

Fifth Year Sermon: Toldot 5781

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The young woman approaches the table labelled “Jewish Students Society.”

She hesitates, feeling both excited and nervous.

“Can I help you?” asks the university student standing behind the table.

“I’d like to join,” the young woman begins, “but I’m not sure if I should.”

She holds her breath, her heart racing.

“Are you Jewish?” comes the straightforward response.

“My Dad is...” she trails off, unsure how to finish the sentence.

“Then you’re not Jewish and you shouldn’t join,” snaps the representative of the Jewish Students Society, and swiftly moves on to the next person in line.

The Hebrew word for inheritance, נַחֲלָה, comes from the same shorash as נָחַל, which means “a torrent of rushing water” or a “river.” An inheritance, whether tangible or intangible, signifies what we inherit from our ancestors. At first glance, a river, נָחַל, may seem nothing like an inheritance, נַחֲלָה. A river often begins high in the mountains, formed from melting snow that gathers pace as it trickles steeply down slopes, tumbles down waterfalls, gurgles through forests and farmlands, a glistening ribbon of life seeping

across the landscape. A river sustains the people, flora and fauna that live along its route. A river might seem to be a static feature, but it is always flowing. And always in the same direction. Towards the sea.

An inheritance, like a river, is not static. It changes and evolves as it passes from person to person, from parent to child to grandchild, from grandparent to grandchild, from teacher to student. As we read *Sefer B'reishit*, we read the stories of our ancestors, stories that make up our inheritance of Jewish tradition. We read about Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, and Isaac, the child that Sarah never thought she'd have. This week, we read *Parashat Toldot*, which tells the story of Isaac and Rebekah's family. Twenty years after we first meet Rebekah, the young woman who generously gave water to the camels of Abraham's servant, the river continues to flow downstream. Now, she is Isaac's wife and pregnant with the next generation.

But troubling times lie ahead. The Torah tells us that:

וַיִּתְרָצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקוֹרְבָּהּ

This is usually translated something like "the children struggled in her womb."¹ Most commentators agree that the verb וַיִּתְרָצוּ, translated here as "struggled," has the shresh *resh tsadi tsadi*, a shresh which only appears twice in the Torah. However, the medieval commentator Rashbam, Rashi's grandson and my favourite grammarian, sees it differently. Rashbam

¹ Genesis 25:22

argues that וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ comes from the shoresh *resh tsadi*, לרץ, meaning “run,” instead of *resh tsadi tsadi* meaning “struggle.” So in Rashbam’s understanding, וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ describes the running, the constant motion of the two babies growing inside Rebekah.

Rashbam’s interpretation aside, other examples of *resh tsadi tsadi* elsewhere in the Tanakh reveal a much stronger meaning than “struggled.” The indomitable BDB lexicon pulls no punches in telling us that *resh tsadi tsadi* means “crush” in the active *binyanim* and “be crushed, oppressed or broken” in the passive *binyanim*. So, the phrase וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶבָהּ means something like BDB’s translation that: “the children crushed one another within her.” Rabbi Yochanan, in *B’reishit Rabbah*, stresses this even more strongly, and explains that : “זֶה רָץ לְהַרְגֹת אֶת זֶה וְזֶה רָץ לְהַרְגֹת אֶת זֶה:” “This one is running to kill that one and that one is running to kill this one.”² Even before their birth, Jacob and Esau are literally at each other’s throats. No wonder Rebekah feels uncomfortable.

The experience of inheriting Judaism from one parent and not the other can sometimes feel a bit like two identities are trying to crush each other inside you. A mixed inheritance can feel like you are not enough of either: too much Jewish to be considered *not* Jewish, but not enough *Jewish* to be considered Jewish. It’s like the opposing parts of one’s soul are deeply entwined in an invisible battle taking place far below the river’s surface.

² B’reishit Rabbah 63.6

Rebekah feels her sons fight within her, and the Torah states:

וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי

"She thought: "If this is so, why do I exist?"³ Rebekah is so very distressed by the turmoil deep inside her that she questions her very existence.

Many of us who inherited Judaism from our fathers have felt existential distress similar to Rebekah's internal turmoil. Claire McMahon Fishman, for example, writes that: "I was deeply upset to realize that because my mother was Irish Catholic, under traditional Jewish law, I had no claim to membership in the community I loved so much."⁴ Rabbi Emily Cohen, in an article titled "I'm done passing as a matrilineal Jew," notes that "generations of children have grown up in Jewish communities and with Jewish identities, only to be told by some that they aren't Jewish enough to count."⁵ Like Rabbi Cohen, I have experienced what she calls "this painful, confusing reality."⁶ I've been rejected from Jewish communities and groups more times than I can count.

