D'var Torah for Toldot – Drash Responsibly
November 26, 2022; Congregation Sinai, San José, CA
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Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach. Yes, chag sameach. Because of course it's Shabbat Yom Turkey. In more traditional Hebrew, turkey is Tarnegol Hodu. So, while we didn't do it today, there once was a special Hallel for the Shabbat of Thanksgiving weekend, where we'd recite Tarnegol Hodu LaHashem Ki Tov – literally "turkey for G-d because it's good."

This is the third drash I'm delivering this year. The first was on Rosh Hashanah – January 1st. The second was during Passover, but you'd need to have listened really hard because it was back east. The Talmud teaches that comedy works in threes. The Talmud also teaches that bad things come in threes. So we'll see in the next few moments if this ends up laughable or laughably bad. Or, perhaps, this is akin to the Torah having said "I give to you a blessing and a curse", if this ends up being both.

But I should point out that the patriarchs also came in threes, as today's Torah reading touched on. The parsha's name, Toldot, means generations, and it starts with over-articulating the connection between Abraham and Isaac. It then goes on to recount more of Isaac's story and the first part of Jacob's.

So, with the long history of Jewish comedians, does this mean that the patriarchs were the original coming of comedy in threes? Or were the patriarchs imperfect people, which could better align with bad things coming in threes? Or both?

Let's take one story arc from this week's parsha as an example. Conveniently, it has three parts. First, near the beginning of the parsha, Rebecca is pregnant with twins. The Big G says to her she's carrying two nations, one kingdom will become mightier than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.

Second event: As the boys grew up, Esau came back exhausted from hunting one day, and asked Jacob for what he was cooking before he collapsed. Jacob barters for Esau to sell him his birthright in exchange. Esau does so, and after he moved to the couch to sleep off all that turkey and stuffing the Torah says "and Esau despised the birthright."

Third, eventually when Isaac's old he tells Esau to go hunting for some takeout and after lunch he'll bless Esau as one does for the firstborn. Rebecca overhears this and famously sets Jacob up to receive the blessing instead.

Now, break away for a moment from our Sunday School infused perceptions of the story. From an early age, we have an understanding of who's the good guy, who's the bad guy, and we know how the story of the Torah goes so we see indiviual events fit into that larger narrative. Not saying that's wrong. But is there useful nuance that is easily missed because of this? Of course there is. There always is. The Talmud is an entire bookcase of elaborations about easily-missed nuance.

In part one, the Big G tells Rebecca that Esau will serve Isaac. In part three, Rebecca works behind the scenes to help ensure that it comes true. Is Rebecca doing it because the

Big G "told her to" in part one? If so, is Esau's beef not really with Jacob but with the Big G instead, since He first brought it up?

Or is Rebecca not thinking about what she was told while pregnant, and the Big G was simply foretelling what she would herself manipulate into happening?

One could probably write a thesis supporting either direction. (Many probably already have.) And in their ways, neither would be wrong, and both notions could mutually coexist even though they sound contradictory.

Or maybe it was neither of these? When Jacob trades soup for birthright, the Torah says nothing leading up to it. This time there's no mention of Rebecca working behind the scenes, or that Jacob was aware (then or ever) of what the Big G told Rebecca while he and Esau were still simmering in the oven. Did Rebecca game this event, too, and for some reason the Torah just doesn't mention it? Or was it Jacob's own spontaneous idea? And, if so, was the Big G predicting *that* at the beginning?

Obviously, these events can be interpreted in several ways. This story could be portrayed anywhere from an episode of Three's Company to a 1980s TV Movie of the Week filled with family intrigue and deception. Or various points in between. What are the key variables that make the difference? Motivation and communication. What do we believe the motivations of the people were? What was and wasn't communicated, and how?

What's more, the answers to these questions are driven by the motives of the people doing the interpreting. What do they *want* to believe the biblical characters' motivations were? What do they want to use the biblical story to communicate? What's the narrative they somehow want this to fit?

A quick example. Ponder these early phrases that the Big G says to Rebecca while she's pregnant: "one kingdom will become mightier than the other" and "the elder will serve the younger." It sounds like, because the elder will serve the younger, that the younger's kingdom will obviously be the mightier. But these are separate phrases. Yes, they're connected by an "and," but remember that Torah trope isn't just a pretty melody – it's grammatical. It provides the structure of the words and phrases in lieu of punctuation, because punctuation simply didn't exist when the Torah was written. As I tell my students, trope helps us understand what the Torah is really saying so we don't have misconceptions like the difference between "time to eat, comma, grandma" and "time to eat grandma."

