Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Toldot
November 30, 2019 *** 2 Kislev, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Torah Portions

1: 25:19-22.....p. 146
2: 25:23-26.....p. 147
3: 25:27-34.....p. 147
4: 26:1-5.....p. 149
5: 26:6-12.....p. 150
6: 26:13-16.....p. 150
7: 26:17-22.....p. 151
maf: 28:7-9.....p. 161

Haftarah: Malachi 1:1 – 2:7.....p. 163

Toldot in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3178/jewish/Toldot-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Isaac and Rebecca endure twenty childless years, until their prayers are answered and Rebecca conceives. She experiences a difficult pregnancy as the "children struggle inside her"; G-d tells her that "there are two nations in your womb," and that the younger will prevail over the elder.

Esau emerges first; Jacob is born clutching Esau's heel. Esau grows up to be "a cunning hunter, a man of the field"; Jacob is "a wholesome man," a dweller in the tents of learning. Isaac favors Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning exhausted and hungry from the hunt one day, Esau sells his birthright (his rights as the firstborn) to Jacob for a pot of red lentil stew.

In Gerar, in the land of the Philistines, Isaac presents Rebecca as his sister, out of fear that he will be killed by someone coveting her beauty. He farms the land, reopens the wells dug by his father Abraham, and digs a series of his own wells: over the first two there is strife with the Philistines, but the waters of the third well are enjoyed in tranquility.

Esau marries two Hittite women. Isaac grows old and blind, and expresses his desire to bless Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father's favorite food, Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father. Jacob receives his father's blessings for "the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land" and mastery over his brother. When Esau returns and the deception is revealed, all Isaac can do for his weeping son is to predict that he will live by his sword, and that when Jacob falters, the younger brother will forfeit his supremacy over the elder.

Jacob leaves home for Charan to flee Esau's wrath and to find a wife in the family of his mother's brother, Laban. Esau marries a third wife—Machalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/587261/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah opens with a mention of the tremendous love G-d harbors for the children of Jacob, and the retribution He will visit upon the children of Esau who persecuted their cousins. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading, whose two protagonists are Jacob and Esau.

The prophet Malachi then rebukes the kohanim (priests) who offer blemished and emaciated animals on G-d's altar: "Were you to offer it to your governor, would he be pleased or would he favor you? . . . O that there were even one among you that would close the doors [of the Temple] and that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain!"

The haftorah ends with a strong enjoinder to the kohanim to return to the original covenant that G-d had made with their ancestor, Aaron the High Priest. "True teaching was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. In peace and equity he went

with Me, and he brought back many from iniquity."

Food For Thought

Isaach and Essau (Toldot 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

http://rabbisacks.org/isaac-and-eisav-toldot-5780/

It's a haunting question. Why did Isaac love Esau? The verse says so explicitly: "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:28). Whichever way we read this verse, it is perplexing. If we read it literally, it suggests that Isaac's affections were governed by no more than a taste in a particular kind of food. Surely that is not the way love is earned or given in the Torah.

Rashi, citing a Midrash, suggests that the phrase translated as, "who had a taste for wild game," and referring to Isaac, in fact refers to Esau, and should be read "there was hunting in his mouth," meaning that he used to entrap and deceive his father by his words. Esau deceived Isaac into thinking that he was more pious and spiritual than in fact he was.

Bolstering this interpretation, some suggest that Isaac, having grown up in the household of Abraham and Sarah, had never encountered deception before, and was thus, in his innocence, misled by his son. Rebecca, who had grown up in the company of Laban, recognised it very well, which is why she favoured Jacob, and why she was later so opposed to Isaac's blessing going to Esau.

Yet the text suggests undeniably that there was a genuine bond of love between Esau and Isaac. The Zohar says that no one in the world honoured his father as Esau honoured Isaac.[1] Likewise, Isaac's love for Esau is evident in his desire to bless him. Note that Abraham did not bless Isaac. Only on his deathbed, did Jacob bless his children. Moses blessed the Israelites on the last day of his life. When Isaac sought to bless Esau, he was old and blind, but not yet on his deathbed: "I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death" (Gen. 27:2). This was an act of love.

