

Parashat Toldot



Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

The most fundamental challenge facing thoughtful modern Jews in contemporary twenty-first-century America is how to remain rooted in the best of American culture and values while, at the same time, maintaining a genuine commitment to Jewish life and Jewish tradition. This issue is particularly relevant to a young woman or man becoming bat or bar mitzvah, setting the course for the kind of life she or he will want to lead into adulthood and beyond. How can a caring Jew simultaneously affirm two identities without doing a disservice to either? A tiny, apparently insignificant, detail in this week's Torah portion provides an answer.

In *Parashat Toldot*, we read how Yitzchak instructs Esav to prepare some food for him, in return for which he will grant him a blessing. Rivkah, troubled by this exchange that she overhears, dresses Yaakov up as Esav and sends him in to his father with food so that *he* should be the one to receive the patriarchal blessing. The scene is set as Yaakov walks in to Yitzchak:

And he came to his father, and said: "My father," and he said: "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" And Yaakov said to his father: "I am Esav your first-born; I have done as you told me. Arise, please, sit and eat of my venison, that your soul may bless me." And Yitzchak said to his son: "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" And he said: "Because the Lord your God sent me good speed." And Yitzchak said to Yaakov: "Come near, please, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are my son Esav or not." (*Bereishit* 27:18-21).

What prompted Yitzchak to sense something strange in the behavior of his son, whom he assumed to be Esav, which led him to request that his son come close so he could touch him to determine who he really was? Apparently something had gone wrong with Yaakov's carefully conceived and elaborately executed plan. Had all proceeded smoothly, Yitzchak should never have suspected anything and would never have been motivated to ask him to feel the texture of his skin.

Rashi (v. 21) is sensitive to the problematics of the verse and comments: "Yitzchak said to himself, 'It is not the practice of Esav to have the name of God (*shem Shamayim*) fluent in his mouth and yet this one said, "Because the Lord, your God, arranged it."'" This is not "Esav-like," said Yitzchak. Esav does not talk this way, to invoke the name of God so glibly, naturally and unselfconsciously. Something is clearly strange here, he thought. "I'd better feel his skin and make sure who he really is," he said to himself. Fortunately for Yaakov, he was prepared for this possibility and was able to proceed with his mission which ended successfully for him.

But I want to go one step further and ask an obvious question. Did not Yaakov *also* know that Esav does not invoke the name of God glibly, naturally and unselfconsciously? Did he not *also* know that "God language" is not "Esav-like?" Why, then, mention God's name and thereby undoubtedly arouse the suspicion of his father and potentially jeopardize his entire mission unnecessarily? Why take the chance of losing his father's blessing? Yaakov went to such great lengths to protect himself. Yaakov was so careful. Why risk losing it all?

The answer, I believe, speaks directly to the committed modern American Jew and is an important one for a young Jewish adult entering *gil mitzvot* to consider. We all seek, and to a large measure have been granted, the blessings that American culture has to offer. Many of us have taken our place in the forefront of American society, and we are proud of it. We are, many of us, fully integrated into the social, economic and political fabric of contemporary America, and we are happy with what we have achieved. And, sometimes, in order to achieve these blessings, we have to some extent adopted, figuratively and literally, the garments, the outer veneer of the general culture that surrounds us and within which we live, and we have no problem with that.

But, teaches Yaakov, there is one irrevocable condition. No matter how important we consider this to be, no matter how great our desire to achieve

these blessings, we can never eliminate or deny God's name. No matter how assiduously we pursue, as we do, the "American dream," we cannot compromise on the centrality of God in our lives, on our personal religious identity. Modernity? Yes. Contemporary American culture? Yes. But, as Yaakov models for us, never, ever, at the expense of the *shem Shamayim*.

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COMING OF AGE



ושונתם לבניך ודברת בם

“You shall teach your children thoroughly and speak of them
(the Torah and Mitzvot)”

Deuteronomy 6:7

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