Here, the trope indicates that these are separate phrases – that there's a break before the "and" – rather than them being one long thought. That doesn't mean they're not related, but doesn't confirm that they are. So it's possible that the elder will serve the younger, *and* also that the elder's kingdom could become mightier than the younger's kingdom. We just assume that if one's serving the other, the mightier kingdom is the one receiving service. "Might makes right" and all that. But also consider that "mightier" and "elder" are the first part of each phrase, so there's parallelism between *those* in the sentence

structure. And, not for nothing, twenty years after Isaac's blessing, when Jacob comes home he's greeted by Esau leading a large army that overshadows Jacob and his brood.

And if you apply it to today, certainly the descendants of Esau are enormous in populace and land at the very least, relative to the descendants of Jacob. And it's worth specifying that neither serves the other (nor should they).

So there are numerous ways that the same events – the same words – can be interpreted. And interestingly they can co-exist, even if it seems like they contradict.

Though I should disclaim it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes conflicting narratives simply can't coexist. For example, a certain incident occurred on January 6th of last year, and there are a variety of ways that the same specifics are contextualized in wildly different ways. A difference here is motivation – some of those contexts are motivated by fitting a particular narrative, no matter how badly it fits. It ends up more important that it fit the narrative well enough, than fitting the facts very well. Perhaps some are knowingly covering up to save face. But many if not most interpret things as they do not because they believe in doing evil, but because they believe they're doing what they understand to be right. In other words, if you just pictured one "side" of this as being deceitful about this, there are people who are equally certain of the same about the other "side."

By the way, if I could eliminate the word "side" from everyday vocabulary, I would. It gets so overused and casts everything as being one versus the other, often in situations that aren't that binary – and shouldn't be. It forces people away from the reality in between extremes.

So, yes, this isn't just about socio-political events, but also in personal, everyday life. Not to tell tales, but I have a few exes from over the centuries who portrayed some things very differently than I did. I'd say they did it to save face, and I'd say that with certainty. But… probably so would they. So, who would people believe? And what disservice is done because of that? To perceptions of people. Bleeding into interactions with those people. Or opportunities for them. It can get impactful.

One could take such a circumstance and try to figure who's saving face and who's telling the truth. But often reality is somewhere in between, no matter how well intended. And people often don't take the time. And who's to say they'll get to the absolute truth of it?

But there are some other events in this parsha, and let's see what directions they might go in, in terms of carrying multiple, parallel, seemingly contradictory meaning.

For example, there are a couple of journeys in this parsha. First, between the brothers' birthright brunch and the firstborn blessing buffet, a famine drove Isaac to the land of the Philistines. They stayed in that general area for quite a while. The Philistines had refilled the water wells that Abraham had previously dug there. Isaac reopened the wells and then a few new ones, because the local shepherds fought with him over the wells. Unfortunately, they just couldn't leave wells enough alone.

Jacob later also took a journey, but instead of being motivated by famine it was motivated by family. After Esau learned that Jacob got the blessing for the firstborn, Esau was ready to kill him. Rebecca tells Jacob he has to flee, and she justifies the trip to Isaac by saying that he needs to send Jacob on a matchmaking trip to Rebecca's brother Lavan. And that's where this week's episode ends. Confused? You won't be after next week's episode of the Torah.

There's another timely tale of a journey that's not in the Torah. An origin of Thanksgiving celebration is the pilgrims landing in 1620. Conventional wisdom is that the pilgrims were fleeing for a new, faraway land to get away from the shadow of religious oppression. Similar to how Jacob took on a journey to a faraway land to get away from the shadow of fraternal oppression.

Interestingly, though, there are those who point out that the pilgrims really didn't need to cross the pond for religious freedom. Apparently, they'd actually fled England twelve years earlier and settled in Dutch territory where they suffered no religious oppression at all. If anything, it seems most likely they took to sea to find new opportunity because of economic hardship.