Isaac, who loved Esau, was not deceived as to the nature of his elder son. He knew what he was and what he wasn't. He knew he was a man of the field, a hunter, mercurial in temperament, a man who could easily give way to violence, quickly aroused to anger, but equally quickly, capable of being distracted and forgetting.

He also knew that Esau was not the child to continue the covenant. That is manifest in the difference between the blessing Isaac gave Jacob in Genesis 27 (believing him to be Esau), and the blessing in Genesis 28 that he gave Jacob, knowing him to be Jacob.

The first blessing, intended for Esau, is about wealth – "May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth" – and power, "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you." The second blessing, intended for Jacob as he was leaving home, is about children – "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples" – and a land – "May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of … the land God gave to Abraham." The patriarchal blessings are not about wealth and power; they are about children and the land. So Isaac knew all along that the covenant would be continued by Jacob; he was not deceived by Esau. Why then did he love him, encourage him, wish to bless him?

The answer, I believe, lies in three extraordinary silences. The most pointed is the question, What happened to Isaac after the Binding? Look at the text in Genesis 22 and you will see that as soon as the angel has stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac drops out of the picture completely. The text tells us that Abraham returned to the two servants who accompanied them on the way, but there is no mention of Isaac.

This is a glaring mystery, tantalising the commentators. Some go so far as to say that Isaac actually died at the Binding and was brought back to life. Ibn Ezra quotes this interpretation and dismisses it.[2] Shalom Spiegel's The Last Trial is a book-length treatment of this idea.[3] Where was Isaac after the trial of the Binding?

The second silence is the death of Sarah. We read that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah

and weep for her. But the primary mourner in Judaism is traditionally the child. It should have been Isaac leading the mourning. But he is not mentioned in the entire chapter 23 that relates to Sarah's death and its consequences.

The third is in the narrative in which Abraham instructed his servant to find a wife for his son. There is no record in the text that Abraham consulted with Isaac his son, or even informed him. Abraham knew that a wife was being sought for Isaac; Abraham's servant knew; but we have no idea as to whether Isaac knew, and whether he had any thoughts on the subject. Did he want to get married? Did he have any particular preference as to what his wife should be like? The text is silent. Only when the servant returns with his wife-to-be, Rebecca, does Isaac enter the narrative at all.

The text itself is significant: "Isaac had come from Be'er Lahai Roi." What was this place? We have encountered it only once before. It is where the angel appeared to Hagar when, pregnant, she fled from Sarah who was treating her harshly (Gen. 16:14). An ingenious Midrash says that when Isaac heard that Abraham had sent his servant to find a wife for him, he said to himself, "Can I live with a wife while my father lives alone? I will go and return Hagar to him."[4] A later text tells us that "After Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac, who then lived near Be'er Lahai Roi" (Gen. 25:11). On this, the Midrash says that even after his father's death, Isaac lived near Hagar and treated her with respect.[5] What does all this mean? We can only speculate. But if the silences mean something, they suggest that even an arrested sacrifice still has a victim. Isaac may not have died physically, but the text seems to make him disappear, literarily, through three scenes in which his presence was central. He should have been there to greet and be greeted by the two servants on his safe return from Mount Moriah. He should have been there to mourn his departed mother Sarah. He should have been there to at least discuss, with his father and his father's servant, his future wife. Isaac did not die on the mountain, but it seems as if something in him did die, only to be revived when he married. The text tells us that Rebecca "became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

That seems to be the message of the silences. The significance of Beer Lahai Roi seems to be that Isaac never forgot how Hagar and her son – his half-brother Ishmael – had been sent away. The Midrash says that Isaac reunited Hagar with Abraham after Sarah's death. The biblical text tells us that Isaac and Ishmael stood together at Abraham's grave (Gen. 25:9). Somehow the divided family was reunited, seemingly at the instigation of Isaac.

