



TOLDOT

MAKE IT YOURS

Finding Your Voice Inside the Tradition

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Toldot

Isaac and Rebecca endure twenty childless years until their prayers are answered and Rebecca conceives. She experiences a difficult pregnancy as the “children struggle inside her”; G-d tells her that “there are two nations in your womb,” and that the younger will prevail over the elder.

Esau emerges first; Jacob is born clutching Esau’s heel. Esau grows up to be “a cunning hunter, a man of the field”; Jacob is “a wholesome man,” a dweller in the tents of learning. Isaac favors Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning exhausted and hungry from the hunt one day, Esau sells his birthright (his rights as the firstborn) to Jacob for a pot of red lentil stew.

In Gerar, in the land of the Philistines, Isaac presents Rebecca as his sister out of fear that he will be killed by someone coveting her beauty. He farms the land, reopens the wells dug by his father, Abraham, and digs a series of his own wells. Over the first two there is strife with the Philistines, but the waters of the new wells are enjoyed in tranquility.

Esau marries two Hittite women. Isaac grows old and blind and expresses his desire to bless Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father’s favorite food, Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father.

Jacob receives his father’s blessings for “the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land” and mastery over his brother. When Esau returns and the deception is revealed, all Isaac can do for his weeping son is predict that he will live by his sword, and that when Jacob falters, the younger brother will forfeit his supremacy over the elder.

Jacob leaves home for Haran to flee Esau’s wrath and to find a wife in the family of his mother’s brother, Laban. Esau marries a third wife—Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Can you truly be yourself while following a path set by others?

Where do individuality and tradition meet—or clash—in your own Jewish life?





From a young age Jacob takes the studious path and Esau chooses a wild and wayward one.

TEXT 1

Genesis 25:27-28

כז. וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים, וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדַע צֵיד אִישׁ
שָׂדֵה, וַיֵּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים.

כח. וַיֶּאֱהַב יַצְחָק אֶת עֵשָׂו כִּי צֵיד בְּפִיו, וְרַבָּקָה אֹהֶבֶת
אֶת יַעֲקֹב.

27. The lads grew up. Esau became a man who understood hunting, a man of the field. Jacob was a wholesome man, living in tents.

28. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his trappings, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

QUESTION

Why would Isaac favor Esau, the wild hunter, over the pious and studious Jacob?

TEXT 2

Rashi, ad loc.

"יִדַע צֵיד". לְצוּד וּלְרֵמוֹת אֶת אָבִיו בְּפִיו,
וְשׂוֹאֲלוֹ: אָבִי, הֲאֵיךְ מְעַשְׂרִין אֶת הַמֶּלַח וְאֶת
הַתְּבֹן? כִּסְבוּר אָבִיו שֶׁהוּא מְדַקְדֵק בְּמִצְוֹת.

"Who understood hunting": [Esau knew how] to "trap"
and deceive his father with his mouth and ask him,
"Father, how do we give maaser from salt and straw?"
His father thereby thought that he was scrupulous in
his mitzvah observance.

ANSWER

Esau asked seemingly pious questions to present himself as religiously sincere, which influenced Isaac's desire to bless him before his death.

TEXT 3

Genesis 27:1-4

א. וַיְהִי כִּי זָקַן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ עֵינָיו
מִרְאָתוֹ, וַיִּקְרָא אֶת עֵשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל,
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
הֲנִי.

ב. וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא זָקַנְתִּי, לֹא
יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי.

ג. וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא כְלִיךָ תְּלִיךָ
וְקִשְׁתְּךָ, וְצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה וְצוּדָה לִי
צִיד.

ד. וַעֲשֵׂה לִי מִטַּעַמִּים כְּאִשֶּׁר
אֲהַבְתִּי וְהֵבִיֵאָה לִי וְאֶכְלָה, בְּעֵבֹר
תְּבַרְכֶּךָ בְּפִשִׁי בְּטָרַם אָמוּת.

1. And when Isaac grew old, his eyesight faded, and he could not see. He called Esau, his elder son, and said to him, "My son." Esau said to him, "Here I am."

