

PARASHAH: Tol'dot (History)
ADDRESS: B'resheet (Genesis) 25:19-28:9
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Eyleh tol'dot.... (Here is the history [generations] of....).” These opening few words dot the beginnings of just a handful of significant chapters in the Torah. To be sure, there are ten significant instances in the book of B'resheet alone that use the Hebrew word **“tol'dot,”** which stems from the root word used for **birth**, or **offspring**. We read about the **history** of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 2:4; the **history** of Adam in 5:1; 6:9 and 10:1 talks about the **history** of Noach. Up until this point, the selection might appear rather “random,” that is, without pursuing a single family lineage. But after Noach, the Torah specifically begins narrowing down its selection of historical perspectives, singling out the significant person that is most pertinent for the reader's study.

After Noach's listing in B'resheet 10:1, the Torah begins the pattern of tracing the lineage of a specific family history, highlighting the offspring of a specific man in particular. Notice the pattern: Shem's **history** is the highlight of B'resheet 11:10; Terach's **history** (Avram's father) of 11:27; Yishma'el's **history** (Avraham's first son) of 25:12; and Yitz'chak's **history** (Avraham's son according to promise) of 25:19, which is of course the beginning of our current parashah entitled **Tol'dot**. Later on we will pick up the familiar pattern again with 'Esav (Yitz'chak's first son) and his **offspring** in 36: 1, 9; and finally the **history** of Ya'akov (the inheritor of the covenantal promises) in B'resheet 37:2. In this way, the Torah guides us into the place where we begin to have the understanding that HaShem wants us to have. This understanding is comprised of the “majors of the majors of Torah, and the minors of the minors” (see my previous commentary to **Parashat Lekh L'kha**, third paragraph, for reference).

Since the topic here is history, I want to take this opportunity to briefly recap the highlights of the Torah narrative up until this point. Moreover, since the Torah is comprised of the first five books of Moshe, this is an opportune moment to refresh the readers understanding of the first five parash'ot of the book of B'resheet. I will use small quotes from my previous commentaries as a guidance tool, bringing the readers up to the current portion of **Tol'dot**.

B'resheet (1:1-6:8) - Beginning with HaShem changes our viewpoint from that of scientific observation, to one of absolute faith, grounded in the Word of God. A scientist, who refuses to objectively deal with a supernatural creation, is a scientist who refuses to deal with a supernatural God! By removing God from the equation, mankind effectively dulls his own conscience towards the responsibility of his own actions, good or bad—if there is “no God, then ultimately, there is no need to answer to anyone but myself.” In this way, the Torah teaches that mankind ultimately destroys himself, and becomes a fool. The mercy of the Holy One offers us an authoritative (**historical**) beginning, complete with purpose and structure for our lives. When God begins something, its destined purpose (its **history**) is made sure.

Noach (6:9-11:32) - The condition that mankind found himself in during those days just prior to the world deluge, is very similar to that of mankind in our current time period. Knowing that **history** can be our best teacher sometimes, do you suppose that we should have learned our lesson the first time? Yes, I do believe that we should have. However, since we did not, the Torah has decidedly promised that in the days of the (second) coming of the Messiah (days, in which this author believes we are living), mankind would once again find himself in a state of such depravity that HaShem would have no choice but to render judgment again.

Lekh L'kha (12:1-17:27) - Because of the example that the Torah records Avram to have been, any man willing to do so is eligible to become an heir of this great father! Because of Avram's trusting faithfulness to HaShem's command, he subsequently became the father of the many righteous followers that would come after him. And last, but certainly not least, because of Avram's trusting faithfulness, a single righteous man was born into his **lineage**. From this single righteous man, came the power to join the physical and/or spiritual family of the Creator of all men!

Vayera (18:1-22:24) - What makes Avraham such a great role model of faith, is that, not only did he trust in the Word of HaShem, but the LORD saw into his future and predicted that his **offspring** would also be taught how to trust in the Almighty. We must, like faithful Avraham, trust in the LORD against all unbelievable odds, to perform in our lives, the promise that he has given us through Yeshua our Messiah!

