Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Toldot
November 18, 2023 *** 5 Kislev, 5784

Toldot in a Nutshell
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3178/jewish/Toldot-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Toldot," means "Generations" and it is found in Genesis 25:19.

Isaac and Rebecca endure twenty childless years, until their prayers are answered and Rebecca conceives. She experiences a difficult pregnancy as the “children struggle inside her”; G-d tells her that “there are two nations in your womb,” and that the younger will prevail over the elder.

Esau emerges first; Jacob is born clutching Esau’s heel. Esau grows up to be “a cunning hunter, a man of the field”; Jacob is “a wholesome man,” a dweller in the tents of learning. Isaac favors Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning exhausted and hungry from the hunt one day, Esau sells his birthright (his rights as the firstborn) to Jacob for a pot of red lentil stew.

In Gerar, in the land of the Philistines, Isaac presents Rebecca as his sister, out of fear that he will be killed by someone coveting her beauty. He farms the land, reopens the wells dug by his father Abraham, and digs a series of his own wells: over the first two there is strife with the Philistines, but the waters of the third well are enjoyed in tranquility.

Esau marries two Hittite women. Isaac grows old and blind, and expresses his desire to bless Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father’s favorite food, Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father. Jacob receives his father’s blessings for “the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land” and mastery over his brother. When Esau returns and the deception is revealed, all Isaac can do for his weeping son is to predict that he will live by his sword, and that when Jacob falters, the younger brother will forfeit his supremacy over the elder.

Jacob leaves home for Charan to flee Esau’s wrath and to find a wife in the family of his mother’s brother, Laban. Esau marries a third wife—Machalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Malachi 1:1 – 2:7
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/587261/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah opens with a mention of the tremendous love G-d harbors for the children of Jacob, and the retribution He will visit upon the children

of Esau who persecuted their cousins. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading, whose two protagonists are Jacob and Esau.
The prophet Malachi then rebukes the kohanim (priests) who offer blemished and emaciated animals on G-d's altar: "Were you to offer it to your governor, would he be pleased or would he favor you? . . . O that there were even one among you that would close the doors [of the Temple] and that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain!"
The haftorah ends with a strong enjoinder to the kohanim to return to the original covenant that G-d had made with their ancestor, Aaron the High Priest. "True teaching was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. In peace and equity he went with Me, and he brought back many from iniquity."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Why Did Isaac Love Esau: Toldot by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/toldot/isaac-love-esau/

Even before they were born, Jacob and Esau struggled in the womb. They were destined, it seems, to be eternal adversaries. Not only were they were different in character and appearance. They also held different places in their parents' affections:

> The boys grew up, and Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob.
> *Gen. 25:27-28*

We know why Rebecca loved Jacob. Before the twins were born, the pains Rebecca felt were so great that "she went to inquire of the Lord." This is what she was told:

> "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." *Gen. 25:23*

It seemed as if God were saying that the younger would prevail and carry forward the burden of history, so it was the younger, Jacob, whom she loved.
But why, in that case, did Isaac love Esau? Did he not know about Rebecca's oracle? Had she not told him about it? Besides, did he not know that Esau was wild and impetuous? Can we really take literally the proposition that Isaac loved Esau because "he had a taste for wild game," as if his affections were determined by his stomach, by the fact that his elder son brought him food he loved? Surely not, when the very future of the covenant was at stake.
The classic answer, given by Rashi, listens closely to the literal text. Esau, says the Torah, "knew how to trap [*yode'a tzayid*]." Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth [*ki tzayid befiv*]." Esau, says Rashi, trapped Isaac by

his mouth. Here is Rashi's comment on the phrase "knew how to trap":

> He knew how to trap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him, "Father, how should one tithe salt and straw?" Consequently, his father believed him to be strict in observing the commands. *Rashi to 25:27*

Esau knew full well that salt and straw do not require tithes, but he asked so as to give the impression that he was strictly religious. And here is Rashi's comment on the phrase that Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth":

> The midrashic explanation is that there was entrapment in the mouth of Esau, who trapped his father and deceived him by his words. *Rashi 25:28*

The Maggid of Dubnow adds a perceptive comment as to why Isaac, but not Rebecca, was deceived. Rebecca grew up with the wily Laban. She knew deception when she saw it. Isaac, by contrast, had grown up with Abraham and Sarah. He only knew total honesty and was thus easily deceived. (Bertrand Russell once commented on the philosopher G. E. Moore, that he only once heard Moore tell a lie, when he asked Moore if he had ever told a lie, and Moore replied, "Yes").