In the Torah, Rebekah turns to God, who tells her that:

"Two peoples are in your belly; two nations shall branch off from each other [as they emerge] from your womb. One people shall prevail over the other; the elder shall serve the younger."⁷

³ Genesis 25:22

⁴ <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/jewish-and>

⁵ <https://www.jweekly.com/2020/02/05/im-done-passing-as-a-matrilineal-jew/>

⁶ <https://www.jweekly.com/2020/02/05/im-done-passing-as-a-matrilineal-jew/>

⁷ Genesis 25:23

Here, one identity wins over the other. Only one child, Jacob, gains his father's inheritance. There's a midrash that states: "At the moments that Rebekah was standing outside synagogues and *b'tei midrash*, Jacob tried to come out, and when she passed houses of idol worship Esau rushed to come out."⁸ So even though Jacob gains his inheritance from Isaac through dubious means of trickery, deception and a dodgy red stew, the Torah makes it clear that it's meant to be. The river flows through Jacob.

After all, Jewish law, or *halacha*, carefully delineates (no pun intended) who is a Jew and who is not. In the Torah, the *brit*, or covenant, passes from father to son, from Abraham to Isaac and, as we read in this *parasha*, from Isaac to Jacob. During this early biblical period, descent was patrilineal. In the Talmud tractate Kiddushin, the rabbis ascertain that: "Your son from a Jewish woman is called "your son," but your son from a non-Jewish woman is not called your son, but her son."⁹ In other words, a child born to a Jewish woman inherits Judaism, but a child born to a non-Jewish woman does not. Matrilineal descent thus became explicit in Jewish law from the rabbinic period onwards.

In Reform Judaism, we do not see *halacha* as binding, but rather as a guide that we choose to adapt to current reality. It was only from the late 1970s onwards that mainstream American Jewish movements began to accept Jews who had a Jewish father and not a Jewish mother. At the URJ Biennial

⁸ B'reishit Rabbah 63.6

⁹ B. Kiddushin 68b: בן הבא מן העובדת כוכבים קרוי בן אלא בנה

in 2015, actor Michael Douglas, whose father Kirk Douglas, *zichrono livrachah*, was Jewish, explained how the Reform Movement's 1983 decision to accept Jews of patrilineal descent opened up Judaism to a whole generation of people who had never been considered Jewish.¹⁰ Suddenly, the door was officially open to scores of people who had previously had it slammed shut in their face.

The river of inheritance, our נַחֲלָה, flows the way it flows. We don't control what flows to us. We don't choose our heritage. Even though we can, to some extent, choose how we respond to our heritage and what to do with it, in the case of Jewish patrilineality, all too often, others make the decisions for us. Well-meaning friends make comments like "Oh, you're not really Jewish then!" Synagogues that require both parents' names for an *Aliyah* make it clear that leaving the mother's name blank is not an option. An acquaintance who had invited me to lunch a couple of times could not hide her shock and said: "You realise it goes through the mother, don't you?" I never heard from her again.

Reconciling a mixed identity is not as simple as choosing one or the other. Rabbi Brad Artson writes of process theology that "In every moment we are coming into being again and again."¹¹ It's more like figuring out how to live in the liminal space of a dual identity that grows and evolves as we do.

¹⁰ <https://www.ifunders.org/michael-douglas-uri-biennial-his-jewish-journey-and-ifn-matching-grant-his-honor>

¹¹ Artson, "Ba-Derekh: On the Way - A Presentation of Process Theology," 7.

The river twists and turns as we explore, discover, question, change and embrace what lies before us.

We can never know where someone is on their journey, or even what someone else's journey is. Questioning someone's Jewish status when they are already feeling fragile about it can be devastating. Instead of quizzing someone about their background, I wonder how we might model our behaviour after the young Rebekah, who went out of her way to draw water for a stranger's camels.¹² I wonder how we might sensitively and warmly welcome anyone who works up the courage to approach us, and refrain from questioning their Jewishness.

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¹² Genesis 24:19-20

"Of course you should join! We'd love to have you!" smiles the representative of the Jewish Students Society.

כן יהי רצון

May it be God's will.

צוהריים טובים!!