



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Toldot 5768

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In this week's *parshah*, *Toldot*, Jacob, our wily ancestor, swindles his brother Esau out of both his birthright and his blessing.¹ Jacob (later known as Israel), perhaps even more than Abraham or Isaac, is the father of the Jewish people—we are, after all, called the children of Israel. Yet this swindle hardly seems an auspicious beginning for the Jewish people—it is an incident perhaps better left unmentioned than proudly displayed in the family album. There is, however, a radical message here, a message essential to what it means to be a Jew. For what exactly is Jacob's crime?

Jacob lives in a society that arbitrarily assigns material and spiritual priority to the firstborn son. In the case of Esau, this is a son who was born with his brother Jacob hanging by his heel. What Jacob, like those after and before him, demonstrates is that the established order and the assumed hierarchies are neither inviolable nor necessary. Indeed, the privilege of the first born is a widespread assumption in the Bible. Yet this privilege is repeatedly subverted. It is Isaac, the second-born, not Ishmael the first, who receives his father's inheritance. It is Judah and Joseph, rather than the first-born Reuben or second-born Simeon, who take over the mantle of leadership when Jacob ages. When Jacob blesses Joseph's sons on his deathbed, he purposefully puts his right hand on Ephraim, the younger, indicating his preeminence, despite Joseph's objections.²

The leaders of the Jewish people also arise from unlikely corners. Moses, the greatest prophet, God's mouthpiece, has a speech impediment. Saul, the first King of Israel, is, by his own admission, "from the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my clan is the least of all the clans of the tribe..."³ And David, a boy untrained in military combat, defeats the Philistine champion Goliath.

Nor is this revolution against the established order confined to family dynamics or individual leaders. The very birth of the Jewish people in the exodus from Egypt is a profound upending of Egyptian hierarchy. The plagues, in particular, systematically undermine that hierarchy and order, turning the forces of nature and the Egyptian gods, such as the Nile, against the Egyptians. Indeed the moral meaning of the notion of miracle here is that what seems natural and inevitable, what seems unalterable, is in fact not so. The world is not constrained to be what we assume it is. Slaves can become a nation of priests privileged to receive the revelation of the divine. Similarly, the audacity to tell our history as originating in slavery rather than in great kings and heroes, as was the ancient norm, is an eternal affirmation of this potential for reversal and its ever present possibility.⁴

What it means to be part of the nation of Israel, then, is to affirm and cultivate the awareness of the possibility of change. It is the consciousness that no matter how entrenched or seemingly natural the present structure, it too is open to transformation. The Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav tells us that this is what it means to be a

¹ Bereshit 25:27-34, Bereshit 27

² Bereshit 48:13-20

³ | Shmuel 9:21

⁴ Herein lies Nietzsche's misunderstanding of the slave origins of the Jewish people. Such origins display not a slave mentality but a revolutionary mentality.

Hebrew. For a Hebrew, an *ivri*, as the word in Hebrew suggests, is one who crosses over (*ovr*) boundaries and obstacles, and in particular the obstacle of meaninglessness and despair.⁵

One of the great challenges of social action is that the difficulties we face often seem insurmountable. Entrenched structures are made to seem natural. Indeed, one of the most pernicious strategies of systems of oppression is their own seeming inevitability. Yet they are not inevitable. Who among us would have imagined the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites? Yet from small chinks, a raging torrent of transformation was released. Similarly, when my parents immigrated to the U.S. from South Africa, fleeing apartheid, change did not seem imminent. In my own lifetime I have seen the apartheid regime replaced by a democratically elected government.

So too, the obstacles that currently seem insurmountable may not be. For the past four years, the government of Sudan with its proxy militia, the *Janjaweed*, has been systematically terrorizing and murdering the population of Darfur, its own citizens. Despite financial and political pressure the genocide has not been stopped. Yet we must not despair. Rather, our sacred texts tell us that reversals are possible, that tyranny can be overcome. Our pressure, financial support, humanitarian aid and advocacy can still make a difference, both to the lives of individual refugees and to the crisis as a whole. As the psalm tells us, “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”⁶ We must reinvigorate and rededicate ourselves to the possibility of transformation, to enabling, once more, slaves to go free and the powerless to become great. For as our ancestors teach us, the younger son and the enslaved people need not stay downtrodden forever – they too can become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.



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⁵ Likutei Moharhan I64b

⁶ Tehillim I 18:22

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