So the classic answer is that Isaac loved Esau because he simply did not know who or what Esau was. But there is another possible answer: that Isaac loved Esau precisely because he did know what Esau was.

In the early twentieth century someone brought to the great Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, the following dilemma. He had given his son a good Jewish education. He had always kept the commands at home. Now, however, the son had drifted far from Judaism. He no longer kept the commandments. He did not even identify as a Jew. What should the father do? "Did you love him when he was religious?" asked Rav Kook. "Of course," replied the father. "Well then," Rav Kook replied, "Now love him even more."

Sometimes love can do what rebuke cannot. It may be that the Torah is telling us that Isaac was anything but blind as to his elder son's true nature. But if you have two children, one well-behaved, the other liable to turn out badly, to whom should you devote greater attention? With whom should you spend more time?

It may be that Isaac loved Esau not blindly but with open eyes, knowing that there would be times when his elder son would give him grief, but knowing too that the moral responsibility of parenthood demands that we do not despair of or disown a wayward son.

Did Isaac's love have an effect on Esau? Yes and no. It is clear that there was a special bond of connection between Esau and Isaac. This was recognised by the Sages:

> Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: No man ever honoured his father as I honoured my father, but I found that Esau honoured his father even more. *Devarim Rabbah 1:15*

Rabbi Shimon derives this from the fact that usually people serve their parents wearing ordinary clothes while they reserve their best for going out. Esau, however, had kept his best clothes in readiness to serve his father the food he had gone out to hunt. That is why Jacob was able to wear them while Esau was still out hunting (Gen. 27:14).

We find, much later in the Torah, that God forbids the Israelites to wage war against Esau's descendants. He tells Moses:

> "Give the people these orders: 'You are about to pass through the territory of your brothers the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you, but be very careful. Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own.'" *Deut. 2:4-5*

And later still Moses commands the Israelites:

> "Do not abhor an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau], for he is your brother." *Deut. 23:8*

The Sages saw these provisions as an enduring reward to Esau for the way he honoured his father.

So, was Isaac right or wrong to love Esau? Esau reciprocated the love, but remained Esau, the hunter, the man of the field, not the man to carry forward the demanding covenant with the invisible God and the spiritual sacrifices it called for. Not all children follow the path of their parents. If it was Isaac's intent that Esau should do so, he failed.

But there are some failures that are honourable. Loving your children, whatever they become, is one, for surely that is how God loves us.

Toldot: There Are No Perfect Heroes by Rabbi Hannah Spiro

https://truah.org/resources/hannah-spiro-toldot-moraltorah_2023/

Let's be clear: When Esau comes home, famished from hunting, and his brother Jacob takes the opportunity to offer him stew at the expense of his birthright, this is not a fair trade. Jacob is taking advantage of Esau in a vulnerable moment. If that's not initially obvious, it should become so when we see the lengths Jacob must go to to actually receive Esau's birthright and blessing from their father Isaac. He puts on Esau's clothing and disguises himself with fake body hair, taking advantage of Isaac's blindness to take what's "rightfully his" without a struggle. This is so obviously deceitful, so clearly manipulative and underhanded…right?

Apparently, our ancestors couldn't really handle thinking about Jacob that way. Ibn Ezra wrote, "Esau was constantly practicing deception, for most animals are trapped through trickery. Jacob was his antithesis, because he was a man of integrity." (Genesis 25:27) Excuse me? I feel for the animals Esau trapped, but what about Jacob tricking his blind father? Where's the integrity there? Ibn Ezra isn't the only medieval commentator full of apologetics for Jacob; they really were

focused on sticking to the party line. Jacob got the birthright and blessing. That was important because it allowed us Israelites to kick-start our lives the way we needed to. Esau was a brute, anyway. (But was he, really? Think about later on, when the two of them reunite. Jacob is terrified Esau will get violent, but Esau just wants to embrace him. It's pretty incredible, honestly.) These commentators can't handle the narrative that Jacob, our hero, did something so wrong.