If this is so, then Isaac's love for Esau is simply explained. It is as if Isaac had said: I know what Esau is. He is strong, wild, unpredictable, possibly violent. It is impossible that he should be the person entrusted with the covenant and its spiritual demands. But this is my child. I refuse to sacrifice him, as my father almost sacrificed me. I refuse to send him away, as my parents sent Hagar and Ishmael away. My love for my son is unconditional. I do not ignore who or what he is. But I will love him anyway, even if I do not love everything he does – because that is how God loves us, unconditionally, even if He does not love everything we do. I will bless him. I will hold him close. And I believe that one day that love may make him a better person than he might otherwise have been.

In this one act of loving Esau, Isaac redeemed the pain of two of the most difficult moments in his father Abraham's life: the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael and the Binding of Isaac.

I believe that love helps heal both the lover and the loved. [1] Zohar 146b. [2] Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Gen. 22:19. [3] Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial, Schocken, 1969. [4] Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 24:62. [5] Midrash Aggadah and Bereishit Rabbati ad loc.

Stumping Rashi: Humility and Modern Discourse – Toldot by Marc Gary

http://www.jtsa.edu/stumping-rashi-humility-and-modern-discourse

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 Nechama 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.*(Marc Gary is Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer at JTS)*

Toldot by Rabbi Berel Wein

https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2242.html

Sibling rivalry is the name of the game. In fact, the entire book of Bereishis can be described as a narrative of sibling rivalry. We have Kayin and Hevel, Avraham and his nephew Lot, Yishmael and Yitzchak, Yaakov and Eisav and Yosef and his brothers. It is as though the Torah wishes to inform and impress upon us the true nature of human beings.
I often think that that is what is meant when the Torah said that the nature of human beings is bad from its onset. We are by nature competitive creatures and the competition always begins at home and with those who are closest to us. We should not think of our children as being angelic but rather deal with their true nature and recognize the pitfalls that natural sibling rivalry will always engender.
Every child is a different world and no two – even identical twins – are the same. Because of this fact of human nature, competitiveness is built into the structure of all children. It is the task of education and the home to channel this competitiveness into positive behavior and creative goals. This is what the Rabbis meant by their statement that the competitiveness between scholars and wise men is a method for increasing wisdom and understanding generally. Without competitiveness there can be very little creativity or advancement in all forms of life – technology, healthcare, finance, politics and human nature. The task is to direct this competitiveness towards positive aims and to limit it so that it does not descend into violence and tyranny.
Part of the problem with Eisav is not competitiveness but rather insecurity. He always feels his younger brother tugging at his heel and preventing him from achieving the greatness that he feels is his due. Because of this insecurity, he seeks fame and fortune in opposing the ideas and lifestyle of his own very family. He scorns his birthright because he feels that fulfilling its demands will only inhibit him. He feels that only by being

different than Yaakov can he achieve permanent respect. As all his plans crumble, he cries out in anguish to his father that he wants the blessings that Yaakov has received. He realizes that only in those blessings, which he will have to share always with Yaakov, can his destiny truly be fulfilled.
This is what Yaakov himself tells Eisav at their last meeting, which we will read about in a few weeks. Eventually Yaakov will come to the mountain of Eisav and then Eisav will be redeemed by his acceptance of Yaakov and of the moral values and tradition of his family.
Throughout the books of Tanach, we find this constant struggle of insecurity versus acceptance and competitiveness versus conformity. We are uncomfortable when we see people who are different than we are. But the only way to achieve personal greatness is by realizing that our own inner security need not be weakened by competitiveness with others.

