A Sibling Rivalry for the Generations
Dr. Brian Smollett, Associate Dean of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies and Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and History, JTS

Do the Jewish people exist because of a bowl of lentil soup? Toledot presents the story of Jacob and Esau, a sibling rivalry with cosmic implications. The twin brothers who would come to father their own nations struggled even within the womb. Different as they were, they both prized the birthright that the already elderly Isaac would bestow upon his first born.

The word toledot here denotes the genealogies with which the portion opens (Gen. 25:19-21) but the word, fittingly, also means history. Why would the Torah establish the birthright of the ancestor whose name our people bear through acts of guile? Unsurprisingly, Rashi too was bothered by this, even going so far as to speculate on the relative order of conception versus birth for twins and concluding that Jacob was indeed the rightful heir.

But what if Jacob’s deceptions were necessary? This depiction of Rebecca, Jacob, and Esau (Matthias Stom, Esau and Jacob, 1640s) imagines the key moment when Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of red lentil soup. The most striking personality in this depiction is Rebecca. Standing with her two sons in this crucial moment, her expression is at once one of eagerness and exasperation. Despite his claims, it seems that Esau is less at risk of starvation and more unwilling to wait for his captured prey to cook. Indeed, he sells the legacy of generations for the sake of his immediate comfort. Perhaps Rebecca knew all along the trouble that would come if Esau took up the mantle of leadership. Here she seems to wait eagerly as Jacob secures both the birthright of his father, and the hope of generations to come.

Toledot 5780

Stumping Rashi: Humility and Modern Discourse
Marc Gary, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, JTS

One of the joys of working at The Jewish Theological Seminary is the ability to take courses from arguably the greatest Jewish studies faculty in the world. Last year, I audited a course on biblical grammar in the Book of Genesis taught by one of this generation’s greatest Bible scholars. While I did my best to keep up with the younger and better-educated members of the class—mostly rabbinical and graduate students—I was particularly impressed by the level of class discussion. During one class, a student offered an interpretation of the text which he argued was consistent with the grammar but different from the one offered by the professor. The professor paused for a moment and then smiled: “I never thought of that.”

Humility. It is like water in the desert—not only in the academic world, but even more so in the political sphere and religious communities. It is a character trait both rare and seemingly out of favor. (The exception may be Anthony Rendon of the World Series champion Washington Nationals who eschewed all the superlatives offered about his game-winning performance, saying “I feel like there are bigger things going on in this world. . . . We’re not taking bullets for our country in Afghanistan or wherever it might be. This should be a breeze.”) We bestow accolades for knowledge, academic achievement, political conviction, religious insight—but rarely for acknowledging uncertainty or what we don’t know.

This reflection on humility brings us to this week’s Torah portion, Toledot. One of the principal themes of the parashah is the relationship between Rebecca and her twin sons, Jacob and Esau. While the two boys are still in her womb, Rebecca—and Rebecca alone—becomes a confidant of God in the divine plan to place Jacob and his descendants above Esau and the nation that
will descend from him. (Gen. 25:22-23). To effectuate that plan, she concocts and participates in the deceitful scheme to secure Isaac’s deathbed blessing for Jacob rather than the older child, Esau, thereby subverting not only Isaac’s intent but also the established rule of primogeniture. (27:5-29). Rebecca then engineers Jacob’s escape to safeguard her son from the wrath of his older brother and to prevent Jacob from marrying a Hittite woman as Esau did—an act that “disgusted” her and clearly led to a deterioration in her relationship with her elder son. (27:41-28:5).

Because Rebecca is clearly the protagonist of this saga and her relationship with her children is front and center throughout, one of the concluding verses of the parashah is baffling: “Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esau.” (28:5) Why, Rashi asks, does the verse have to identify Rebecca as the mother of Jacob and Esau when the entire preceding story makes that relationship abundantly clear? Since, according to Rashi’s method of biblical interpretation, no words are superfluous in the text, what do these seemingly unnecessary descriptive words convey?

Rashi’s answer is straightforward: “I do not know what it teaches us.” Here the greatest Bible scholar and teacher of all time demonstrates his humility by proclaiming to the world his ignorance on this point. More than that, his public acknowledgement of ignorance is gratuitous. As Nehama Leibowitz points out, Rashi could have remained silent. He could have simply moved to the next verse on which he comments; after all, Rashi does not comment on every phrase of every verse. (Studies in Bereshit, 287). So why did he decide that it was important to acknowledge his ignorance on this issue publicly?

Rashi did so, I believe, not out of a sense of humility for its own sake; but rather, he wanted his humble acknowledgement to encourage others to seek meanings and resolutions that escaped his grasp. If Rashi had remained silent, others might have missed the issue entirely and therefore not addressed it. On the other hand, if Rashi—to protect his reputation as a Bible scholar—had proposed a solution that he did not feel was authentic, others might have been intimidated from offering more cogent explanations. So Rashi laid out the problem and left it to future generations to tackle (which they did).

How refreshing is Rashi’s humility when compared to our present political discourse! Viewing the contemporary political landscape, I am struck by the certitude expressed about the correctness—indeed, the (self)righteousness—of the positions taken in respect to complex problems that cry out for subtlety and compromise. To paraphrase Joseph Epstein, we have become like a modern-day version of Diogenes walking the streets with a lantern looking for the one righteous person—we turn the lamp on ourselves and call off the rest of the search. (“True Virtue,” The New York Times Magazine, Nov. 24, 1985) Perhaps we could improve our political discourse and begin to heal the divisiveness in our society by acknowledging, in the words of Robert Bolt, that “The currents and eddies of right and wrong which you find such plain-sailing, I cannot navigate.” (A Man for All Seasons, 39).

So too could humility bring a refreshing perspective to religious life. It has become accepted to confidently take a knife to traditions or discard them entirely when they no longer are “meaningful” to us. Innovation, while necessary in a changing world, has become a fetish—an objective for its own sake, an easy route to avoiding the difficult, discomforting, and even downright offensive parts of our tradition. But perhaps in the face of a tradition that has given succor and meaning to generations of the Jewish family, we should be humble enough to at least pause before excising significant portions of that tradition. The late Rabbi Richard Israel, formerly the Jewish chaplain at Yale University, once admitted that the second paragraph of the Shema had lost all meaning for him, speaking as it does of divine reward and punishment through changes in atmospheric conditions. Even so, he continued to include the entire Shema in his prayer practice: “If I drop bothersome aspects of the tradition, I will never again have the opportunity to be challenged by its difficult ideas, nor will I give the generations that come after me the opportunity to recover a meaning which I have lost. I am involved in a holding action.” (The Condition of Jewish Belief, 100).

Rashi’s humility, like Rabbi Israel’s, gave future generations the opportunity to find meaning that those great religious leaders could not uncover. As we read Parashat Toledot—the parashah of “generations”—may we seek to cultivate the same level of humility in ourselves for our own sakes as well as for the sake of future generations.