

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Parshat Toldot

When Isaac, our Patriarch, married Rebecca, they were unable to have children for many years. After twenty years of praying and pleading with G-d to bless them with a child, G-d finally heeded their prayers. Despite this, the Torah states that Rebecca's pregnancy got off to a rough start. During pregnancy, Rebecca experienced serious pains. She responded to these pains by saying "If so what am I?" This response is puzzling. Rebecca just spent the last twenty years hoping and praying for a child. Could it be that after twenty years of prayer, that the pain was so great, that she wanted to give up all her hopes and dreams?

The Torah continues and tells us that after making this statement Rebecca turned toward G-d for help. G-d responds by telling her: "Two nations are in your womb; two regimes from your insides shall be separated." This response is also troubling. How does this prophecy help her deal with her discomfort?

Rashi quotes the Midrash, that explains that Rebecca's discomfort did not occur haphazardly. When Rebecca passed a house of Torah study, she felt pain because Jacob sensed holiness and was trying to leave his mother's womb. When she passed a house of idol worship, Esau sensed its impurity and desired to leave. According to this explanation, Rebecca's agitation was not physical in nature. The pain was too much to bear, as it indicated to her that she was bearing a child who was attracted to unholiness.

With this explanation of Rebecca's pain, how could she have been satisfied with G-d's response? Could it be that this holy Matriarch was okay with having a wicked son as long as she was having a righteous son too? It would seem that knowing that she would have a son who was totally wicked and not just a son who was having conflicting feelings and could be swayed towards doing good, would be worse.

Rabbi Yehoshua Aharon Tzvi Weinberg (1815-1892) gives a very insightful explanation of these verses which teaches us a very important lesson about human nature. Rebecca was not afraid to birth a son who had evil tendencies. This was something she felt she would be able to handle. She could teach him, guide him, and push him onto the right path. Rebecca was afraid of having a child who would live a double life. One who studied by day and killed at night. One who came across as an honest hard working person but secretly was a cheat and a liar. She sensed that she had a son who was attracted to not only G-d and his Torah, but also to idol worship



# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

and evilness. This would be too much to cope with. She felt she could not guide and teach a son if she did not know who he really was. However when the prophet told that she was going to have two children, two very different children, that was a whole different story. Maybe one would be easier to raise, and one harder, but she would be able to help and guide each one to use HIS strengths to become the best person he could be.

However as the boys grew Rebecca realized that her assumptions were wrong. She realized that her older son Esau would be the child that she feared she would have when she said the words "If so what am I." Although Esau was a murderer, a robber and an adulterous person this was not the face he showed the world, nor the face he showed his parents. The Torah describes Esau as a good trapper. The Midrash explains that his traps were set with his mouth. He would steal and deny his theft. He would kill and deny his murders. Furthermore, the Midrash explains he would trap his father. He asked him questions about tithing salt and straw, although he knew these were things which do not require tithing. He did this so that his father would think he was careful to fulfill all of G-d's commandments. Rebecca who grew up in the house of her deceitful father, Bethuel, and brother, Laban, understood that there was more to Esau than met the eye. Isaac, however, grew up in the house of Abraham and was not used to dealing with cheats. He was fooled by his deceitful son.

This is certainly an important lesson for us. If we ever want to guide someone, whether it be a child, a student, a friend or even a spouse, we must first realize who we are dealing with. Is this person truly good or secretly troubled? If we do not fully understand this then the effect of our guidance will be greatly reduced. This is also true when we are trying to improve ourselves. The first step is to make sure we are being honest with ourselves. If not we will keep convincing ourselves that there is nothing wrong and we will not be able to change ourselves.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