Our "Imperfect" Biblical Characters : ToledotBy Rabbi Irwin Huberman ('10)
https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/

Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz, one of my most influential teachers, once shared a profound insight with me regarding why he believed the Torah is based on truth.
"The characters we read about are so flawed," he said. "While the heroes of many other religions are depicted as perfect, ours are not. There is no reason to describe them this way, unless it is to touch on the truth within each of us."
This week's Torah portion, Toledot ("This is the story of Isaac"), is a case in point. It recounts the story of a dysfunctional family worthy of a reality television series.
After twenty childless years, Rebecca conceives twins. The Torah describes Rebecca's difficult pregnancy, as her two future sons "struggle inside her." God describes "two nations in your womb," and—as often is the case in the Torah— "the elder will serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23)
Esau is the first to arrive and is covered with red hair. He will grow up to be a hunter. His father, Isaac, "who had a taste for game," likes him best. (Genesis 25:28)
Meanwhile, Jacob, who enters the world holding Esau's heel, described by some commentators as "innocent," (Rashbam 25:28) becomes the tent dweller. He is Rebecca's favorite.
Indeed, as we review our holy Biblical text, we need to ask ourselves: How is it possible that a text as sacred and instructive as the Torah promotes the model of one parent favoring one child over the other?
Does this ever lead to good? How many families today are plagued by sibling rivalry? How many of these rivalries stem from one parent appearing to favor one child over another?
As we review these texts today, on many levels, we are reminded of how not to raise children.
Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) in his Hirsch Commentary on the Torah, points out that Isaac and Rebecca broke the golden rule of parenting, as quoted in the Psalms: Hanokh l'na'ar al pi darkho – "bring up each child in accordance with their own way." (Prov. 22:6)
Not only did Isaac and Rebecca foist their own biases upon their children, but they potentially stifled their children's individual nature by perhaps making each an extension of themselves.
Later, it will be Jacob who will favor Joseph over his other sons. The Talmud uses this example to emphasize that, for example, in the preparation of a will, one parent should never favor one child over another lest it cause animosity and resentment which can resonate within a family for generations. (Shabbat 10b)
Indeed, each parent, then and today, by loving the uniqueness of each child must not only love each equally, but appear to do so.
As parents, Isaac and Rebecca fail this test.
Later in the Parashah, Esau is victimized by a conspiracy as Jacob, dressed in fur, and

upon the coaxing of his mother, impersonates Esau and steals his father's blessing. It's a tale of dishonesty, deception, and manipulation.
What does this say about the love and communication that married couples must share as they raise their children? Why was it that Isaac and Rebecca, who earlier in the Torah are described as passionate lovers, pit their own children against each other?
The Torah describes Isaac as blind. This is true on many levels. Rebecca may have been ultimately right in her support of Jacob – but this week's Torah portion inspires us to ask, "Is this the way that disputes should be addressed within a family?"
In the end, most of these biblical vignettes are resolved. Many biblical characters revisit their flaws, and ultimately adopt a more wise and responsible personal path.
As Rabbi Ehrenkranz noted, herein lies the Torah's inherent truth. Our biblical characters enter the world flawed. They commit interpersonal errors, often in their youth, or as a result of impaired awareness.
It is why this week's Torah portion is both disturbing and inspiring. For while so many of our biblical characters are imperfect, they represent truths about each of us.
If, as the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) suggested in his Commentary to Mishlei 4:13, "The entire purpose of our existence is to overcome our negative habits," then, in many ways, we can thank our biblical ancestors for inspiring us by example, to explore and eventually overcome the defects which plague each of us.
There is an Aramaic text which we recite each Shabbat morning before removing the Torah from the ark. It reads, "Not upon mortals do we rely, not upon angels do we depend, but upon the God of the universe, the God of truth, whose Torah is truth…" (Siddur Sim Shalom, 1985 Edition, Page 398)
I love the Torah because it tells truths. Our role models are not always perfect, but more importantly, they teach us by example to expose and explore those tendencies and characteristics which we struggle with.
Indeed, the Torah is sometimes messy, upsetting, and confusing. Just like life.
It is one reason why perhaps the Torah, as it echoes the imperfections of humanity, continues to endure.*(Rabbi Irwin Huberman (AJR '10) is the spiritual leader of Congregation Tifereth Israel, a USCJ affiliated congregation located in Glen Cove, NY.)*

On Aging: Toldot by Rabbi Neil James

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1seyszry6O8SB-HoWw8dOUYNJ19ItyXg1OGctttJKuKs/edit

