



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Toldot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 2, 2013

Toldot

Do Jews Have Muscles?



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

You are a detective. A heist of the most valuable diamond in the world has occurred. Only two individuals were in the vicinity. But one of them is lame and the other is blind.

What to do?

The narrative which solves the mystery of the missing diamond began more than 3,666 years ago, when two very famous babies – twins – were born in the Middle East. It continued 1,800 years after that, when a Prince of Judah and a Roman general discussed the secrets of the universe. And it goes on to this very day, when you and I try to back our ideas with muscle and give legs to our dreams.

In this week’s Torah portion, *Toldot*, the Woody Allen stereotype of the nebbish Jew first appears – and is quickly obliterated.

Jacob and Esau, Judah the Prince and Antoninus, You and I all play a part, and it can’t get much better than that.

Intriguing Talmudic story, a joke about Jewish rowers and the modern day mystery all come together to illustrate the key lesson of this week’s Torah reading and make it relevant to today’s audience:

Pick up an oar, flex your muscles, yell into a bullhorn – and your victory is assured!

WHEN BRAIN MET BRAWN: MUSCULAR JEWS AND OTHER OXYMORONS

Take-away message: By putting our aspirations on top of our actions, we can achieve greatness.

1. A Jewish Row (Joke)

Let's face it – Jews are more typically identified with brains rather than brawn.

Indeed, there is a prevalent stereotype floating around this hemisphere. The stereotype depicts a Jewish man as a short, thin, frail, nerdy, brainy and nebbish. Basically, it suggests that all Jewish men look and talk like Woody Allen. The stereotype states that Jews have powerful minds but weak bodies. It is, certainly, an anti-Semitic stereotype – but is it also true?

For better or for worse, Jews are seen as the antithesis of athletic – unless, of course, you count white-collar activity as a sport.

I once heard someone suggest that Jewish communities and Jewish schools should pioneer a Little League not to develop future players, but to develop future *owners* of professional sports teams. Such a Little League would teach kids how to purchase and run a sports franchise, because, statistically, there is a greater chance a Jewish child will *own* a sports team than *play* on one.

This, naturally, reminds me of the following yarn:

A Yeshivah Gedolah, a Higher Academy of Talmudic Scholarship, is known for its razor-sharp debate teams and cutting-edge analysis. One such Academy, based in Brooklyn, decided to go out into the world and field a rowing team. It crunched the numbers and decided to go up against the Ivy League rowing crews of Harvard and Yale.

Unfortunately, they lost race after race. They practiced for hours every day, but never managed to come in any better than dead last.

The Rosh Yeshiva, the dean of the school, a wizened sage, finally decided to send Yankel – all five-foot-five of him – to spy on the Harvard Crimson rowing team. Yankel thus schlepped off to Cambridge and hid in the bulrushes off the Charles River. From there he carefully watched the Harvard team as they practiced.

Then up the I-95 to New Haven, where he scouted out the Yale Bulldogs.

Yankel returned to his yeshiva and announced that he had figured out their secret to success.

With anticipation, the entire study hall held its collective breath. “Nu, Yankel,” prompted the senior scholar. “Tell us already!”

“Well,” says Yankel. “By them, they have eight guys rowing and only one guy shouting.”

2. The Heist

Say you were Sherlock Holmes or, to contemporize it a bit, say you were a special agent working for the CSI. A call comes and you hustle over to the crime scene at once. You find that the vault of a central bank has been broken into and the most valuable diamond in the world is missing.

There are no leads. No fingerprints, no DNA samples, no witnesses, no evidence. The closed-circuit video cameras have been tampered with and all the recordings show nothing but static.

Only two people were in the vicinity during the crime. But they probably won't be of much help. One of them is blind and the other is lame, paralyzed, unable to move an inch.

You, as the lead investigator, ask the blind man: “What happened?”

The blind man replies: “What, something happened? I didn't see anything. I didn't even know there was anything. What, there are diamonds here? I thought this was a delicatessen...”

Next, you question the lame individual: “What happened to the diamond?”

He responds: “I certainly wasn’t involved, I cannot even move, my legs are out of order!”

This is what we would call a cold case. A perfect crime has been committed and there is no solution in sight.

What can you do to unravel this mystery and solve the case?

