

# **The Biblical Narrative: Whose Story are we telling?**

Parshat Toldot 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

An orthodox rabbi once told me that he never prepared his Shabbas sermon before he had a cup of coffee on Saturday morning. “How can I know what I’m going to talk about,” he said, “Before I’ve read the daily paper?” As I sat down yesterday to prepare for Shabbat, I realized that it would be impossible to prepare a sermon for this week. A major crisis was unfolding in Mumbai, the fate of the Chabad center was still unknown and there were many unanswered questions. We concluded our Minyan yesterday with a prayer for the Holtzbergs, the other hostages and the victims of terror. What more could we do?

So I’m not going to deliver a sermon this morning. What I’d like to do is share some thoughts about our weekly Torah portion and then ask some questions. I’d like to focus on the larger picture that our *parshah* presents and ask what it means for how we see the world and the events unfolding around us. Rather than focus on the details of *Parshat Toldot*, I’d like to look at the process and the purpose of telling stories such as the ones we find in this week’s Parshah.

We begin with our Torah portion: the birth of twins, the unfolding conflict between them, parental favoritism and an act of deceit that tears a family apart. When Rebecca faces a difficult pregnancy, she learns that she is not caring twins but two nations who are destined to live in conflict. Imagine living with such a revelation. What would you do with this information? Who would you tell? Rebecca’s oracle is never mentioned again but it underlies everything that takes place in the next several chapters.

The Torah portion goes on to deal with more mundane matters. The boys grow up. Esau is an earthy, physical man; he’s something of a jock. Jacob is a homebody who would rather hang out in the kitchen than go hunting. But destiny is decided over a bowl of soup. You know the story: Esau, famished from the hunt, comes home and trades his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup.

What an odd story this is! It is hardly what we think of as history. And it’s certainly not very complimentary either of Esau who is depicted as a boor or Jacob who is a con artist. The story presents us with a snap shot. It deals with small details in the life of a family. Why is it necessary to know this – and to retell this story year after year?

I’d like to suggest something that might surprise you: Genesis is not history, at least not in the sense that we think of recorded history. From the perspective of the Bible these stories are significant not because they happened but because they are a reflection of a later historical reality. Esau and Jacob weren’t simply brothers but nations that were living in conflict at that very moment. Their story helped our ancestors understand their own reality. Similarly, Isaac and Ishmael were great nations rather than the descendants of Abraham. Joseph and his brothers were the twelve tribes that made up the Israelite confederation. So we’re not really telling the stories of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob or Ishmael or Esau. These stories only make sense when we think of them as the stories that people told to understand their relations with their neighbors and the political realities of their day.

The book of Genesis, then, is entirely political in nature. And that's what makes this book so extraordinary. They capture something of the contemporary realities in ancient Israel. History was not made up of big national events such as wars or the rise of empires. History is present in a bowl of soup, in a son's home made dinner or in a coat of many colors.

But if these stories never happened or they simply reflect later political realities, why tell them? Why is this so important for us today? Story telling was the means by which our ancestors made sense of their lives and found God in their experience. The process through which our ancestors wrestled with their lives can teach us something about how we see our world today.

First these stories suggest that all history is personal. History doesn't happen to other people or on the front page of the paper – but right here at home. It is in a bowl of soup, in the choices we make, and how we live.

Second, the great events of the day don't involve strangers or nations but individuals and family. Edom, Israel's arch enemy, is our brother. Ishmael is not a stranger but a cousin. Every story of conflict and sorrow is really a story about sibling rivalry. There is no 'us and them' but an awareness that we all come from the same place. Our enemies are not strangers but our cousins, our brothers and sisters. Think about it – the bible tells the same story over and over again; it is a story of rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers. It is written into our DNA. Every political intrigue comes down to this conflict between brothers and sisters. It is impossible to demonize Esau and Ishmael when you read the Bible in this way. They are not great big groups of people and strangers – but people we know and recognize, people we hurt and who hurt us. We cannot ignore our errors, our shame, and our foolishness.

We discover this by telling stories rather than recording history. Stories help us to understand who we are and where we are going. And the most personal stories we tell are not just about family but about nations and even about our very humanity.

So what can we learn from a bowl of soup? What does this story teach us about Jacob and Esau? Imagine living with the Edomites – the descendents of Esau – as your next door neighbor and then telling a story which depicts him not only sympathetically but as a victim. How might this affect your behavior and attitudes?

And what stories do we tell today? What is our narrative? And what stories do we tell about our neighbors? If we learn anything from the bible it is that we cannot demonize the other because we are really connected in mysterious ways.

Do you think that there are underlying themes in the stories in Genesis? And can all conflicts be reduced to a story of sibling rivalry? Does it really matter whether the stories we tell actually happened? And is it possible that other people might have different narratives – that they tell different stories – that are just as valid as the stories we tell, that might influence their attitudes and behaviors.

So what can we find in a bowl of soup? What can we learn from Genesis about our world today?

Shabbat Shalom