

## THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

### PARSHAT TOLDOT: ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

#### SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

I. The book of Genesis is full of stories of Abraham and Jacob

- a) We know a lot about them
- b) We know much less about Isaac, the two stories associated with him aren't really focused on him
  1. The Binding of Isaac is about Abraham
  2. The story of the switched blessings, the story most discussed this week, is really focused on Jacob and Esau
- c) Who was Isaac, and what do we know about him?
  1. There is only one story in the Torah that features Isaac as the main character
  2. Because of the blessings, it's often glossed over



II. 20 second parsha recap

- a) After years of being unable to conceive, Rebecca gives birth to twins
- b) Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for stew
- c) There is a famine, and Isaac goes to Gerar
- d) He settles, and tries to dig a bunch of wells
- e) Esau marries
- f) Isaac wants to bless Esau, and Jacob pretends to be Esau and tricks his father
- g) Jacob runs away because Esau vows to kill him
- h) Before he does, Jacob makes a promise to marry a woman from Canaan
  1. Did you spot the Isaac story?



III. The one story that focuses on Isaac is the story of the wells, and understanding it may give the key to unlocking the mystery of who Isaac is

- a) Here is what happened:
  1. After the famine, Isaac settles in Gerar, and something amazing happens
  2. Isaac plants in the land, and it grew, and he became great; the people became jealous, and he was asked to leave (Genesis 26:12-14)
  3. He moves to the valley
  4. Then is the strange story of the wells



- Apparently, Abraham had dug a few wells during his time
- Since Abraham died, the locals plugged up the wells
- Isaac tries to dig the wells
- He dug the first, but the local shepherds fought with him about it, saying it was theirs; he named the well "contention" (Genesis 26:20)
- Isaac digs another well, but the locals try to claim that one too; Isaac calls that one "hatred" (Genesis 26:21)
- He moved away from there and dug a third well, and no one fought him for it; he named the well "expansion" (Genesis 26:22)

IV. There are a lot of questions to be asked; focus on two:

- What happened between the second and third wells?
  - The locals argued over the first and second wells, but they just stop by the third - why?
  - Did they just give up? What changed?
- Why is this the story God chooses to tell about Isaac?
- Explore together the character of Isaac and strange story of the wells



V. The story of the wells actually begins a few verses earlier in a prophecy

- Before Isaac landed in Gerar, he was actually on his way to Egypt to get food
- God appears and says not to go down to Egypt, reiterating the covenant (Genesis 26:3)
- Isaac settles in Gerar (Genesis 26:6)
- It seems like Isaac did exactly what God told him to do, but that's not exactly true
  - Looking carefully at what God told Isaac and what he actually did, God told him to גור, and he ישב (temporarily versus permanently)
  - A few weeks ago when discussing God's selection of Abraham, spoke of the challenges that come along with wealth



- If God is going to make your name great so that you can bring blessing to the world, how do you balance being a prince of God with the pride and arrogance of being handed that destiny?
- God told Abraham that he will get the land, but not quite yet
- Verse careful to say that when Abraham returns to the land with so much wealth, there were others in the land (Genesis 13:6-7)
- Why do we have to know that?
- Abraham was wealthy with great gifts from God to be used to positively impact others
- When you're put on a pedestal, can have the opposite effect
- Could rub others the wrong way
- Abraham saw that, so he didn't settle, show off his wealth; pitches tents
- 3. Isaac, who would continue Abraham's mission, is faced with a similar situation
  - When God appeared to Isaac in Gerar, He promised to give him land
  - The gifts of land/wealth are tools for his mission to influence others
  - Something went wrong
    - Isaac settled down and became really wealthy
    - His wealth and great name weren't making a positive influence; they were having the opposite effect
    - The people around him were jealous, and he was asked to leave

e) Now the wells make so much more sense



1. In Jewish law, one way to show ownership of land is changing something
  - Only an owner has freedom to do what he wants It's almost like the wells were a symbolic claim of ownership
2. Isaac digs wells to say, "It's my land," but he wasn't successful in claiming the land - The locals challenged him, saying it's their water
3. Then something changed, something so subtle it could be easily missed
  - Isaac doesn't just dig a third well; he does something first
  - He removed himself from there (Genesis 26:22)
    - Who cares that he removed himself?
    - Does that remind you of anything?
4. There's only one other time that the word **ויעתק** appears
  - Right after the first time God promises land and children to Abraham, text says that Abraham removed himself from there (Genesis 12:8)
  - Might think that's just a coincidence, but looking at the situations of Abraham's story and Isaac's story, they seem to be identical

f) Right after God promises the land to his children, Abraham responded not by planting roots, but by traveling and removing himself

1. He realized that the land isn't his yet
2. He hears the promise
3. Maybe, by using the same word in this parsha, the text is saying the Isaac got that message also
  - He no longer tries to plant roots; he moves away
  - He doesn't fight them for the land

g) That's what changed between the second and third well

1. By removing himself from the land, he showed that the third well isn't about marking territory
2. As soon as Isaac shows God that he understands that, there is no more struggling over that last well



h) Isaac calls the third well "expansion" because God expanded the land (Genesis 26:22)

1. He showed God that he could not lose sight of the gift giver and the purpose
2. Then, God is ready to fulfill His promises

VI. As the text continues, the seemingly-boring details all highlight Isaac's shift in perspective

a) What is the next thing Isaac does?

1. He goes from there to Be'er Sheba (Genesis 26:23-24)
2. Who cares? Why is the verse telling us this travel log?
3. Even after Isaac gets to Rehoboth, the place of expansion, he voluntarily moves again because Isaac has shifted his perspective
4. He no longer claims land; he sojourns

b) Then God appears to him in another prophecy

1. Difference between this prophecy and the first prophecy from earlier
2. God says not to fear, He is with him and will bless him (Genesis 26:23-24)
3. God mentions the promise of children, but land is entirely missing
  - It's almost like God is speaking in negative space - what God doesn't say
  - Isaac is able to see that the land is a tool to accomplish his mission



- When that happens, it's like God gave him the land already
- Isaac showed God that he uses the tools of land and wealth sensitively
- So God doesn't need to mention it
- By leaving it out, perhaps God is telling Isaac that he earned the land

VII. Further connection to Abraham

- a) Look at what Isaac does right after the prophecy - he builds an altar (Genesis 26:23-25) - Who else builds an altar after a prophecy? Abraham (Genesis 12:8)
- b) Both then call out in the name of God - Calling out in God's name right after God promises that he'll make your name great is the ultimate way of showing that you won't become conceited, focusing only on yourself
- c) After Isaac builds that altar, he pitches a tent (Genesis 26:25)
  1. A tent is the best expression of temporary dwelling
  2. Abraham build a tent right before building his altar (Genesis 12:8)



VIII. Parallels not coincidental - text begged to connect the narratives

- a) After being kicked out and opposed for the wells, Isaac realized what his father realized
- b) It's inappropriate to flaunt status as chosen people
  1. Wealth is a powerful tool that should be used conservatively to fulfill a Godly mission
  2. After Abraham passes away, the focus shifts to the next generation



- Abraham had a divine mission, and now Abraham's child, Isaac, continues that legacy of becoming a model nation
- God will bestow wealth, greatness, children upon this new nation
  - The promise of greatness and chosenness are hard to handle
  - God needed people who would be able to use these gifts properly as tools for spreading God's name and righteousness
- After struggling a bit in Gerar, Isaac showed God that he's up to the task
  - Like his father, he will use his gifts with sensitivity
  - This story about overcoming a difficult challenge of being able to step out of one's own success and remember the larger picture is the story that the Torah chooses to tell

