

Torah Portion for Toldot

Shabbat beginning November 25, 2022

This week's portion, Toldot (generations), connects us to our great Jewish tradition of critique. It tells the story of Esau and Jacob, one hairy and outdoorsy, the other homespun and grasping. They become the founders of Edom and Israel. Hungry from hunting one day, Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a meal. Next, he takes Hittite wives, a bitterness to both his parents. When Isaac is old and blind, Rebecca helps Jacob receive his blessing to lead the clan by disguising him as Esau, whose belated wrath at his loss forces Jacob into exile, never to see his mother again. Jacob marries within the family and Esau finally adds a third wife from the family.

We read that Rebecca *favours* Jacob and Esau *disdains* his birthright but finally *understands* his parents' objections. The rest of the story is told without emotional inferences through descriptions of actions, places, and things. Consequently, rich interpretations become possible. Some tell the story well; others glean deep meanings. Critiques ask what it teaches about deception, sibling rivalry, and alienation in daily life, or focus on the grander scales of national origins and women's roles. Our tradition gives us many ways to use stories.