2. Isaac said, "Behold, if you please, I am old. I do not know the day of my death.

3. "Now, therefore, please take your equipment, your sword and your bow, and go out to the field and trap [deer] for me.

4. "Make it into a tasty dish for me, the way I like it, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul will bless you before I die."

With the help of his mother, Jacob ended up tricking his father into giving him the blessings.



TEXT 4

*Rabbi Moshe
Teitelbaum, Yismach
Moshe, Toldot #11*

יש לדקדק במקראי קדש אלו טובא. איך היה עשו כל כך חכם להרע לרמאות את אביו החכם האמיתי? בשלמא אם היה יושב אוהל ובקרבו ישים ארבו, היה מקום לטעות. אבל כיון שהיה איש שדה נגלה לעין כל, אם כן באיזה נכלים וערמימיות רימה את אביו? . . .

וגם הדרש שהיה צד אותו ומרמהו בדבריו, גם כן תמוה, באיזה ענין הטעה אותו?

There is much to examine in these verses. How was Esau so connivingly wise as to deceive his saintly father? If he was someone who openly sat in tents and engaged in hunting secretly, there would have been room for error. But considering that he was a man of the field, exposed to all, then with what schemes and cunning did he deceive his father? . . .

Also the Midrash, which says that he would trap and deceive him with his words, is likewise puzzling: How exactly did he mislead him?

TEXT 5

*Rabbi Shmuel
Borenstein of
Sochatchov, Shem
MiShmuel, Toldot
5674*

יש להבין שכנראה לא רצה לברך כלל את יעקב . . .
ולמה? וכי לא היה יודע שיעקב איש תם יושב אוהלים?
ואף שחשב את עשו לצדיק כי ציד בפיו, מכל מקום לא
מצינו שחשב על יעקב להיפוך!

We must understand: From the story, it seems that Isaac didn't want to bless Jacob at all. . . . Why? Was he unaware that Jacob was a "wholesome man, living in tents?"

Even if he thought Esau was righteous "because he deceived his father with his mouth," we still don't find that he thought the opposite of Jacob!

QUESTIONS

1. How could Isaac, a spiritual giant, be so easily fooled by Esau?
2. What was Esau trying to accomplish with his esoteric question about salt and straw?
3. Why didn't Isaac bless both sons?



Salt and straw are both exempt from the *mitzvah* of *maaser*.

TEXT 6

*Rabbi Eliyahu
Mizrachi, Genesis
25:27*

ונקט תבן ומלח מכל שאר דברים, משום דאינן חייבין
במעשר לא מדאורייתא ולא מדרבנן, מה שאין כן ירקות
דאף על גב דמדאורייתא אינן חייבין במעשר, כדכתיב:
"מעשר תבואתך" — יצאו ירקות שאינן בכלל תבואה —
מכל מקום, מדרבנן מיהא מחייבי.

He chose straw and salt over all other items because they are exempt from maaser, both biblically and rabbinically. This stands in contrast to other items, like vegetables, which, though exempt biblically from maaser, are nevertheless obligated rabbinically. This biblical exemption is derived from the verse, "a tenth of your grain" (Deuteronomy 14:23)—excluding vegetables that aren't grain.

TEXT 7

*Rabbi David Pardo,
Maskil LeDavid,
Genesis 25:27*

מה זו שאלה היאך מעשרין, כמו מעשרין כל שאר הדברים?
ותו . . . הרי בשאלתו זאת היה מורה שהוא עם הארץ, ושאינו
יודע הדין דתבן פטור ממעשר! ואין זו ערמה — דאדרבא,
יאמר אביו שאינו נותן לבו לשמוע בלימודים, דאם לא כן הוה
יודע מה חייב ומה פטור!

What kind of question is it to ask, “How does one tithe___?” as if it’s different from how one tithes anything else?

Moreover . . . with this question, he was showing himself to be an ignoramus who doesn’t know the law: that straw is exempt from tithing! This isn’t cunning at all. On the contrary, his father would say he doesn’t pay attention in his studies, for if he did, he would know what’s obligated and what’s exempt!

In a pre-Sinai world, mitzvot were observed voluntarily and without the halachic precision that came later. In that context, it was possible to tithe anything.