Hayyei-Sarah (23:1-25:18) - With the coming of Yeshua, the ultimate “son of promise,” non-Jews could finally share completely in the spiritual as well as physical blessings promised to “our father Avraham.” Only after this time came, could this “mystery” (Ephesians 3:4-10), allowing the uncircumcised to be called righteous (Romans 4:11-12), be revealed. But at this current time in our parashah of historical making, according to HaShem, while Gentiles were allowed into the covenant, God saw fit not to explicitly reveal how this mystery would unfold...

I am not purposely neglecting the Gentiles of today, the ones who are offspring according to faith. The Torah does indeed have Gentiles in mind when it speaks of covenants. To be sure, Hegg asserts that the reason that Jewish lineage is important is that God has promised to manifest His omnipotent sovereignty through the people descended from Jacob. But in maintaining this promise to Jacob, one need not exclude the non-descendent, for God has also promised to bring the nations within the scope of that same covenant. God has adopted them both! It is only when the Jew and non-Jew live and worship together as equally adopted brothers in the congregation of Yeshua that God’s faithfulness and power are manifested as they should be.¹ I am, however, laying the groundwork necessary for the Gentile believers to understand the foundations of the Christian faith. By addressing first the natural we will be better equipped to understand the spiritual.

As you can see from a cursory glance of the highlighted words above, the Torah has quite a bit to teach us about **history** and **offspring**. To be sure, it has been aptly noted that “a person that knows not from whence he came, will be ill-equipped to properly deal with where he is going to.” Our current portion gives us the beginning of the fast-paced story of two brothers, ‘Esav (Esau, also called Edom), and Ya’akov (Jacob), and their ongoing struggle to become the men that they feel they deserve to be. It is an interesting tale, complete with deception and disappointment. Rivkah, Yitz’chak’s wife, gives birth to twins, who grow to become individuals with quite opposite character traits. The elder, ‘Esav, is a skilled hunter, a rough, hairy man, with a flair for cooking tasty game. He winds up being favored by his father. On the other hand, the younger, Ya’akov, is a tenderhearted, dweller of tents, smooth-skinned and quiet; he becomes the favorite of his mother.

Like a good Tom Clancy novel, the Torah narrative baits the readers’ curiosity, by informing us that from these two individuals, two nations of peoples will spring forth (25:22, 23). Moreover, the Torah also informs us that the rivalry started at birth, and continuing through the majority of their lives, will eventually culminate in one of these nation of peoples eventually serving the other; ‘Esav would serve Ya’akov. Why does HaShem want us to know these intricate details of history?

¹ Tim Hegg, *Fellow Heirs* (FFOZ 2002), 40, 41

What about the physical offspring of Avraham is so pertinent to us 21st Century believers? Let's look at the **B'rit Chadashah** (New Covenant) for our answer.

In what I call Sha'ul's "masterpiece of Jewish-Christian, theological discussion" (and my own personal favorite book of the entire Torah), the book of Romans also talks about the birth of these two individuals, and their subsequent relevance in the history of HaShem. David Stern, author of the Complete Jewish Bible, and the Jewish New Testament Commentary, has this to say about Romans 9:10-13,

"The case of Rivkah is even more to the point in demonstrating God's absolute sovereignty in determining such matters independently of anything human beings do. For **both** Ya'akov and 'Esav were **her children**, whereas the fact that Yishma'el's mother was Hagar and Yitz'chak's was Sarah might lead one to conclude that Sarah's greater worthiness had *earned* Yitz'chak the promises. Nor can one look for a difference in deservedness on the father's side, **for both were conceived in a single act by Yitz'chak**"²

What we can glean from this is that, not only is HaShem actively involved in historical development, he is ultimately orchestrating and directing it towards a divinely expected ending. It is in this way, that a man's destiny becomes fixed. Notice that in our current parashah, at the request of Rivkah, that HaShem disclosed some rather important key details surrounding the destinies of her soon to be born twins (25:22-23). This speaks to us about the sovereignty of our all-knowing God, and his desire to bless all of mankind through chosen, obedient individuals. Unfortunately, because of our fallen condition, we usually render ourselves ineligible to receive HaShem's blessings, due to our lack of faith. But this lack of faith doesn't render the plans and blessings of HaShem powerless! Concerning the corporate unbelief of the Jewish people, what does the Torah say?

