac favors Esau. Like his father, Esau lives in the moment; he gladly takes a meal today in exchange for the *b'chorah*—the inheritance of the land which rightfully belong to him and to his descendents. And like Esau, Isaac takes a meal in exchange for the *b'rachah*, the blessing which was meant for future generations and not for a son who has no regard for the future.

It is no surprise that Rebekah favors Jacob, who has enough foresight to worry what might happen if Rebekah's deceptive plan backfires and Isaac curses him instead of blessing him. And Rebekah has the foresight to know that she must be willing to take the curse upon herself; and she is cursed: she will never see her favorite son again.

In Rebekah's last words, foresight fails her. She thinks the quarrel between Esau and Jacob will subside and Jacob will come home to her. But that is not to be.

Instead, it is Isaac whose last words foresee the future of the Jewish people. "May El Shaddai bless you...and grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring..."

Zei a Yid.

Shabbat Shalom