I don't think they're the only ones. Today, we still struggle to recognize the gray within our heroes as well as within our ideological opponents. We jump to point out the hypocrisy, unethical behavior, and dearth of compassion in our enemies, while doing everything possible to underplay that of our allies — and, of course, ourselves. As we live through this excruciating time of grief and war, reality truly is too painful to bear. And so we point our fingers, trying to figure out whose fault it all is, or who isn't responding correctly. We expect, we demand, wide open hearts from others, while our own hearts remain deeply bitter, resentful, and mistrustful.

I get it. I must be doing this, too. There is so much at stake. We feel like we need to preserve any power, any appearances, any upper hand that we can. Jacob must have felt that way, too, as did generations upon generations of his descendants who defended him without fail. It's hard not to feel like the ends justify the means. But as we continue to push through with our narrative, what do we lose along the way? How much credibility are we willing to sacrifice? Are we partisans, or are we peace-pursuers, justice seekers, and lovers of humanity?

Our ancestor Jacob's story began with manipulation and deception, and he was never a perfect hero (who is?), but along the way, he managed to withstand, learn, and perform extraordinary things. He showed what it means to be patient for love. He showed what it means to lead one's children with firm honesty in his final blessings (and admonishments) to them. He wrestled with a messenger of God, in courage and in vulnerability, and allowed that experience to change him and his name forever. We can acknowledge our own shortcomings, and those of the people we care about, and still hold fast to our belief in repentance, repair, healing, and growth. We can be honest, about ourselves and one another, and we can still move through the world from a place of compassion. *(Rabbi Hannah Spiro is the rabbi of Hill Havurah, an independent congregation on Capitol Hill, and a 2017 graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.)*

From Birthright to Blessing: Toldot by Rabbi David Kasher

https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/birthright-blessing

By the time we arrive at Parashat Toldot and come upon two brothers vying for the mantle of family leadership, we can already predict with some confidence that it is the younger brother who will prevail.

For one thing, we were listening in when that fate was made nearly explicit at the opening of the *parsahah*, as God told Rebecca that "two peoples" were growing in

her womb, but that “the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23).[1] Isaac will remain unaware of this message, but we have taken note of it.

But even without eavesdropping on this prophecy, if we have been reading Genesis carefully so far, we know: in this book, when brothers are in competition, the firstborn never wins. We have already seen Abel’s offering chosen by God over his older brother Cain’s. Then we witnessed Ishmael cast out of Abraham’s family so that, as Sarah says, “the son of that slave-woman will not inherit with my son Isaac” (Genesis 21:10). On that precedent alone, we might well suspect that the fix is in for elder brother Esau.

There are also some clues in the Torah’s language that support this hypothesis. If we trace the use of the word for firstborn, *bekhor* (root: ב.כ.ר), from the beginning of the book, we notice a pattern of failure. The first usage comes early on in Genesis, fittingly, in the story of Cain and Abel. A quick read-through might miss it, because the term is used to describe not Cain’s status as the firstborn, but instead the “choicest” (בכרות, literally, “the first-issue”) of Abel’s flock (Genesis 4:4). There is just a subtle hint there in the midst of the first sibling rivalry, a nod to the word which will become so pivotal to all subsequent such rivalries. But already it is Abel, the younger child, who has a hold of the “firstborn.” Cain cuts Abel’s ascent short with violence (as Esau will one day threaten to do to Jacob), but in the end, Cain remains cursed—“more cursed than the ground” (Genesis 4:11).

The next two usages of the term “*bekhor*” will continue to create ominous associations: the firstborn of the accursed Canaan (9:15), and the firstborn of Abraham’s brother Nahor, Uz (Genesis 22:21)—whose name will appear again in the setting for the Job story (Job 1:1). Cain, Canaan, Job—all doomed figures. So by the time Ishamel is finally called “Abraham’s firstborn” (Genesis 25:13), just a few verses before Parashat Toldot begins—but long after having been supplanted by Isaac as the primary inheritor—we are coming to understand that the firstborn child is not the most likely to succeed.

