

Think Big and Start from the Beginning

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The Jewish Center

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Having lived in New York for the better part of the last 20 years, I was sure that I'd heard just about every possible kind of solicitation from panhandlers on the subway. "Can you spare some change?" "Can you help me buy a cup of coffee?" But this week I heard something new on the downtown C train around 145th St. "Excuse me, sir. Can you help me out," the gentleman said. "I'm trying to collect \$1,000 before the next stop."

I said, "That's very ambitious."

He said, "Hey man: You gotta think big."

And thinking big is really the theme of our parsha. Yaakov – along with his mother – has great expectations about his future. And Yitzchak has big dreams about bestowing the blessing of the firstborn on Esav.

But both of these central characters make for very difficult reading. Having grown accustomed to the heroism and moral greatness of Avraham over these past few Parshiot, his son and grandson seem almost other-worldly.

Yitzchak comes across as passive at best and uninspired at worst. His life looks like a feeble attempt to retrace the path of his father. It would be impossible to imagine a scene in which Avraham is not the arbiter of his own destiny. Yet Yitzchak somehow lacks the zeal to be a trailblazer.

And while Yaakov is certainly more intriguing as a personality, his character sets us on edge for a different reason. Here we are reading the book meant to guide us down the path of righteousness and integrity and when we meet the father of the 12 tribes we meet a man who seems to play fast and loose with the basic rules of human decency. He bends the truth and preys on the vulnerabilities of his brother and father. We can go to great lengths to justify Yaakov's behavior. And chazal do. But why would one of our holy patriarchs act in such a way that requires justification?

With your permission, I'd like to offer something of a radical reinterpretation of our Parsha.

And it begins with the supposition that Avraham Avinu was a great theological innovator and that his life story conveyed to us three timeless messages.

First was the message of the land. לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך. Leave Padan Aram and head to the land of Canaan.

Second was the message of blessing: ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה. You will be a source of blessing to all those around you.

And finally, of course, is the message of חסד. When people are in need, it's Avraham who comes to their defense; it's Avraham who invites them in and cares for them.

Now that Avraham has faded into the background, a question of monumental proportion looms overhead. Avraham's legacy is hanging in the balance. At great sacrifice, we've established that Yitzchak will be his heir. But we've yet to establish an answer to the most fundamental question of all: Is it the form or substance of Avraham's narrative that's meant to be transmitted to future generations? Should his children and grandchildren be iconoclastic because Avraham was iconoclastic? Or should his heirs instead attach themselves to the stuff of Avraham's moral innovations?

What I want to argue is that Toldot is a biblical diptych; a side-by-side portrait of two competing models.

The first is Yitzchak's. Stay the course and toe the line. Yitzchak literally follows in the footsteps of his father, visiting the same places, digging the same wells and interacting with the same people. Just think of Avraham's three great messages: Yitzchak remains eternally in the land of Israel; he considers it a top priority to dispense blessings; and the Torah even goes out of its way to tell us that he performed chesed like his father: ויעש להם משתה ויאכלו וישתו. After sealing a covenant with Avimelech, it's Yitzchak who provides the food and drink – just as Avraham would have.

And incidentally, that's why Yitzchak favors Esav, the man of the field. Yitzchak is the only patriarch described as being לשוה בשדה. He was a man of the field, too, and saw in his older son an image of himself. At the expense of drama or intrigue, in the preservation of Avraham's legacy Yitzchak privileges continuity and constancy.

Yaakov has a very different idea. It's not the substance of Avraham's teachings that's paramount, but rather his grandfather's spirit of challenging conventions. In the 21st century lexicon we might call it a commitment to disruptive innovation. And so Yaakov is all-too-happy to upend the family orthodoxies.

When it comes to the land, Yaakov ends up leaving Canaan and returning to Avraham's birthplace. לך לך – the path toward the Promised Land is replaced with Rivkah's words ברח לך – flee from here and run away from the land that Hashem had shown your fathers.

וזהיה ברכה: Instead of being a source of blessing to others, we have Yaakov's protracted attempt to steal the blessing.

