

# TOLDOT: CHOOSE A GOOD GRANDFATHER

- Yaakov and Esav develop differently because Yaakov chose Avraham as his model and Esav chose Betuel. The rest is history.

## TOLDOT: CHOOSE A GOOD GRANDFATHER

[The idea for the theme of this sermon came from a thought I read but cannot remember where. If a reader can identify the source I would appreciate hearing from him so that I can give proper credit to the author. True, this version of the thought is nikne beshinuy. The original author still should be thanked. The picture of the cemetery of Prague stands out in my mind and is based on a 1990 visit I made there on the way to Israel. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, was on that trip. He revealed, when we visited the synagogue of the Mahara"l of Prague, that he was a direct descendent of that great sage. It was a moving moment when he stood next to the seat and shtender of his illustrious ancestor. At that moment the distance between generations shrank. And I remembered this message....]

The Torah reading today tells of the birth, rearing and development of Yaakov and Esav. Our sages were puzzled about the different characters of these two brothers. Here were twins, products of the same environment, and yet, in attitude and behaviour, worlds apart. Morally, spiritually, they were as different as day is from night.

Right away the Torah underlines this. Vayehi Esav ish tzayid, veykov is tam, yoshev ohalim. Esav the hunter, the violent man, and Yaakov the gentle, the student, dweller in the tents of Torah.

Later it became even worse. You know the story where Esav sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Our Rabbis saw this too, as a description of their different characters. Why was the soup so important? It was lentil soup, and anything round by tradition, say our Rabbis, is the food of the mourner. When someone returns from a cemetery, till this day, they have something round to eat. It is to show the bereaved that life is like a circle with no end, since there is life after death. It is a reaffirmation of that faith in the hereafter, which is one of the foundations of our faith. It also hints at the mourner's eventual resumption of the functions of life and fulfilling its cyclical responsibilities. So the sages of Mishnah and Talmud saw the death of Abraham as the background of the conflict between Esav and Yaakov. Here is Yaakov preparing the food of mourning, is anguish at the loss of his beloved grandfather Abraham. And Esav comes stamping in from hunting, demanding, "Pour this read stuff down into me!" Shocked Yaakov responds: Don't you know what happened today and what this soup really is? Don't you realize it is for Isaac as his food of mourning for beloved Abraham our grandfather?" "Don't bother me with theology! I don't believe in life after death! When I die that's the end! Hine anochi holech lamut! Never mind your old superstitions. The old man had to move over and make room for us young ones anyway!" That's why Yaakov demanded that he give up the claim to be the spiritual heir to Abraham. He will not be destined to serve God as priest in his Holy Temple! Vayakam, vayelech, vayivez Esav et habechorah,. "And Esav drank, rose, went off, and despised that kind of a spiritual birthright."

So our Rabbis were very much troubled. Why did Yaakov grow to be such a good and home loving person, while Esav became a hunter of man and beast, unprincipled, untamed?

The explanation they give is striking. They say the answer is to be found in the grandfathers, Abraham and Bethuel: Abraham, the man who discovered God and loved humanity, and Bethuel, an infamous fraud who put money above everything. Yaakov chose Grandfather Abraham as his model in life and became the servant of God and man. Esav chose Bethuel as his guide and grew up to be unscrupulous, selfish, violent man.

There are many stories about children and parents, some of them humorous - who has not heard of about the man who came to the Rabbi seeking to become a kohen, and would not be refused, offering great donations to charity if only he would be declared a kohen. Finally - in desperation, seeking to find a way to dissuade the man from something clearly impossible, the Rabbi asked, tell me, why do you want so desperately to become a kohen? To which he answered, My father was a kohen, my grandfather was a kohen, and so I'm determined to be a kohen too, and I won't give up until I am!!!

Well, in a sense that is what our Rabbis were saying, that a person should choose to copy his ancestors. Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed the same thought when he said, "He is a wise child who chooses a good grandfather." ... or grandmother. Each of us has two parents, four grandparents, and eight great-grandparents. If we go back to the days of Abraham the first Jew, each has more than a trillion ancestors. Not one pedigree, but countless pedigrees are ours, many very good, some bad, and some indifferent. One of the major responsibilities of our lives, therefore, is to choose our ancestry with care; to decide which tradition and heritage from our past should claim our loyalty and our allegiance. It is impossible to be the spiritual children of everyone who preceded us. But we can choose - from so many - the forbears we would like to copy, the grandfathers or grandmothers that should be ours, that should be our own personalities, to that heritage we should like to belong. The cemetery in Prague, where great Jews are buried, includes the Mahara of Prague. And the Jewish community had only a small plot of land for the cemetery, and so as each successive generation was buried, they added a layer of earth, and made the cemetery higher and higher till it became a series of small hills. But each time they raised the level of earth, they also raised the gravestones from underneath and placed them on top, so that above each grave were five, six, seven, even ten gravestones, each one behind the other, almost touching, till you looked and saw the generations, one touching the next, each almost physically leaning on the previous, and certainly in spirit each dependent on the gifts of the spirit of those who went before.

I met a man who came from an irreligious home. That was his heritage until he was sixteen years old. Then something happened. Somewhere in the attic of his home the boy found an old letter, yellow with age, written in an ancient script. Out of curiosity he took it to school and showed it to his teacher. She recognized that it was written in Hebrew and advised him to take to the Rabbi. The Rabbi explained the contents. It had been written, he said, one hundred years before, by a great grandfather in Poland who warned his son who was going to the New World, to remain a loyal Jew, to keep the Sabbath and to observe the mitzvot of the Torah.

The Rabbi then asked about his family, and the boy admitted that he was never taught anything

about his Jewish heritage. He knew nothing about Judaism. The words of the Rabbi about the wonderful great grandfather moved him deeply. For the first time in his life he came face to face with his heritage, which till then had been totally strange to him.

At first he tried to ignore it, but it was challenging him all the time. Then one day, in a transforming decision, he chose to listen to his great grandfather's warning. He went to Israel and began alef bet at sixteen, learned in a Yeshiva there, worked hard, grew in learning and love of Judaism from day to day. He had chosen his grandfather! I daresay you too know such people with similar stories. They are increasing today beyond what we had dreamed, people who choose carefully, to follow great grandparents.

When Isaac sent his son off to marry, he gave him a blessing: "May God give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your children after you" (Gen 28:4). In this final charge, we hear the anxious prayer of the loving father, "My son", said he, "Continue to make Abraham, your grandfather, your model in life. Make his philosophy his love of honesty and truth your guide. Make his home, that of Sarah your grandmother, your ideal picture of a home. That will be the fulfilment of my fondest hopes and most cherished dreams."