With all of this in mind, when we come to the first recorded dialogue between the twin brothers and find it centered around a negotiation over the *bekhorah* (בכרה), the birthright of the firstborn, we can guess how things will end. Note how strongly the word is emphasized throughout the scene, recurring once in each of four successive verses: Jacob seeks to purchase the birthright (מכרה כיום את **בכרתך**, 25:31) from Esau for a pot of stew. It seems like a bad deal for Esau, but he is amenable, saying, “למה זה לי **בכרה** - what use is a birthright to me?” (25:32). So Jacob has Esau swear on it, “וימכר את **בכרתו** - and he sold his birthright” (25:33). When we are finally are told, “ויבז עשו את **הבכרה** - Esau spurned the birthright,” (25:34), the logic clicks right into place for us. The pattern continues. The firstborn is out. Jacob will surely inherit the covenant.

This time, however, there is a twist; this rivalry is not quite over. The sale of the birthright turns out to be just a prelude to the main event of this *parashah*, which

begins in chapter 27: Jacob deceiving his aging and nearly blind father by dressing up as Esau, in order to take from him a blessing meant for Esau.
We had been told that Isaac favored Esau over Jacob: *"*Isaac loved Esau, for he was a hunter*"* (Genesis 25:28). Now Isaac is calling upon the skill he admired, asking Esau to "hunt me something and make it into food I love, so that I can bless you before I die" (Genesis 27:7). But Rebecca—perhaps with the message from God in mind—launches into a plan to send Jacob in first with food, dressed as Esau, in order to fool Isaac into blessing Jacob instead.
This climactic drama, then, is a struggle not for birthright (בכרה), but for blessing (ברכה) and it is the root for blessing, ב.ר.כ, that will serve as the key word in this narrative, appearing no fewer than 23 times in the course of chapter 27. Yet the other root, ב.כ.ר, has not been forgotten; in fact, the chapter has begun to weave the two together, as we see in the pivotal moment when Jacob carries out his deception with one word in order to secure the other, saying, "I am Esau, your firstborn (בכרך), and I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat what I have caught, so that you may bless me (תברכני)!" (Genesis 27:19).

As the significance of "birthright" and "blessing" in these successive Esau and Jacob narratives becomes difficult to distinguish, perhaps we will notice that the Hebrew words for the two concepts (בכרה and ברכה) are themselves almost identical: anagrams with the same outer letters, but with the inner letters flipped. The composition of these two words, then, parallels the twin siblings themselves: formed from the same genetic material, similar enough for one to pose as the other —but not quite identical.

Just as we are beginning to catch on to the narrative device of interweaving these two fraternal-twin words, we are unexpectedly joined by a character in the story itself, who also seems to pick up on the Torah's signals. Esau, of all people, when he realizes that he has lost the blessing meant for him, suddenly makes the connection between the two scenes and their two key words:

Genesis 27:36
And he said: "That is why he was called Jacob, for he has grabbed this away from me two times—he took my birthright (bekhorati), and see, now he has taken my blessing (birkhati)..."
It is as if Esau—mostly clueless up to this point—has suddenly stepped slightly outside the narrative, and is able to look back at his own story with the eyes of a reader, to see all kinds of linguistic clues and (in case we had missed them) to draw the connections for us.[2]
The Zohar picks up on Esau's moment of awakening and, in a finely nuanced reading, reads another layer of meaning into his exclamation:

Zohar, vol. 1, 145a
"He has grabbed away this (zeh) from me two times"—Why say zeh, "this"? It

should have just said, “he has grabbed away from me two times?” But it is really one word that has been used twice. It was “my birthright” and then it came back again as “my blessing”—this one thing used in two ways.
The two key words we have been considering, “בכרה - bekhorah” and “ברכה - berakhah,” are actually, in this reading, one word with slight changes in form. The Zohar’s mystical orientation allows for words themselves to be animated, to reconstitute themselves and reappear. But this is also a symbolic way of saying that the two scenes and two concepts we have been considering are all manifestations of one underlying concern.

We have been trying to figure out who will inherit this covenant. We took notice as the Torah slowly undermined the institution of the firstborn’s birthright as a formal claim. In Parashat Toldot, we come to better understand what is being inherited. Inheritance in this covenant is not a claim to property or title. It is the passing on of a blessing that God gave to Abraham in their first encounter: “והיה ברכה - you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). That is why our parashah closes with Isaac calling upon God to give Jacob “ברכת אברהם - the Blessing of Abraham” (Genesis 28:4).

