

Parashat Toldot 5774 – Esav's Plea

I need you to hear me cry. Just give me fifteen minutes of your time, please. You see me as boorish, as evil, but that's just not me. Let me talk... Thank you, thank you.

I'll tell you about me. I'm the oldest, and I grew up believing that I would succeed my dad as leader of the family. That's the tradition in our clan; the oldest takes over.

I took my role as first born seriously. I put food on our table. And I studied my dad, Isaac. I loved him, I did everything for him.

And he reciprocated. I needed him. In my dad's mind, I was special. He valued me for who I was -- hunter, breadwinner, man of the field. He was all I had. My mom Rebecca never understood me as I was. She couldn't deal with the fact that I wasn't a scholar, like my brother, Jacob.

Jacob rarely took me seriously, and he stole from me the things that were dearest to me -- my dad's devotion, my birthright, my inheritance. How could he? You know the stories, but my side is never heard.

Jake makes some soup, and doesn't even offer me a bowl. I come home starved, having hunted for our family food, and he remains, as ever, ungrateful. Sure, I made a stupid decision, but why did I have to be manipulated in such a cruel way by my own brother?

And the blessing, the *beracha*. Dad sent me out for some of his favorite delicacies, a festive meal to celebrate the blessing. I would rise above Jacob's jealousy and assume what was rightfully mine -- leadership and inheritance. As I chased after our *seuda*, I relished this climactic, intimate moment with dad. Do you understand?

I can never forget that moment. Dad was so distant, so loveless -- so different from how he normally was. What happened to him? How could he possibly not discern Jacob and mom's trickery? Did he really not know me well enough that he couldn't tell me apart from Jacob?

I feel the emptiness of that moment so potently right now, that sense of complete abandonment and powerlessness. I cried, yelled, cried some more, and no one listened. I wanted affirmation from someone, some bit of consolation.

I had to plead with my dad three or four times to give me even a lesser blessing. I wanted something, something, anything to show that he loved me. In retrospect, I should have left at the moment, holding my head high.

Abandoned, humiliated, with no one to hear my cry -- it was time to leave that place, and its misery.

I went on, I built up an empire in Seir. I had many deputies, yet I trusted no one. I never let anyone have too much power. I had the power and money, yet was still miserable. Followers in the thousands, wives and kids, yet I still felt that no one heard my voice. There was no real intimacy in my life. No real security.

I didn't come back to Canaan to "get" Jacob. I came back to see my family, to repair the relationships which had been the source of this misery, this distrust. It took me 20 years to get to that point. 20 years!

I saw my dad Isaac first, at least in a dream. En route to Canaan, I dreamt about the reunion with him. Was he happy when I announced my presence! He raised himself out of bed and threw his arms out, grasping for me, unable to find me. I directed his hand into mine.

I opened his eyes that day, and he saw the past clearly. He told me of his

shame and regret for what was past, and shared with me the pain of our separation. I told him of my burden, tears flowed down his face. I woke up thinking, had dad really been blind to what was going on in our house? I couldn't help but think that. Still, dad had taken responsibility, and I felt so much better.

I was eager to confirm my dream, and sped toward dad's house. Just so happened that then I found out the news of Jacob's return from the land of Haran. Messengers showed up. I couldn't believe it. Again! Jacob was born grabbing onto my heel, and he never stopped.

My anger exploded just like it did that day two decades ago. I lost it. I surrounded myself with my best 400 troops, and prepared to take revenge on Jacob and his camp.

Jacob sent another group of messengers to me, and this changed my perspective. These messengers, although few, seemed in my eyes like thousands. It was as if God was sending me a message telling me it was futile to seek Jacob's destruction. What would it accomplish? His death, my death, the end of our dad's entire legacy -- and giving up my future.

I looked anew at my troops, and saw an army of reconciliation, not destruction. The troops regarded me as their leader -- whatever I did they would follow. I began to see myself as their leader. What model would I set?

Justice still told me to fight, but reason and instinct told me to lay down my sword and approach my brother as a peacemaking, proud and forgiving man. Jacob's many gifts would not appease me. Only his good faith and regret would. That is all I would accept.

I went forward toward Jacob because I wanted to, and because I had little choice but to. It became clear to me that that God had tied our fates

together. I needed Jacob and he needed me. What did I need from him? The source of my past misery, what could I possibly need from him?

It became clear to me when we met. I saw him, and the memories flooded my mind. New ones, that I had never before remembered. Many bad ones, but some good ones too. Like the times our grandfather Abraham propped us up on his lap and told tales of his travels from the old country.... Only through my brother Jacob could I really deal with my past and move forward. I needed him to hear me, to empathize with me, to validate my experiences.

Thankfully, he came through. It really must have been difficult for him, looking in retrospect. He took the first step, bowing low several times, to the ground, in front of me. I ran toward him, hugged him, kissed him, hoping for genuineness and sincerity in his reaction. He wept, and then I wept. He kept weeping.

The burden slowly lifted from my shoulders. Finally, I had what I had wanted all these years. My brother acknowledged me, he held me, he showed me love, and he showed me regret. My anger subsided, to the point where I asked about his life -- his wife, his children. I felt emotions -- support, love, brotherhood -- long dormant. I felt more truly human than I have ever felt in my entire life.

We walked together to my father, who was nearing the end of his days. The time on that walk was a blessing, the truest one I have ever been graced with. For the first part of the walk, Jacob barely spoke a word. He just listened intently, his face welling up with tears.

When we arrived at dad's, something happened. Jacob stopped at the threshold of the tent and let me approach our father first.

Dad then confirmed my dream. He greeted me with tears of regret and a listening ear. The three of us were there together - the blesser, the blessed, and the deprived. Yet I no longer felt deprived. God gave me a greater blessing -- the blessing of reconciliation, the blessing of new self-knowledge and confidence, and the blessing to move forward happily with the rest of my life. I truly feel blessed.

That's why it hurt so much to come back again to Canaan, this time to bury my dad. If it wasn't enough sadness to be burying my father! Everyone still gives me nasty looks on the sidewalk. The shopkeepers, the guys playing backgammon, passersby -- everyone.

I made peace with my past and the people most important to me. I took the hard steps to self-awareness and reconciliation. I have good values and lead an honorable life. I'm ready to embrace the future. Can't you and your fellows see that? Does that model threaten you too much? Can't you learn from it? Or is there another reason you keep on demonizing me?

Reconciling with my family was hard. It's the toughest challenge I ever faced. So much pain, and the tears. But it was worth it. You've heard my cry. I'm ready to hear from you.