3. Lame Excuse, Blind Ambition

One way to approach this unsolved crime, is by looking in the Talmud,¹ at a philosophical discussion that took place some 1,800 years ago between the leader of the Jews, Rabbi Judah the Prince, known simply as Rebbe, and Antoninus, a Roman general.

This discussion revolved around the question of how God judges the body and soul after someone has passed away. It went something like this:

Antoninus, the Roman general, asked Rebbe, “It seems that both the body and soul may exonerate themselves from judgment. The body may claim that without the soul it is but a corpse, no more than a pile of bricks, and how could a brick ever sin and be culpable? And the soul may claim that without the body it is but a mystical, ethereal spirit, without any tangible mechanism, and, without any grounding, how could something spiritual ever transgress?

Antoninus posed an excellent question. But Rebbe’s answer was even better.

Rebbe replied with an analogy. And this is what he said:

¹ Sanhedrin 91a-b.

There once lived a king who had a very valuable fig orchard, and he hired two watchmen to guard it. One watchman was lame, the other blind.

As these two watchmen guarded the orchard, the lame watchman, whose body was paralyzed but whose eyes and mind worked very well, hatched a plan. He said to the blind watchman, "I'm sure you don't know it, but we are guarding a very precious fig orchard. I can see but am paralyzed, while you are blind but have a very strong and healthy body. Let me climb upon your able shoulders and, with me as the eyes and you as the legs, we will relieve this orchard of its figs and split the loot between us."

Great plan. And they proceeded to carry it out. It was, seemingly, a perfect crime.

When the king next visited the fig orchard, he was outraged. "Who stole my precious figs?" he demanded to know. And, naturally, he interrogated the only two people who were anywhere near the scene of the crime.

The paralyzed watchman claimed, "I am not your man! Do I have legs with which to move? Do I have the ability or mobility to carry out such an audacious act? Of course not!"

The blind watchman claimed, "I could never pull off such a detailed and well thought-out robbery. I don't have eyes with which to see. How would I even know that there are figs here? And even if I did know, is there any possible way for me to see where I'm going?"

So what did this wise king do? He ordered the lame watchman climb atop the shoulders of the blind watchman, and he then judged them both together as one unit.

Said Rebbe to Antoninus, "This is how God judges a person's life. God places the soul upon the body and judges them both together as one unit."

There we have the solution to the curious case of the missing diamond. If you, as the investigator in the above heist, had suggested that we place the lame individual on the shoulders of the blind man and look at them as one unit, then you would be a world-class detective indeed.

4. Parshat Toldot: Womb Mates

The root of this argument between Rebbe and Antoninus goes way back in time – to way before Rebbe or Antoninus were even born. Indeed, it originates in the Torah – in *Parshat Toldot*, which we read this week.

This week, as we open the timeless Torah scroll and read the portion of Toldot (meaning “legacies” or “chronicles”), an eternal narrative, a chronicle of legacies, begins. And it goes like this:

Some 3,666 years ago, there lived a woman named Rebecca who was married to a man named Isaac. After many years of having no children, Rebecca became pregnant with twins. Mazal Tov! But it proved a very complicated and painful pregnancy. The two twins were wrestling with one another in her womb. Indeed, Rashi – the 11th century Torah commentator – tells us that whenever Rebecca would walk by a house of Torah scholarship, one child would struggle to leave the womb and enter the world, and whenever Rebecca walked by a house of idolatry, the other child would struggle to get out.

In her pain, Rebecca turned to God and asked Him what was happening?

And the Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two kingdoms will separate from inside you, and one kingdom will become mightier than the other kingdom, and the elder will serve the younger.”²

No wonder this pregnancy was so complex. Rebecca was literally carrying the future of the world! Her pregnancy encapsulated the eternal battle between two archetypes – two diametrically opposite ways of thinking, feeling and living.

²Genesis 25:23.

5. Goyim vs. Geyim

About this, the Talmud³ says a fascinating thing.

It quotes these words from our Torah portion, “Two nations (*goyim*) are in your womb...” and states that one should not read the word as *goyim* (meaning “nations”) but as *geyim* (meaning “lords” or “princes”). If we read it like this, it says “Two princes (*geyim*) are in your womb...” And, states the Talmud, this is an allusion to two princes that would live 1,800 years after Rebecca and her difficult pregnancy – none other than Judah the Prince, also known as Rebbe, and Antoninus, the Roman general.⁴

As with all parts of the Talmud, this strange statement holds significant and pertinent lessons for us today. And these lessons are best understood by examining the personalities of the twins, Jacob and Esau, who were, in fact, the twins warring in Rebecca’s womb.