The roles of birthright and blessing have been difficult to disentangle in this narrative, but learning to distinguish between them provides us with deeper insight into the nature of the covenant we have inherited. This is not a legacy meant to secure wealth and power, but to bestow divine favor. God’s blessing is not automatically acquired through birth order or social status, but has the potential to cut through traditional hierarchies to favor the younger child, the underdog, the unlikely hero. As Genesis moves us from birthright to blessing, the change in the order of letters reminds us that the family order—and the world order—can always be overturned. *(Rabbi David Kasher grew up bouncing back and forth between Berkeley and Brooklyn, hippies and Hassidim - and has been trying to synthesize these two worlds ever since. After graduating from Wesleyan University in 1998, he studied for several years in yeshivot in Israel before heading off to rabbinical school at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. He was ordained there in 2007. For more info on Rabbi Kasher see: https://www.hadar.org/about/people/rabbi-david-kasher)* [1] It should be noted that the precise meaning of Rebecca’s prophecy is not entirely clear. The medieval commentator and expert Hebrew grammarian, R. David Kimhi (“the Radak,” 1160-1235), notes two potential ambiguities in this phrase alone: 1. The Hebrew phrasing, ורב יעבד צעיר, without the preposition את, could be read to mean “the older shall serve the younger,” or, “the older, the younger shall serve.” He concedes that the first reading is more natural, and perhaps the one that fits the historical record better—but ultimately he leaves the matter unresolved. 2. The word רב means “great” or “greater”—but not necessarily, “greater in years” or “older.” Here the Radak is confident that opposite the word “צעיר - younger,” the word רב must mean the opposite, “older.” Given Esau’s eventual loss of the “בכורה - birthright,” however, it is interesting that the Torah does not use here a more common word for “older,” בכיר. It is as if Esau is already marked as destined to lose his firstborn status.

[2] Remarkably, Esau highlights this bekhorah/berakhah wordplay at just the moment that he also seems to become conscious of the deeper meaning of Jacob's name: the one who grabs [at Esau's] heel (ekev). "That is why he was called Jacob (ya'akov), for he has grabbed this away from me (ya'akveini) two times." We, the readers, know that derivation from the birth scene. But it is unusual for a character in the Torah to explicitly call back to the meaning of another character's name as an explanation for their behavior.

Isaac: Schlimazel, or Something More? By Aiden Pink
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/isaac-schlimazel-or-something-more/

In his book The Joys of Yiddish, Leo Rosten defines one of the most useful words in our tradition: "When a schlimazel winds a clock, it stops; when he kills a chicken, it walks; when he sells umbrellas, the sun comes out; when he manufactures shrouds, people stop dying" (347).

In the entire Torah, it seems, there is no bigger schlimazel than Isaac.

At the beginning of his life, he's nearly killed by his father. At the end of his life, he's deceived by his son. He barely participates in the courtship of his own wife. Isaac is hapless, passive, an eternal victim—the archetypical schlimazel.

That's why the 26th chapter of Genesis is so fascinating. Sandwiched between Rebecca's evocative pregnancy plea in chapter 25 and her and Jacob's "Great Berakhah Caper" in chapter 27, Isaac's adventure in the land of Gerar is understandably often overlooked. But it actually offers a key to his character: he is not so much defined by his passivity as by his active choices—specifically, his choice not to deviate from his father Abraham's actions.

Again and again in chapter 26, Isaac follows in Abraham's footsteps, sometimes literally. Just as Abraham did, Isaac takes his family to the land of Gerar. Just as Abraham did, Isaac tricks King Abimelech into believing that his wife is actually his sister, and eventually establishes with him a peace treaty. Isaac re-opens the exact wells that Abraham first dug—and the Torah is quick to note that Isaac "gave them the same names that his father had given them" (Gen. 26:18). Most importantly, God speaks to Isaac and promises to "bless you and increase your offspring," like God had done with Isaac's father before him—though, notably, the blessing is "for the sake of My servant Abraham," not for anything that Isaac himself has done (Gen. 26:24).

