

Torah Table Talk – *Sacred Words*

Bekhorah: Of Birthrights, Blessings and Privilege

Parshat Toldot, Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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Parshat Toldot revolves around two stories: the sale of Esau’s birthright (*bekhorah*), and the deceitful acquisition of Isaac’s blessing (*berakhah*) by Jacob. It is more than a coincidence that the Hebrew terms for birthright and blessing are nearly the same in Hebrew: *bekhorah* and *berakhah*. It is also ironic (and tragic) that Jacob has already been promised that which he desires the most. Before he and his brother are born, Rebecca is told, “Two nations are in your womb, two separate people shall issue from your body. One shall be mightier than the other and the older shall serve the younger.” Jacob’s decision to take matters into his own hands (with a little encouragement from his mother) leads to a life of misery and exile for our forefather Jacob.

Birthright plays an important role in Jewish life. The first born has special privileges as well as responsibilities. He is entitled to a special portion in his inheritance. The Torah refers to Israel as God’s first born in the story of the Exodus. Tragically, Jacob desires that which he cannot have: one cannot become what one is not. Either one is the first born or one isn’t. Throughout Genesis, God consistently chooses the younger over the older as a sign that birth order is not as important as belief and behavior. Jacob must learn this lesson for himself.

Genesis 25:30-34 Esau said to Jacob: “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down for I am famished,” which is why he was named Edom. Jacob first said, “Sell me your **birthright** (*bekhorah*).” And Esau said: “I am at the point of death so what use is my **birthright** to me?” But Jacob said, “Swear to me first!” So he swore to him, and sold his **birthright** to Jacob. Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil soup; he ate, drank and rose and went away. Thus, Esau spurned the **birthright**.

Sources

Exodus 4:22-23

Then you shall say to Pharaoh; “Thus says *Adonai*: Israel is my first-born (*bekhori*) son. I have said to you, “Let My son go that he may worship Me,” yet you refused to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.”

Deuteronomy 21:15-17

If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, but the first-born is the son of the unloved one – when he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as the first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older. Instead, he must accept the first-born, the son of the unloved one, and allot him a double portion of all that he possesses; since he is the first fruit of his vigor, the birthright is his due.

Nachum Sarna, Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary

The first-born son along with the first fruits of the soil and the male firstlings of the herd and the flock were considered to be possessed of a unique sanctity. They all belonged to God. The first male of the human womb had to be redeemed from his sacral state. Originally he was accorded a privileged position in the cult. At a later time the tribe of Levi displaced the first born in Israel and appropriated his cultic prerogatives. Being the primary guarantor of the future of the family line and, hence, of the preservation of the ancestral heritage, the first born ranked second only to the head of the family, the paterfamilias, whose successor he would automatically become. Isaac’s blessing in Genesis 27:29 makes this quite clear. The status of the first born was bound up with the responsibilities and obligations on the one hand and with rights, privileges, and prerogatives on the other. Two other aspects of the story of Jacob and Esau have been illuminated by ancient Near Eastern documents. We know that a father had the right to disregard chronological considerations in determining his heirs and that an heir was able to barter his future inheritance. The hegemony of the older brother in the ancient world is widely attested...

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 16b

The sages offered the following explanation of the verse “Abraham was blessed with everything.” (Gen. 24:1): Another explanation is that Esau did not rebel so long as Abraham was alive. Another explanation is that Ishmael repented while he was still alive. How do we know that Esau did not rebel (against his father) while Abraham was alive? Because it says, “And Esau came in from the field and he was faint.” (Gen. 25:29) It has been taught [in connection with this] that that was the day on which Abraham died, and Jacob made a broth of lentils to comfort his father Isaac. Why was it of lentils? In the West they say in the name of Rabbah ben Mari: Just as the lentil has no mouth (no cleft like other kinds of pulse), so the mourner has no mouth [for speech]. Others say: Just as the lentil is round, so mourning comes round to all the denizens of this world. What difference does it make in practice which of the two explanations we adopt? — The difference arises on the question whether we should comfort with eggs.

Robert Alter The Five Books of Moses

Each of Jacob’s words, in striking contrast to Esau’s impetuous speech, is carefully weighed and positioned, with “me” held back until the end of the sentence. If Esau seems too much a creature of the imperious body to deserve the birthright, the dialogue suggests at the same time that Jacob is a man of legalistic calculation. Perhaps this is a quality needed to get and hold of the birthright, but it hardly makes Jacob sympathetic; moral ambiguities will pursue him in the story.

Commentary

While the chronological position still influences the dynamics of family relations, the role of the first-born is no longer the same as it was in biblical times and in traditional society. Within the Jewish tradition, the only time we acknowledge the special role of the first-born is on the eve of Passover when the first-born are enjoined to observe a special fast (which we immediately cancel by having a *siyyum*) and at birth when the first-born child is redeemed in a special ceremony called a *Pidyon Haben*. The Torah makes special mention of not overriding the rights and privileges of the first-born child in contradistinction to the stories we read in Genesis. A father can not take away the privileges of inheritance from his first-born even if he is not the son of his favored wife. Apparently, by the time the book of Deuteronomy was composed our faith tradition understood the damaging affects of parental favoritism. But the role of birthright had more to do with affirmation than inheritance. Jacob desperately wanted the recognition of his father who favored his older brother, and Esau, having grown up with an emotionally distant mother, is devastated when he is cheated out of his father’s blessing.

What does it mean to be the first-born? Israel is referred to in the story of the Exodus as God’s first-born. This term implies both one who is favored and is connected to the idea of chosenness. But chosenness is not a privilege but an obligation. When we recite the blessings before the reading of the Torah we thank God who “chose us from among all peoples and gave us the Torah.” Sarna suggests that the first-born is one who takes on special responsibilities as the one who will maintain and pass on the ancestral heritage. I wonder whether the presumption of first-born and family privilege isn’t the continuing source of conflict both in families, in religions and in society at large.

Questions to Ponder

1. While we are told that Esau spurned his birthright, the Torah does not explicitly pass judgment on Jacob’s actions in this episode. How do you feel about Jacob’s actions? Why do you think he acted in this manner?
2. The Midrash suggests that this episode took place shortly after the death of Abraham? What was it about the patriarch’s death that might have motivated Jacob to take action?
3. Does birthright have special meaning for us today? How has family position influenced the way you relate to your parents and to your other siblings? How has it influenced who you are as an individual?
4. What does the Torah mean when it refers to the people of Israel as God’s first-born? Does God play favorites? How do you feel about this idea?
5. In the Jewish tradition, when we speak of the first-born, we usually mean the first-born male. Why should a first born female be treated differently than a first-born male child?

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