TEXT 8

Genesis 14:20

וּבְרוּךְ אֱ-לֹהֵי יְיָ מִגֵּן צַרִּיךָ
בְּיַדְךָ, וַיִּתֶן לּוֹ מֵעֵשֶׂר מְכֹל.

[Malchizedek said:] “And blessed be the Most High Almighty, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” And [Abraham] gave him a tenth of everything.

SALT



Salt alone is small, but it enhances every dish it's added to.

STRAW



Straw alone is light, but a small amount strengthens bricks.

TEXT 9

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 25, p. 119*

דער צד השווה פון מלח און תבן (אין זייער
אנדערשקייט לגבי אנדערע זאכן) איז, וואס פאר זיך
אליין האבן זיי ניט קיין (גרויסע) חשיבות, אבער
בשעת מען מישט זיי צוזאמען מיט אנדערע זאכן,
האט מען פון זיי א תועלת וואס איז שלא בערך מער
ווי זייער תועלת בפני עצמם.

ווי מען זעט במוחש, אז א קליין ביסל מלח — וואס
זיין כמות פאר זיך האט זייער ווייניק שווה כסף
וחשיבות — גיט אריין טעם אין א תבשיל ומאכל,
ומשבחם א שבה וועלכער איז א סך מער און
גרעסער פונעם קורטוב מלח; און ניט נאר א הוספת
טעם, נאר באופן אז אן דעם מלח פעלט בכללות
אכילת המאכל . . .

ועל דרך זה תבן: מצד עצמו (אלס מאכל בהמה אדער
להסקה בתנור וכיוצא בזה) האט תבן גאר ווייניק
שוה כסף וחשיבות, בשעת אבער מען נוצט עס
לעשיית לבנים לבנין וכו' איז זיין שוויות א סך מער.

The common denominator between salt and straw (despite their differences) is that, on their own, they have no (significant) value. But when mixed with other things, they bring a benefit far beyond what they offer individually.

This can be plainly observed: A small amount of salt, which on its own has minimal monetary value or importance, adds flavor to a dish or food in a way that greatly enhances it, far beyond the actual quantity of salt itself. Not only does it add taste but without it, the food may be lacking altogether.

The same applies to straw: In and of itself—whether as animal fodder or as fuel for an oven, etc.—it has very little monetary value or significance. But when it is used to make bricks for construction, its value is greatly increased.



TEXT 9

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 25, p. 119*

און דאס איז געווען די שאלה פון עשו: ביי דעם מעשר בנדון דידן . . . איז לכאורה מקום לומר, אז מען רעכנט דעם מעשר התבן והמלח ניט לפי המדה משקל או מנין בפני עצמו ובהווה — ווי מעשר בהמה, נאר לויט דער שוויות פון די זאכן ווען ער וועט זיי נוצן בפועל.

און וויבאלד אזוי, ווערט די שאלה ביי מלח ותבן — ווי רעכנט מען זייער שוויות: צי לויט זייער ווערט פאר זיך יעצט, אדער לויט זייער שוויות בעת מ'נוצט זיי אלס תערובת ונותן טעם כו'?

This was Esau's question in this unique case: . . . there is room to say that the salt and straw tithe should not be measured by standard unit, weight, or count (like tithing animals), but rather by the value those items will have when actually used.

If that's so, then the question regarding salt and straw becomes: How does one calculate their worth? According to their current stand-alone value? Or according to the benefit they will produce when used in combination: as flavoring, as a mixture, etc.?

ANSWER 1

Esau's question was whether *maaser* should be measured by an item's low intrinsic value or its greater impact when used. It was a nuanced halachic question, and it was enough to convince Isaac of Esau's potential sincerity and depth.



Stories in the Torah are manifestations of profound spiritual dynamics.

TEXT 10

*Rabbi Shneur
Zalman of Liadi,
Torah Or, Vayishlach
24a*

הנה ידוע שיעקב שרשו הוא מבחינת שם מ"ה דעולם התקון, ושרשו של עשו הוא מבחינת עולם התהו. והאורות דתהו הם גדולים מאד ולא יכלו להתלבש בתוך הכלים, ונסתלקו מהכלים. והן בחינת מקיפים, והכלים נשברו ונפלו למטה. לכן היה עשו שלמטה רשע.