Yitzhak said to Yaakov, "Come closer, that I may feel you my son" (Bereshit 27:21)
Some 18 months ago my 96 year old grandmother broke her hip and was admitted to hospital for surgery. A child refugee from Germany, who had only gone back to university in her later years, the little deafness and macular degeneration have not changed her mental acuity. I think that's what made the post-operative delirium so hard. She felt imprisoned and suspected everyone of nefarious intent, not even recognising her own children and grandchildren. In a semi-lucid moment she said to me, "Lean over Neil, let me feel your beard. I want to be sure it's you."
"I am old now and I do not know the day of my death" (Bereshit 27:2)
I've spent so many years teaching these passages from Torah, perhaps I had become careless in my attention to Yitzhak. But recently I have become attuned once again to the nature of aging, of ill-health and responsibility. We spend many hours discussing whether Yitzhak was going along with the ruse hatched by Rivkah and Yaakov to steal the patriarchal blessing from Esav. Dressed up as Esav, Yaakov approaches his father and pretends to be the older son. Today I read the text differently and become heartbroken in thinking about Yitzhak's vulnerability.
"Then his father Yitzhak said to him [Yaakov]: Come close and kiss me, my son" (Bereshit 27:26)
In the extended discussion of honor of one's parents in Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31b, Rabbi Abbahu recounts the example of Avimi his son. We're told in the gemara that

not only would Avimi run to his father's call, even though he himself had five ordained sons (grandsons to R. Abbahu). On one occasion Avimi was called by R. Abbahu to bring water to drink.

"Before he brought it, Rabbi Abbahu dozed off. Avimi bent over him until he woke up."

It's a touching moment that leads to the reward of Avimi being able to interpret an obscure aspect of Psalm 79. The language of the gemara to describe the dozing of Rabbi Abbahu is namnem from the verb נום. The sense of the word is slumber, drowsy, even to be dying. Perhaps, the gemara hints, Rabbi Abbahu is edging towards the liminal world between life and death. And yet we know this verb well from Psalm 121 – לא ינום הנה – the guardian of Israel does not slumber. Honoring parents is, after all, akin to honoring the Holy Blessed One.

"Yitzhak breathed his last and died, he was gathered to his kin, in ripe old age" (Bereshit 35:29)

Yitzhak does not die immediately after the incident with his sons in Parashat Toledot. Much unfolds before his eventual death, though we hear really nothing about his life of old age. In my experience in Jewish communal life, these years – the hidden, often challenging, beautiful and uplifting, but as frequently full of diminishing health – have become more and more something for us to address as a people. Those who are aging and those who are caring – the direction of care now frequently extends up and down two or three generations. As I reflect on this and the honor and blessing of caring, I am drawn to the touching sentiment of the Bavli in exploring the notion of raising up in holiness. From this Rav Yosef derives the idea that the two tablets which Moses shattered are also placed in the Holy Ark and then:

"We learn from this that a sage who forgets his learning by his own misfortune, one should not treat him with disrespect" (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 99a)

We do not set aside people whose grandeur, on the surface, seems to have been diminished or whose vitality has dulled, who need to feel our presence to know who we are. Rather, we raise up in holiness – this is our vision. (*Rabbi Neil Janes, Conservative Yeshiva Alum ('03-'04) & Executive Director of the Lyons Learning Project and Rabbi of West London Synagogue)*

D'var Haftarah: The Triumph of Yaakov by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1seyszry6O8SB-HoWw8dOUYNJ19ItyXg1OGctttJKuKs/edit#

Some might find the opening verses of this week's haftarah disconcerting. It broadens the brotherly conflict between Yaakov and Esav into a national struggle between two nations - Israel and Edom (considered the descendants of Esav), while maintaining the primacy of Israel. Just to make things clear, at the time of this prophecy, when the Jews had just returned from Babylonian exile, the Jews harbored enormous animosity toward the Edomites who had sided with the Babylonians in their conquest of Judea. So, when one reads a prophecy where God promises that He will requite what the Edomites had done, you should not expect any complaints from a Jewish audience. Malachi makes a theological point from this promise: "And your own eyes shall see and you shall say, 'May the Lord be great beyond the region of Israel.' (1:5)