If we can have multiple wildly different interpretations of a specific event, imagine how much more afield we can go when two events are conflated into one like this. If it was deemed okay to conflate the pilgrims' fleeing in 1608 with their arrival here in 1620, ignoring the twelve years in between, what else is it conventionally acceptable to gloss over? And what harms and benefits are provided in the doing of each?

Now, it's true that comedy works in threes. And while this wasn't a setup for me to make a reference to Yom Turkey by saying "who does a turkey thank when it's called up for an Aliyah?" "gabbai gabbai gabbai." – I'll delve into a third and final extrapolation.

As nearly a couple of you might recall, in my copious spare time I've been slowly translating the works of Moshe Chafetz, a rabbi from late 1600s Venice who in several ways is not what you'd expect.

His 311th yahrtzeit was on Thanksgiving Day this week, which makes it especially interesting to cite this small bit of his Torah commentary on today's parsha, from his commentary published the year before he died.

When the elderly Isaac asks Esau to go get some coldcuts before he gives him the blessing for the firstborn, he leads into it saying:

> Behold now I have grown old I don't know the day of my death: (27:2)
> וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא זָקַנְתִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי׃

R. Chafetz writes that the young man doesn't think that death comes, but when he grows old then he'll truly see it drawing near. So Isaac said here, now, that "I have grown old"

but with that he said "I don't know" and he didn't say "I was thinking it is" the day of my death:

But he also offers another opinion. The young man will foresee mortality in years. And the old man foresees it in days. Therefore Isaac because he was old didn't know the day of his death, which was imminent in days:

And not years. In the span of two sentences he offers two different takes on the same verse. In one he says that young people don't think that death is coming, and in the other he says that young people foresee mortality in years. That sounds contradictory. But the points he makes with each complement each other, as different ways that checkout time is perceived relative to age. And each offers unique applications – if one doesn't suit you, maybe the other does. In this instance, neither seems harmful. But that's something the Torah does – it gives us the opportunity to apply the same things in different ways. It's just up to us, all of humanity, to use it responsibly. The problem comes from different interpretations of what "responsibly" means.

One other bit. I said that Thanksgiving was R. Chafetz's 311th yahrtzeit. That's both true and misleading. He died on the 30th of Cheshvan. Many note his yahrtzeit in most years on the 29th of Cheshvan. Some note it on the 1st of Kislev. Why? Because Cheshvan usually has 29 days, and no 30th.

Hold onto your hats. Everyone knows about February 29th. Some know that the Hebrew calendar has leap years – about 7 out of every 19 years we add an entire month. We have two Adars.

By the way, if you want your mind blown, which Adar is the one that's added? Adar I or Adar II? Adar I is the extra month. Why? Purim stays within a few weeks of Passover, so it's in Adar II.

But what's this 30th of Cheshvan thing? Well, Rosh Hashanah can't begin on a Wednesday or Friday. Why? Because Yom Kippur can't be on a Friday or a Sunday.

Why? Because if Yom Kippur is on a Friday, you don't have time right before Shabbat to prepare for it. Similarly, if Yom Kippur is on Sunday, you don't have time right before it to prepare for it because it'd be Shabbat.

So, every few years we have to add a 30th of Cheshvan to keep the days of the week aligned properly. So, technically, there have been only about 100 of his actual yahrtzeit days. But that doesn't mean he was still around a hundred years ago – though there's some fun trivia where a 19th Century republisher of his Torah commentary mistakenly believed R. Chafetz had lived to be over 100 years old. It's a funny story, but you can ask me after class.

What's the point in raising the Rosh Hashanah Postponement Rules now, when we only recently traded in finishing the dishes – both cleaning plates and eating leftovers – from the High Holy Days for Thanksgiving leftovers and dirty dish piles? Well, secular Rosh

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Hashanah is just five weeks away, but the main point is that even something as simple as a calendar entry can lead to multiple, seemingly contradictory interpretations, which can either peacefully coexist or be used as bludgeons in the eternal struggle humanity seems to pull itself back into year after year until the Moshiach comes or the Mets win another World Series, whichever comes first. So, especially on this holiday weekend, drash responsibly.

And here's a parting gift for you. In some years, the R''H Postponement Rules abstain from a 30th of Cheshvan *and* remove the 30th of Kislev. That means Chanukah, in those years, ends on the third of Tevet instead of the second of Tevet. One extra day of presents. Right?

Shabbat Shalom. Chag Sameach. And Roll Tide.

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