

TIMELESS TORAH



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha
with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

PARSHAT TOLDOT - The Subtle Origins of Complex Conflict

Rome vs. Jerusalem

Professor Martin Goodman, in his remarkable work *Rome and Jerusalem* (2007, p.33), draws a thought-provoking picture of the contrasting roles of Rome and Jerusalem in the ancient world and their influence on modern-day thought: *'Rome and Jerusalem have existed for centuries in the Western imagination as opposite ideals of grandeur and sanctity. Rome, the 'Eternal City', has long been conceived as the epitome of magnificent power imposed through military might and the force of law and as a warning of the dangers of moral corruption. The picturesque ruins of the imperial city have both fascinated and repelled, stimulating admiration for brilliant achievements by past generations and rumination on the fallibility of human desire for glory. In contrast, Jerusalem has been idealized as a holy place of revelations, miracles and spiritual intensity ... They were two cities that shared a political world fostered by friendships, alliances, patronage. But they were two cities which, as it turned out, came into conflict with terrible results'*.

According to the Sages, the conflict between Rome and Jerusalem was far more ancient than this. *Parshat Toldot* introduces us to the precursors of these two great cities: Yaakov, as the forefather of the Jewish nation, and Esav, as the progenitor of *Edom*, or Rome. We will explore the origins of this conflict through the lens of the parshah and thereby seek to understand vital lessons in how such conflicts can possibly be avoided.

The Myrtle & Thorn

The Torah does not divulge much about the early childhood of Yaakov and Esav, but we are told that *'vayigdelu hane'arim* — the lads grew up' (25:27). The insinuation is that they grew up together, with a shared education. But as soon as they came of age, their paths diverged. Yaakov was an *'ish tam*—a wholesome person' and was *'yoshev ohalim*—dwelled in tents,' whereas Esav was *'yodea tzayid ish sadeh*—proficient as a hunter; a man of the field'. The Midrash (Bereshit Rabba 63) compares this to a myrtle bush and a thorn growing side by side. At first both seem harmless, but as they begin to mature, one brings forth fragrant leaves while the other grows thorns. So too, these two boys lived in the same household and shared the same education, but when they reached the age of thirteen, one went to study Torah while the other went to the houses of idolatry.

Based on this Midrash, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch develops a powerful lesson that can guide us in recognising and eliminating the sources of tension even before they develop. The sharp contrast between these two grandsons of Avraham Avinu was not only a result of their natural tendencies but was also caused by mistakes in their upbringing. Rav Hirsch suggests that Yitzchak and Rivkah overlooked a cardinal principle in education: *chanoch lanaar al pi darko* (Mishlei 22:6) —every child must be educated in the way that suits the qualities

and tendencies latent to the depth of his or her personality. Esav felt trapped in an educational setting that failed to meet his unique needs. As a result, he rebelled, embracing negative behaviours with disastrous consequences.

A Failed Masquerade

With this in mind, we can better understand the second half of the parshah. Yitzchak is misled by Esav's duplicitous behaviour and intends to give him the coveted blessings. Rivkah, however, knew that the blessings were meant to be given to Yaakov and she encourages Yaakov to disguise himself and take the blessings in his place. What is going on here? How could Rivkah think that the blessings, which were the heritage of Avraham Avinu, could be taken through trickery? And how could she believe that this clumsy masquerade, dressing Yaakov up in goatskins, would succeed in deceiving Yitzchak?

Rav Hirsch writes that Yitzchak was aware of the differences between his two sons, but he wanted the two to create a partnership. He wanted Esav to excel in materialism and stand beside his brother's spiritual power. Rivkah, however, knew better. She remembered from the house of her brother, Lavan, that such division can only lead to misery. She knew that only a house pervaded by the spirit of Avraham could gain from the blessings of physical wealth, and the twin blessings of spirituality and prosperity must stay

together within a single fully developed personality. She knew, however, that Yitzchak would not accept this without experiencing personally the tragic error of his assessment of his children and she therefore devised this ingenious plan *with the intention to fail!* Rivkah knew that the truth would eventually be discovered, and that is exactly what she wanted. She intended to show Yitzchak how easy it had been to be fooled by the empty trappings of Esav's righteousness. Indeed, when Yitzchak realised what had happened, he immediately trembled and exclaimed, *'Gam baruch yihye*—[Yaakov] should retain these blessings (27:33)'.

In this approach to this exceptionally difficult *parshah*, Rav Hirsch guides us in understanding the trajectory of events behind the epic conflict between Yaakov and Esav, Jerusalem and Rome. The story was tragic, and it remains tragic in the sense that the development of world history could have been entirely different had this story unfolded in an alternative way. Esav may have abused his free will to manipulate his father and antagonise his brother, but the lesson for generations to come is that with foresight and early perception of people's very individual natures, even deep tensions can be dispelled.

Next week: Parshat Vayeitzei -
The Pathway of Yaakov: Finding
Truth & Wisdom in Exile