It's not that Isaac could not escape his father's shadow. To give Isaac credit as a person with agency, one must assume that he chose to copy his dad because he believed that this was the way, perhaps the only way, to live a holy life—and presumably was vindicated by God's blessing, which so closely tied Isaac's reward and legacy to the fact that he was his father's son, and not that he was his own man.

So it's no surprise that Isaac would have thought that others should follow precedent as well. This belief was so strong that, according to one

midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 65:9), physical suffering did not exist in the world until Isaac pleaded to God that it should be so. “When a person dies without suffering, the attribute of Divine Judgment [rather than Divine Mercy] is placed upon them,” Isaac said. “If You were to bring suffering upon them, the attribute of Divine Judgment would not be placed upon them.”

“You have demanded a good thing,” God replied, “and I will begin with you”—and so God gave Isaac suffering through the blindness that afflicted him in his old age.

Isaac’s belief that earthly suffering leads to eternal rewards is an old one within Judaism (though pushback against that idea is just as old). But while the midrash describes the “first suffering” as being the first example of physical pain or disability, it’s not hard to look at Isaac’s life and conclude that the first historical example of suffering was actually his traumatic experience on the altar, looking up at his father holding a knife to his throat. It makes sense, then, that Isaac, devoted to upholding the burden of history and driven by his belief in having been vindicated by God’s blessing, would have believed that since emotional or physical pain was good for him, it ought to be the standard for everyone else.

In his book Heavenly Torah, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains how Judaism welcomes diversity of opinion: “Jewish thought is nourished from two sources, and it follows two parallel paths: the path of vision and the path of reason. With respect to those things that are given to objective measurement, reason is primary. With respect to things of the heart, vision is primary . . . . Torah can only be acquired in two ways: With reason’s lens and the heart’s lens” (707–709, emphasis added). He then quotes from the Talmud: “One who is blind in one eye is exempt from the obligation to go on pilgrimage” (Hagigah 2b).

In other words, the Torah—God’s instructions for how to live an ethical and holy life—can only be understood by using both the head and the heart, by having both reason and vision. Without both, one cannot be expected to have the capability to encounter or understand that which is holy.

In both of these categories, Isaac missed the mark. He did not demonstrate enough intellectual reasoning to realize that he had options beyond those chosen by his father. And his emotional vision was also deficient: he wished for others to have pain just because he experienced it himself—a common sentiment, one that is often expressed in the phrase “hurt people hurt people,” but not one to be emulated. And so ultimately Isaac’s intellectual and emotional blindness was made manifest in his physical blindness—in both eyes, not just one. No wonder that God’s continuation of the covenant with Isaac was nonetheless instead made “for the sake of My servant Abraham.”

What Isaac could not see, even while he still had physical eyesight, was that while Jews are called to uphold the mitzvot and our traditions, we should not be so beholden to them as to inhibit our own individuality—or worse, cause suffering upon others who do not fit the historic mold. When the students of the Hasidic

master Reb Zusha found him crying on his deathbed, they asked him, “Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham.” Reb Zusha answered, “When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won’t ask me, ‘Zusha, why weren’t you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham?’ Rather, they will ask me, ‘Zusha, why weren’t you Zusha?’” Isaac was trying so hard to be Abraham that he nearly failed at being Isaac.

But Judaism also teaches us that everyone, even late in life, is capable of change, and so too is Isaac: when Esau asks him for a blessing to replace the one that Jacob stole, Isaac at first reverts to his pattern of relying on precedent, saying that nothing can be done once the original blessing has been uttered. But then, in response to the tears of his firstborn son, Isaac finally makes an independent choice—listening to both his head and his heart—and offers a blessing nonetheless. It is then, finally, in his last recorded act before he dies, that Isaac leaves behind schlimazel-dom and becomes a patriarch worthy of emulating, an independent and empathetic thinker; to use another Yiddish word: a mensch.

(Aidan Pink is a student at the Rabbinical School of JTS, class of 2025)

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Yahrtzeits

Burt Solomon remembers his father Jack Solomon on Saturday November 18th

Perry Fine remembers his mother Rosette Fine on Sunday November 19th

Nancy Isaacson remembers her mother Ruth Isaacson on Sunday November 19th
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