



5 Ways to live with family frailty

In our faith family as much as our blood family, life deals cruel blows: loss, betrayal, grief, shattered dreams. Torah records it all, even sets our teeth on edge (like the rape of Dinah, in a forthcoming Torah portion). And through it all, our God is faithful. Love finds a way. Grace forges a path. Where there is nothing, something is born. Day by day we are invited to embrace this mystery.

1. Acknowledge the reality of human limitations, mistakes, weakness and sin. The Torah certainly does. With the help of Scripture, can you see your family as broken yet graced, wounded yet loved?

2. Grieve what makes you sad. Torah records the anguished cries of Rebekah in her painful pregnancy (Gen. 25:22), of Esau as a victim of deception (Gen. 27:34), and of so many other biblical characters.

3. Inquire into God's ways. That is, call out to God, seek divine insight, 'pray with pluck,' like Rebekah. She doesn't just passively endure her

painful ordeal; she goes 'to inquire of the Lord' (Gen. 25:22).

4. Trust that there is a loving mystery at work in all this. Perhaps it can't be 'seen' or 'felt' at this difficult moment, but make an act of faith anyway. Scripture attests to the ultimate triumph of God's love.

5. Move on. There is a time for reflection, grief, prayer and making amends. And there is a time for just 'getting on with it,' moving forward in life, and allowing our brave steps to forge a new and more hopeful future. This in itself can be part of healing grace.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 25:19—28:9

Toledot:
'generations'

Why reflect on Torah?

Christianity, then, came to birth in the bosom of first century Judaism. Although it gradually detached itself from Judaism, the Church could never forget its Jewish roots, something clearly attested in the New Testament; it even recognised a certain priority for Jews... (Rm 1:16).

"The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures"
(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001)

Vatican II issued a dramatic wake-up call for the faithful to rediscover their important links with the Jewish people.

Numerous aspects of Christian life and worship which we take for granted in fact grew out of the Jewish faith; e.g., the calendar of feasts, the use of word and gesture in sacraments, the daily rhythms of prayer, the reading of scriptures followed by an explanation of the text, the sacred meal, anointing, laying on of hands.... Most especially, we remember that the bible of the early disciples of Jesus was that of Israel. Each week, *Light of Torah* reflects on a portion of the Torah (the first five books of the bible) drawing on Jewish insights. It is a way for Christians to be sensitized to the Jewish pulse that throbs in the person of Jesus and in the depths of the Church.



Light of Torah
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 25:19–28:9

Our Torah portion opens with the story of a difficult pregnancy. Eventually Rebekah gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. The tensions between the brothers are exacerbated by a strong-minded (manipulative?) mother and a passive (weak?) father. From chapter 27 tensions climax as Jacob and his mother conspire to ensure that Jacob receives the blessing which would ordinarily go to the firstborn (Esau). The Torah portion closes with Jacob fleeing for his life in the face of Esau's wrath.

Tasting Torah

In our Torah portion you will notice that Jacob is blessed by his father not once but twice; the first time under the pretext of being Esau, and the second with his true identity in full view. After reading the story of Esau and Jacob (chapters 25 and 27), return to the text for a closer look at the two blessings:

1. Blessing intended for Esau: *“May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine...”* (See Gen.27:27-29).
2. Blessing for Jacob: *“May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful... May he give to you the blessing of Abraham... so that you may take possession of the land”* (See Gen.28:3-4).

Share your observations with a friend.

Touching Torah

The contrast between the blessings is striking. The first (meant for Esau) promises material prosperity. But it does not mention the divine promises made to Abraham, including election of a chosen people and the gift of a special land. These are part of the second blessing, clearly meant for Jacob. It would appear that even if Esau *hadn't* been denied the blessing he sought, he still would not have received the Abrahamic mission. The covenant God made with Abraham, the Torah seems to suggest, is to pass through Jacob, not Esau. Which raises the question: is this what their parents understood all along? Continue to discuss in *havrutah*, with a friend.

Depthing Torah

Of course the intentions of Rebekah are explicit. In her engineering of the sequence of events she boldly expresses her view that Jacob *must* be the one to carry the Abrahamic promise.

But what about Isaac? Is he really as blind as he makes out? (Recall the drawn-out sequence in 27:19-26 where he repeatedly questions his son's identity.) Does he, like Rebekah, understand Jacob to be the chosen one, but can't bring himself to admit it? Is it a case of going along with the charade, reluctantly giving a muted blessing, followed by the fuller blessing only when denial is no longer tenable?

In the tradition we find the sages discussing Isaac's 'dim eyes.' One opinion is that his vision is *spiritually* impaired. Favoring his first-born, and wanting to comply with the conventions of natural birthright, Isaac 'turns a blind eye' to the unexpected choices of God. Says Abravanel: *“His affection for Esau blinded him to his faults... His powers of judgment grew dim and he was not able to see reality.”*¹ Do you agree?

Of course, Esau's unsuitability is a whole topic of discussion in itself, but for now, let's stay with the question of parental insight and intentions. What do you make of the family and spiritual dynamics in this Torah portion?

Doing Torah

Think of a time in your life when God's plan didn't seem to follow the expected ways of family/parish/community life. Does today's Torah reading speak to that experience? How?



From the Midrash

“Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see” (27:1). Commenting on this verse, the midrash refers to that terrifying event on Mt Moriah when Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son:

For when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac, the ministering angels wept... Tears dropped from their eyes into Isaac's, and left their mark upon them, and so when he became old his eyes dimmed...

(Gen. R. LXV. 10).

Once again we note how Isaac's near-death experience continues to haunt the characters as the book of Genesis unfolds.

1. Abravanel: 15th c. Spanish-Jewish scholar. Quoted by Leibowitz, p.275. Bibliography: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.