

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Toldot

Have you ever had a favorite song that you loved hearing over and over again – you would turn the station dial looking for it – record it onto a cassette or even CD ten times in fifteen songs? Has that song ever then been so over played that you never want to hear it again? This is the best description I can muster for some of the main story lines of this week's Torah portion. The stories of Esau spurning the birthright over porridge and Isaac blessing the wrong son are good ones, except that given the normal commentary offering, one would think that they were the only stories in what is actually one of the longer weekly Torah portions in the cycle. Ok, we know that Esau is evil for doing what he did and that Isaac really did not bless the wrong son in blessing the younger Jacob ... oh yes, and we know that the first born son never takes the double portion and blessing he is supposed to get according to the rules of biblical antiquity. Or, at least we know that every Rabbi has at least once based a commentary on one of these three ideas, at some point in his/her Rabbinate. I got stuck on a more remote part of this portion. Last week, I was teaching at a local church, and I pointed to a Midrash from our tradition that argued that Abraham actually killed Isaac on top of the mountain (the binding of Isaac story). Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer tells that story, quoting from more ancient sources. The question raised in response was obvious, "But how could he have died, he still has to get married and have kids!" Well, the early Midrash teaches that he was resurrected and brought back to life. In reading several commentaries to this week's portion, I found another interesting answer. The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, citing a 16th century sage, argued that Isaac spent the time from the binding story, through his marriage to Rebekah (3 years) in the Garden of Eden (and then returned back to this world). The medieval sage argued that the binding story was symbolic for the ending of Isaac's single life, while the marriage was his rebirth or resurrection, "marriage as a person's second birth: first, the soul enters into the body and assumes a physical existence, then, at a later point in life, it further "descends" into the physical state by marrying."

With the idea that the Isaac story was already well used as a metaphor for renewal and future redemption already in my head, I read about the wells that Abraham had dug and that the Philistines had filled in. Isaac re-dug them. He re-dug three of them. The first two caused violent conflict with the nomadic shepherds. RaMBaN (Nachmonides) taught that the first two wells allude to the first and second Temples. They were built with the best of intentions of settling the land and building a peaceful community, yet both were destroyed in violence. Isaac then dug a third well, which the sage tells us symbolizes the third Temple, yet to be built. There was no violence over the third well. Isaac dwelt at the well in peace. All who came to drink from it drank from it in peace. This, of course – is the promise of the third Temple – the coming of the messianic age.

The notion that our youth is spent lacking spiritual "wholeness" absolutely coincides with the notion that the first Temples lacked maturity. Just as we speak of the foibles of youth, our tradition speaks of the ills of the first and second Temple period. Our youth ends (or at least it is supposed to) as we accept responsibility not only for our own lives, but for the lives of our partners and eventually, our children. Our celebrations are supposed to become more soulful/more meaningful, even as we accept responsibility for the lives who join our own. The Temple, as Philo of Alexandria taught 2000 years ago, is not a walled structure in Jerusalem, but the fire that burns on the altar of our hearts. To construct the third Temple, we have to accept maturation as a people. We have to come to understand that amidst

our everyday celebrations, we bear responsibility for the sacred lives of the people all around us. We are, in fact, our brother's keeper, and there is no one to do the work of healing and securing the world, if we are not going to accept the responsibility for acting. No differently than a spouse has to accept "oneness" with a new life partner, each of us has to buy into the "oneness" we experience with each other sharing a community. No marriage can work where there is a "Mine vs. Yours" mentality. No world can heal, no community can progress, and no society can grow where "Mine vs. Yours" is our rule of being. This speaks to the responsibility we take on when we build a house next to someone else, occupy a locker at school or at work amidst a bank of lockers, or choose to exist in a community where services make us interdependent, one on another. This week, I have shared experience with those whose lives were saved because people accepted this responsibility – laying the foundation for this third Temple. I have also experienced time with those who have just as quickly removed those very same bricks, returning us to our exile from any spiritual fulfillment. Our tradition teaches us that if you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world, but if you let one falter, it is as if you have destroyed it all. In some real sense, it is time to realize that our worlds throw us together as though we were married to each other, and as such responsible for each other; there is no escaping this truth. This means that we also have to accept the responsibility for laying a more firm foundation on which future generations can build the Third Temple in each of our communities. Shabbat Shalom.