And food – the basic ingredient in the recipe for chesed – is turned on its head. Whereas Avraham had used it to provide intrinsic benefit to guests and strangers, Yaakov uses it as instrument in a subversive attempt to deceive his brother and father.

It will take Yaakov years before he's able to come around to the ways of Avraham and Yitzchak.

But eventually, he too, returns to the land.

He bestows blessings on everyone: Esav and Pharaoh; his children and grandchildren. And he ultimately sends gifts of food to Esav and Pharaoh as well.

This was Yitzchak's wisdom – a wisdom that Yaakov hadn't yet appreciated: Times of transition don't call for insurrection – they call for a return to well-worn norms.

My predecessor, the second rabbi of The Jewish Center, was a man who understood this message in a very deep way. Particularly in the years before and after the Holocaust, there was a growing sense that Orthodox Jewish life in America would die a certain and inconsequential death. A hero of his generation, Rabbi Jung made certain not only that Modern Orthodoxy would survive, but that its adherents would stand at the forefront of a Jewish renaissance. And at least in one sense, he did it by returning to the basics. He spoke often of Reverence, Righteousness and Rahmanut: core values cherished by every descendant of Avraham Avinu. Sure, there would be moments to think about innovation and integration, but uncertain times called for a return to certain values.

Rabbi Jung was an extraordinary communal leader, but he was also an extraordinary בעל חסד on a personal and human level. Whenever there was a Jew in need – whether it was on 86th St. or half way around the world, Rabbi Jung made it his business to help.

Moe Fuerstein, the great Boston philanthropist, once recounted the following story about his father.

Recently a distinguished senior member of the Brookline community, in discussing the sad passing of Rabbi Jung, reminisced about his escape from Germany and his experiences in America. In 1935, he said, after losing his first job in the United States because he was *shomer Shabbat*, he went to Rabbi Jung. He feared that he would lose his *yiddishkeit* if he stayed in New York—a situation he saw happening all too frequently among his friends. He told the Rabbi that he would be willing to go to any smaller community that Rabbi Jung might recommend. Without a moment's hesitation, Rabbi Jung said, "Go to Malden. Tell my friend Sam Feuerstein that I sent you, and he will give you a job." The young man was hesitant and worried. He wrote to my father, telling him what Rabbi Jung had suggested, but there was no reply. The young man went to Rabbi Jung again. The Rabbi patiently responded, "Just go to Malden and you will be provided with a job."

When the applicant arrived in Malden, my father replied that employment would be impossible. He had just laid off 80 people, and the union would probably go on strike if an outsider were hired. For a few moments there was silence. Then my father murmured to himself, "How can I let down my good friend Rabbi Jung?" He picked up the telephone, called the superintendent, and told him to find a job for the young man.

We established the Rabbi Jung Memorial Fund not only to pay tribute to his memory, but to perpetuate his legacy of chesed and his acts of charity that earned him a reputation as one of the great Jewish leaders of the 20th century. Through this fund, The Jewish Center is able to help those in need with both discretion and dignity.

Every day people call on us for help.

- Someone's fallen behind and can't make the rent;
- A family's breadwinner and is out of work and the tuition costs are just too much;
- Or someone is sick and their insurance just won't cover enough of the bill. The list goes on.

We've all been preoccupied with the news and with current events. We have all kinds of anxieties – both local and global. It's at moments like these when we do well to go back to the Avraham and Yitzchak playbook.

Of course we're thinking about Israel and the victims of the recent fires.
We want to be a source of blessing to all those who need an uplift.
And we want to perform acts of Tzeddakah and chesed.

The Rabbi Jung Fund has been and continues to be our community's way of helping on all three fronts.

We all want to know that the money we set aside for צדקה will matter. I can assure you that so many of the gifts we make from the Rabbi Jung Fund are nothing less than transformative.

We're not going to make an open appeal this morning as we've done in years past, but I hope you'll make a personal pledge to contribute generously. Of course a gift on any size is helpful. But to paraphrase my new friend on the C train, let's think big.