This message, namely, that God's realm of action extended beyond the narrow borders of the nations of Israel and Judea became Judaism's normative message after the return from exile. Still, this message encapsulated in geo-political violence did not characterize later rabbinic thinking and consequently, this verse underwent a transformation in meaning as characterized in the following midrash: "'And your eyes shall see and you shall say, the Lord is great' – And the Holy One Blessed be He said to Israel: My children, study much Scripture and learn lots of Mishnah, until I (God), Myself, come and say to you what is pure and what is impure." (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah chapter 13 end, Ish Shalom ed. p. 68)

Implicit in this message is the recognition that God's greatness in the world will be achieved not through great military triumphs or world-historical events, but through the

serious and diligent study of Torah. This idea represents what Professor Gerson Cohen, the late Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, noted as one of the preeminent contributions of rabbinic Judaism to world civilizations, namely, the universal study of religious texts as a discipline for communing with God. The more people study, the greater the recognition of God's greatness.
This recalls a debate the Talmudic sages had over the preeminence of Torah study over deed: "Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper floor of Nitza's house, in Lod, when this question was raised before them: Is study greater, or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Deed is greater. Rabbi Akiba demurred, saying: Study is greater, for it leads to practice. Then all [of the sages present] responded: Study is greater, for it leads to action." (adapted from Kiddushin 40b) The bottom line, for the Jew, is that Torah study not only shapes the way a person thinks but also leads us to shaping the world as God envisions it.

Choose not to be a bystander but to confront racism head on by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

http://rabbisacks.org/choose-not-to-be-a-bystander-but-to-confront-racism-head-on-thought-for-the-day/

A few days ago, two Jewish children were sitting with their parents in a train on the London Underground when a man came up to them and for almost twenty minutes harangued them with antisemitic abuse. Someone intervened but was threatened with violence. Then a young woman confronted the man, and calmly told him what he was doing was wrong. This distracted him and saved the day. It was a heroic act. The hero was a young Muslim woman wearing a hijab. Her name was Asma Shuweikh.
She herself has known what it's like to be abused. Muslims suffer from this as much as Jews. But instead of allowing that to intimidate her, she used it to identify with the Jewish family. That is what the Book of Exodus means when it says, "Do not oppress a stranger for you know what it feels like to be a stranger." Use your pain to sensitise you to the pain of others.
That we in Britain should still be talking about antisemitism, Islamophobia, or racism at all, is deeply shocking. But it reminds us of the distance between public utterances of politicians and the reality, and it's been like that for a very long time. Thomas Jefferson who drafted the line in the American Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," was a slave owner. A century after the French revolution, with its commitment to liberty equality and fraternity, France at the time of the Dreyfus trial had become a world leader in antisemitism. The Germany of Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven and Kant, that gave us some of the finest expressions of universal humanity, later became the birthplace of the most murderous racism Europe has ever known. Racism has returned to Europe and to Britain – are we, and the politicians who represent us, doing enough to stop it?
We still have to fight for the truth that every group should feel safe; and that our differences, not just our similarities, are what make us human. The Bible taught this in its opening chapter by saying that every human being is in the image and likeness of God. Meaning that one who is not in my image – whose colour, culture or creed is not mine – is nonetheless in God's image.
Asma Shuweikh, the lady in the train, who later said, "I wouldn't hesitate to do it again," chose not to be a bystander but to confront racism head on. Her quiet courage should be a model for us all.

Yahrtzeits

Len Grossman remembers his father Harry Grossman on Mon. Dec. 2 (Kislev 4).
Perry Fine remembers his mother Rosette Fine (Reizel bat Lazar v'Sarah) on Wed. Dec. 4(Kislev 6).
Nancy Isaacson remembers her mother Ruth Isaacson on Wed. Dec. 4 (Kislev 6).