"What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge" (Romans 3:3, 4, NIV)

It is the desire of HaShem that we should indeed inherit the blessings intended for us! He told Avraham of the future inheritance and blessings of his offspring (Genesis 17:1-8), Yitz'chak of the future inheritance and blessings of his offspring (26:3-5), and later (in the next parashah), we will once again read about HaShem reminding the young man Ya'akov, about the future inheritance and blessings of his offspring. Why does HaShem remind us about the inheritance and blessings that are ours? I might imagine that it is because he doesn't want us to forget about them. More than that, it is a reminder to us of his limitless, unbridled love

² David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., 1996), 390, emphasis his

and concern for us, even though we don't deserve such things. But along with these promises, he wants us to also be reminded that it is his authority and grace alone that makes our glorious history a reality! To be sure, Ya'akov and his mother Rivkah got themselves into a real mess trying to secure what they both knew belonged to them.

Reading further into our story in **Tol'dot**, we learn of the deception and deceit of Ya'akov and Rivkah, as they plot to take not only the birthright of 'Esav (25:29-33), but eventually the coveted verbal blessing, from father Yitz'chak, pronounced upon the firstborn son (chapter 27). Now you might single out the fact that Ya'akov stole (or "supplanted," as the name "Ya'akov" suggests) the birthright blessing from his brother 'Esav. Yet we know that HaShem had already promised to his mother earlier that the "elder would serve the younger." So in a way, you could also conclude that Ya'akov was just taking what already belonged (or eventually would belong) to him in the first place. It is true that the blessing was his, yet the lesson I believe the Torah is trying to teach us here is not to take matters into our own hands. What Ya'akov did was still wrong. Rivkah would pay for her foolishness by sending Ya'akov off to her brother Lavan, until the heat of 'Esav's anger subsided (27:43-45). She supposed then, at a future date, Ya'akov could return. Alas, she would never see her beloved Ya'akov face to face again. To be sure, he would also reap the harvest of his own greed, at the hands of another man who would prove to be even greedier than he was! The next few parash'ot will indeed prove to be intriguing!

Finally I want to mention one last important "**tol'dot**." In the first book of the Apostolic Scriptures, Mattiyahu (Matthew) begins by informing the readers about a very prominent, historical genealogy, that of the Messiah Yeshua!

"This is the genealogy of Yeshua the Messiah, son of David, son of Avraham...." (Vs. 1)

Having established our historical heritage, traced through the loins of the family of the man from Ur-Kasdim, we must now establish and solidify our heavenly lineage, by lining our history up with the history of the man from Natzeret!

The Torah teaches us that since we have "died" to sin and have been "buried" with him (symbolized in baptism), then our hope lies in the fact that he was raised from the dead (see 1 Corinthians 15 the whole chapter, but specifically verses 20-28)! Moreover, these verses prepare us in understanding the spiritual **inheritance** that we have in Messiah, as mentioned in Ephesians 1:3-14! Let's look at verses 11-12:

“Also in union with him we were given an inheritance, we who were picked in advance according to the purpose of the One who effects everything in keeping with the decision of his will, so that we who earlier had put our hope in the Messiah would bring him praise commensurate with his glory.”

So looking forward by faith, we find that Yeshua’s inheritance is our inheritance, he being the ‘firstfruits of those who are raised to life in righteousness.’ Because genealogy is very important to HaShem, we should seek to better understand the history we inherited by faith, from father Avraham (Romans chapter 4). A man by the name of Abraham J. Heschel developed a theme along these lines. In his volume on philosophy and religion, *Man Is Not Alone* he writes,

“When the hurricanes of life batter us so that we bend to the point of breaking, we are not rootless. There is a firm and secure root to support us. The “root that supports” (Rom. 11:18) and “nourishes” (11:17) is the godly, living faith of Israel. This is our foundation: to know the God of history, Israel’s history (cf. Heb. 11). This concept of history brings ultimate meaning and purpose to both personal and global events. We are not alone. The future is secure. God is alive, at work, and in control.”³

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Torah-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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³ Abraham J. Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951; repr. New York: Harper & Row, 1966)