אבל מצד שרש שרשו במקיפים דתהו, הרי האורות דתהו הם למעלה מהאורות דתקון.

According to kabbalah, Jacob is rooted in the spiritual world of tikun (discipline), whereas Esau was rooted in the spiritual world of tohu (chaos). The lights of tohu are very powerful, but they could not be contained. As a result, the lights withdrew, leaving the containers to shatter and fall below. This is why Esau, as he manifested in this world, became a wicked person.

However, when considering the ultimate root of Esau in the bright lights of tohu, these lights are actually loftier than the lights of tikun.

Esau's soul came from
the chaotic realm of
Tohu—intense Divine
light without the vessels
to contain it.



ANSWER 2

Esau's question about salt and straw wasn't just halachic; it was existential. He was asking, "Should I be seen for what I am now or for what I could become?" He was pleading to be judged by his potential, not his present state.

TEXT 11

*Rabbi Levi Yitzchak
of Berditchev,
Kedushat Levi,
Genesis, 25:28*

וזהו "ויאהב יצחק את עשו", כי בשורש עשו היה
נצוצות אשר ניצודו שם, דהיינו נשמת שמעיה
ואבטליון ונשמת רבי מאיר, וכן כמה נצוצות עד
ימות המשיח.

This is the deeper meaning of the verse, "Isaac loved Esau." For in Esau's supernal source, there were sparks [of holiness] that had been trapped there—namely, the souls of Shemayah and Avtalyon, the soul of Rabbi Meir, and several other sparks [of holiness] destined not to be revealed until the days of the Messiah.

ANSWER 3

Isaac saw Esau as someone with untapped, explosive potential who needed encouragement to realize it. The blessing was meant to awaken that greatness. Jacob, already on a strong spiritual path, didn't need that extra push.



Esau's potential remained unfulfilled due to a lack of self-mastery, while Jacob embodied the balance of innovation and tradition.

FIRST APPROACH: ABRAHAM

- Abraham symbolized **innovation**, breaking tradition to introduce monotheism with boldness and vision.
- Risk: instability



SECOND APPROACH: ISAAC

- Isaac symbolized **stability**, preserving Abraham's revolution through structure and continuity.
- Risk: Monotony



TEXT 12A

Rashi, Genesis 25:25

"ויקראו שמו עשו". הכל קראו לו כן,
לפי שהיה נעשה ונגמר בשערו כבן
שנים הרבה.

"And they called his name Esau (עשו)":
Everyone called him this as he was born already
"made" (עשה), full of hair beyond his years.

TEXT 12B

Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, Bereshis, ad loc.

שמו עשו: אדם עשוי ונגמר שהיה
בעל שער.

“... his name Esau (עשו)”: A complete, made (עשוי) man, full of hair.

Esau was born *complete*, with both models before him. The thrill of revolution and the weight of responsibility.





Like Esau, we're caught between past revolutions and present stability, struggling to find our unique purpose in a world that feels already built.

THIRD APPROACH: JACOB

- Jacob symbolized **integration**, blending tradition and innovation by preserving form while infusing it with personal meaning.
- Strength: Authenticity within structure creates true originality.



Jewish tradition isn't a barrier to individuality, it's a framework for it. While Esau failed to find his place, Jacob showed that we can make tradition our own by bringing our personal touch to mitzvot.



KEY POINTS

1. Esau represented himself as righteous with quite a rudimentary Halachic question, and somehow his father fell for it.
2. His question actually required an advanced understanding of the laws of maaser.
3. Esau possessed an intense and powerful soul, but he tragically couldn't express it positively. Isaac wanted to draw that out by blessing him.
4. Abraham was a pioneer. He had the thrill of introducing monotheism to the world. Isaac's contribution was to uphold and stabilize, ensuring that Abraham's innovation endured. Esau struggled in this world. He was bursting with energy and couldn't conform to the established systems of before.
5. Jacob's greatness lay in his ability to blend Abraham's and Isaac's paths together, remaining true to tradition while infusing it with personal depth. His path is a teaching guide for us all.

