

Parshat Toledot: Transgender Day of Remembrance

By Kadin Henningsen

Parshat Toledot. It's one of Torah's most famous, and possibly one of Torah's most difficult.

So. The story. We ALL know it. Here are the cold hard facts:

- Rebecca has a difficult pregnancy.
- Esau and Jacob are born – in that order.
- Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils.
- Isaac is old and blind and ready to hand over the first blessing.
- Isaac tells Esau to go hunt and prepare him a meal so Esau can receive the first blessing.
- Rebecca hears this and wants Jacob to get the first blessing.
- Rebecca convinces Jacob to deliver the meal to Isaac, thus receiving the first blessing.
- Jacob does what he is told, deceives his father, and receives the first blessing.
- Isaac realizes it's Jacob – or at least not Esau.
- Esau comes back and is enraged at having lost the first blessing.
- Jacob, with the urging of his parents, flees the rage of Esau.

Now, there is a lot of stuff that happens in between and far more detail about how it all plays out, but I think you get the big picture.

It seems the most difficult part of this narrative to grapple with is Jacob's deception. How culpable is Jacob in this? At the beginning we are informed, "And the elder shall serve the younger." So, of course we're inclined to think that it HAS to play out this way. We also know that it is Jacob's mother, Rebecca who devises the plan of deception. Of course! MOTHERS!

In order to understand more clearly how this narrative plays out it might be useful to look at Jacob more closely. Who is Jacob? What do we know about him? And what does he tell us about himself? Our understanding of Jacob in this *parshah* is always through an opposition to Esau. As twins, their identities are linked. We are always told who Jacob is as an opposite of Esau.

The lads grew up and ESAU became one who knows trapping, a man of the field; but Jacob was a wholesome man, abiding in tents." (Genesis 25:27)

We also get more definition of Esau through the love of Isaac: "Isaac loved Esau for game was in his mouth." But no further exploration of Jacob is revealed in Rebecca's love for him: "but Rebecca loved Jacob." (Genesis 25:28)



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When Rebecca tells Jacob to take the meal to his father, Jacob's response is fear that his father will perceive him as a deceiver. But there is more to it. It's not that he is afraid that Isaac will see that it is Jacob, but that he will see that it IS NOT Esau. Again, Jacob offers insight about himself by defining himself in opposition to his brother Esau: "But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am a smooth-skinned man. Perhaps my father will feel me and I shall be as a mocker in his eyes." Throughout this *parshah* we get a very clear image of who Esau is. Jacob remains unclear. And perhaps this is the problem. Perhaps Jacob, by not being SELF defined, becomes malleable in his identity. He doesn't take a stand on who he is. He knows who he is not – he is NOT Esau. But because he is not solid in his OWN self image this leaves him open to letting others define him and put him in situations he is not completely comfortable with. Because he does not recognize himself, others are unable to recognize him. Thus, his mother is able to convince him to "play" the role of Esau. This by no means excuses Jacob from his culpability within this situation, but it does shed some light on a driving force behind it.

And this is how we all start to move through the world. We start by saying "I am not that." Whatever that is. Gays and lesbians are often defined as "not straight." Transgender people are far too often defined "neither men nor women." Jews are sometimes defined as "not Christian." It's easy. It's easy to define others by saying what they are not rather than what they are. And it's easy to define yourself by saying what you are not. But when you say what you are not you never say what you ARE. And when you never say what you are you're unable to gain a clear sense of self. So how do you say what you are? How do you KNOW who/what you are as opposed to who/what you are not?

There is in this *parshah* a narrative that sheds light on how to do this. In between the story of Esau and Jacob's birth and the story of Jacob's deception is a story about digging some wells.

All the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up, and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us for you have become much mightier than we!' So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and dwelled there. And Isaac dug anew the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father and the Philistines had stopped them up after Abraham's death; and he called them by the same names that his father had called them.

Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of fresh water. The herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen saying, 'The water is ours, ' so he called the name of that well Edek because they involved themselves with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that also; so he called its name Sitnah. He relocated from there and dug another well; they did not quarrel over it, so he called its name Rehoboth, and said, 'For now Adonai has granted us ample space, and we can be fruitful in the land.'



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He went on from there to Beer-Shiba. Adonai appeared to him that night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; Fear not, for I am with you; I will bless you and increase your offspring because of Abraham my servant.' He built an altar there, invoked Adonai by Name, and there he pitched his tent; there Isaac's servants dug a well. (Genesis 26:15-33)

So what can we glean from this narrative? The word *be'er* – "well", is repeated through out this narrative. Taking a closer look at this word, the root *Bet – Aleph – Resh* means to expound, explain, elucidate, to interpret. Through the act digging of wells we have a clear metaphor for understanding ourselves.

Abraham dug wells and while he remained alive, the wells remained flowing with water. Throughout Torah we have a strong sense of who Abraham is. Abraham has a strong sense of who he is. These wells of living water remain open because Abraham has dug his own internal wells, he has expounded, explained who he IS. It is upon his death that those wells become filled in – both literally and metaphorically.

Isaac too digs wells – or his servants do. At first he digs wells and names them after the same wells of his father. These wells get filled in. These wells get filled in because he is digging wells with the idea of Abraham in mind. Isaac is not digging his OWN well; he's re-digging Abraham's wells. Isaac is not defining himself; he's trying to be his father, so these wells get filled in.

Again, Isaac's servants dig wells and these wells are not filled in but named in relation to quarrels. These wells are the result of other's work and named in relation to others. Isaac is not digging his OWN well, but letting others dig and name his wells. Again, Isaac is not defining himself but letting others do it for him.

It is when Isaac is able to gain "ample space" that HE becomes directly involved with the digging of a well. He sets up his tent, and there he digs the well. This well is not filled in and becomes a great source of living water. Isaac finally, FINALLY, digs his own well. This well remains active and lively, because Isaac has finally done his own work and has started defining himself.

It is when you turn inward and start digging your own well for yourself that you can start exploring who you are. When you get wrapped up with defining yourself by who/what you are not it becomes far too easy for others to come along and fill in those wells. When you let others dig your wells for you, you let them define you. But when hard work and determination are used to dig your own well, to get at the heart of your own truth that well that you have dug becomes a great source of life. It is these wells of truth that become great sources of life for not just yourself but others too.

This evening the LGBT community is gathering in West Hollywood and today all over the world the LGBT community and our allies are gathering in public squares, community centers and



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houses of worship to celebrate the lives of our lost transgender brothers and sisters and challenge a world that tolerates violence and bigotry against them. Far too often transgender people's lives are cut short. Brandon Teena and Gwen Aroujo's lives were cut short by violence and aggression. Robert Eads life was cut short by insufficient health insurance and poor healthcare because doctors were unwilling to treat a transman with cervical cancer. Brandon, Gwen, and Robert all had the courage to stop letting others dig their wells for them. They stopped letting others define them and they stopped defining themselves by who they are NOT. Brandon, Gwen and Robert started the very difficult task of digging their own wells. And once those wells were tapped in to, they were able to take a step forward, and like Abraham and Moses before them, say "Hineni" – Here I am. The truth from their own wells gave them a source of life to say this is who I AM. And transgender people all over the world are picking up their shovels, digging their wells and saying who they ARE.

Tonight when you say Kaddish, take a moment to look at the memorial board. You will notice that the plaque honoring Gays and Lesbians has been removed and will in the following weeks be replaced with a new plaque including both our Bisexual and Transgender brothers and sisters. During Kaddish take a moment to reflect on those transgender people who have so courageously dug their wells and shared their source of living water with us. Let those lives and wells be an inspiration to YOU to pick up your shovel and start digging.



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