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DISCOVERING JACOB

FROM THE JEWISH POINT OF VIEW, THE FAMILY IS A CENTRALLY IMPORTANT aspect of human life. Animals bear offspring, and often care for them greatly, but only human beings consciously have grandchildren - or grandparents. The bonds between husband and wife and the various generations together, for all peoples, are central themes in Jewish thought.

A further dimension is, not just a family, but a *Jewish* family. This has an additional ingredient: the involvement of specifically Jewish ideals in the process of marriage, child-bearing and the development of one's children. Here there is much room for heart-ache. And this indeed is the theme of our Sedra¹, focusing on Isaac and his family.

Isaac was born after his father Abraham had been circumcised. This at once gave him a special sacred quality. Isaac was brought up as a Jew, unlike his father who had been raised as an idolater and had to discover G-d. Then Isaac married Rebecca. Although born in an idolatrous environment, the Rabbis tell us she was only three years old when she left her parents' home and came to the Land of Canaan to marry Isaac. This means that her experiences too as a growing child were in a totally Jewish atmosphere.

Isaac and Rebecca are therefore, in a sense, the first typically Jewish couple. They longed for children, and at last were blessed with twins: Jacob and Esau. However, they then had the problems of bringing them up. They were two very different children, with

117 GEORGE STREET, LONDON W1H 7HF
cru@lubavitchuk.com - www.chabadresearch.org

different styles of behaviour and different qualities, heading in different directions. Jacob was spiritual and studious, while Esau married Hittite women who served idols, and the Sages tell us that he was also a murderer. His grandson Amalek became the foremost enemy of the Jewish people.

In terms of having children who contrast greatly with each other, many Jewish parents through the ages have felt they can identify with Isaac and Rebecca. Yet there is a vitally important difference. There are many challenges in the task of bringing up children, but there are now no Esaus in the Jewish world.

We live in a time when unfortunately people do often drift far, far away from the Jewish community. They may become involved in the most problematic and negative things. Such a child is not Esau, however, simply a lost Jacob.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, we live after the Giving of the Torah. According to R. Judah Halevi, the great poet of medieval Spain, at the earlier stages of the development of the Jewish people, a couple could give birth to children some of whom would have the special spiritual quality of being “Jewish”, while others would not have it. Thus Isaac and Rebecca gave birth to both Jacob and Esau².

After the Giving of the Torah this changed. The Divine revelation at Sinai had a permanent effect on everyone. From then on, every child born of a Jewish mother, or a convert according to Jewish law, would have the spiritual quality of a Jew³.

A second difference concerns our history. We have been through thousands years of bitter suffering for the sake of Judaism. We have been refined in the crucible of our collective past. Every Jewish child today is holy, with a potential force for good which has been distilled through the centuries. Whatever his current actions, that child is really a Jacob.

The challenge to us as parents and teachers is simply to find the right key, in order to unlock the power of Jacob which is surely in every heart.

1. Genesis 25:19-28:9. 2. See Kuzari I:95. 3. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Haggadah* (1976), p.150 (comment on the answer to the Wicked Son: after the Giving of the Torah he too would be redeemed).

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SEDRA TOLEDOT

THE PATH OF JACOB

"Riing..." The sound of the bell sent the boys running and shouting down the stairs all the way to the lunchroom. Food – finally. It felt like years since they'd last eaten. The boys ran to grab a plate, slump on some mashed potatoes and meatballs, and stuff it all into their mouths. This was the daily routine. Silently, Michael thought that they all looked like a bunch of animals being let out of their cage, but he would never voice his opinion – the whole school would think he was a freak.

Even Mr Elkins, the Chemistry teacher who was usually on Dinner Duty, did not seem to think that anything was wrong. Perhaps he felt that since there was no concentrated acid in sight, they were safe, and could therefore do as they liked.

But today was somehow different. Michael decided he must say something to someone. Maybe this was because they were even more wild than usual, or maybe it was the fact that all this seemed to be going completely against what they'd just learnt in Rabbi Levy's class. Michael didn't know what exactly it was but as he quietly took a plate and stood in line, amidst the noise and food throwing, Michael knew that something had to be done.

"You know," he said, turning to Chaim who was trying to squeeze as many meatballs as possible into his mouth, "This is all kind of wrong."

"Huh? Wadya mean?" asked Chaim, as he wiped off tomato sauce from his chin.

“I don’t know,” Michael said, looking around thoughtfully. “All of this. I mean, just a few minutes ago Rabbi Levy was talking about the difference between Jacob and Esau. How at the beginning of the Sedra, Esau came in while Jacob was preparing the lentil soup, and just said ‘gimme food’ and literally threw the whole bowl straight down his throat. But, said Rabbi Levy, as Jews, we know that before eating we make a special blessing to thank G-d for the food – acknowledging that everything comes from Him, and then once we finish, we make another blessing. Food isn’t something we just scoff down – it’s something from G-d and we should treat it like that. You know, you were also in the lesson.”

Chaim nodded. “I see what you mean”, he said, skillfully dodging a meatball coming directly from the food fight in the corner, “this isn’t exactly behaving as we should be.”

“Hey you two – you’re right!” They hadn’t noticed that Josh was listening in. He cheerfully thumped Michael on the back. “And I think that we gotta do something.”

The three boys huddled together, deciding how they’d go about changing the atmosphere at lunch. Chaim and Josh would get the boys’ attention, and since it was Michael’s idea, he would do the talking. They approached Mr Elkin, and got his agreement that they would address the throng of boys before they were all dismissed.

To cut a long story short, by the next day, the lunchroom was a changed place. After they finished singing Grace together, several older boys headed over to Michael and his friends to congratulate them on a job well done. Michael smiled, thinking of our ancestor Jacob. It felt good, knowing that they had made a difference.

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