For Jacob and Esau became the ancestors of Rebbe and Antoninus respectively – and their archetypes continue to play themselves out in our contemporary lives.

6. A Hunter and a Scholar

When Rebecca’s twin boys were born, they were anything but identical. The Torah describes their divergent personalities:

*And they grew up, and Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.*⁵

³ *Avodah Zarah* 11a (quoted by Rashi in our parsha on verse 25:23).

⁴ Many conversations are recorded throughout the Talmud between Rebbe and Antoninus. These would range from the philosophical to the astronomical. Antoninus came to respect Rebbe, seeing him as his teacher and mentor. Indeed, Antoninus had a tunnel built from his palace to the home of Rebbe, by which he could visit Rebbe conveniently and secretly. (Evidently, a Roman general consulting with the leader of the Jewish people wasn’t so in vogue in the 1st century.) Ibid 10b.

⁵ Genesis 25:27. See Rashi who describes that “grew up” in this verse refers to their 13th birthday.

Not to be overly cute, but in tents could also read *intense*. Jacob was an intense scholar, whereas Esau was a hunter, full of brash machismo.

Jacob was *tam*, innocent. As Rashi explains,

*He was not an expert in all these matters. Like his heart, so was his mouth.
A person who is not astute at deceiving is called tam, innocent.*

Esau was his opposite. He was a deception artist, an aggressive businessman, a great negotiator, buying low and selling high. He was a man who did what he had to do to get the job done. Even if it meant hurting others ... killing, pillaging ... whatever it takes to succeed in the marketplace.

The Torah does not mince words. By describing Esau as a man of the field, a hunter, and Jacob as innocent scholar dwelling in tents, the Torah is conveying two archetypes, two elements we each possess.

On one hand, to survive in a material world, we need to be a hunter, who knows the way of the field – the market place. We need to have muscle and strength to protect ourselves and climb the ladder of success.

Indeed, most of our days are spent in the field, whatever field that might be – the field of business, medicine, law, construction, technology – we each have our field, our professional life which is, let's face it, a hunt. We hunt for deals, for success, to capture the prize.

The art of negotiation, by its very nature, requires a measure of deception, saying one thing and meaning another.

This is the Esau within our psyche.

On the other hand, we have the transcendent Jacob within us also. He represents our innocence and purity – the scholar within, who seeks to transcend and remain above the ways of the field and marketplace. This dimension within us is defined by integrity and seamlessness – our mouth reflects our heart.

In the workplace, if we feel that we want to strangle our boss, we still smile and say, "Good morning." We know in our heart the real price paid for a product, but to turn a profit, we mark it up as much as possible for customers. This is the way of the field.

But the way of the pure Jacob is the opposite – what you see is what you get.

7. Body and Soul

Esau and Jacob represent our body and soul. The physical body is defined by its strength and power. The soul reflects spiritual vision and direction in life.

These two forces battle within us. They are in a perpetual struggle, each fighting to dominate.

It would seem (as Antoninus asked) that body and soul – the hunter and the scholar – are antithetical and cannot be at peace. In other words, we seem doomed to a life of duality: at times Esau reigns at the expense of Jacob; at other times Jacob reigns as Esau is subdued.

In truth, however, Esau and Jacob are twin brothers who complement each other (as Rebbe explained).

And by channeling their ancestors, Rebbe and Antoninus came to inform the relationship between these two very different twin personalities – and the need to join them together as one.⁶

⁶ Antoninus represents the philosophy of duality, in which we compartmentalize body and soul, matter and spirit. Rebbe represents the Torah's philosophy of unity between the two.

8. Brain versus Brawn

A hunter, a man of the field, is representative of the blind but very muscular and robust watchman. An introverted dweller of tents is indicative of a man with great vision but no interaction with the field, the world outside.

Each has an advantage over the other: The hunter is powerful but directionless. The scholar has vision and clarity but may lack the strength and fortitude to implement his vision in a challenging world.

The scholar and visionary has great ideas, but very often remains sitting intently in his proverbial tent, his heart and mouth on the same page, but he feels powerless to act. His dreams never translate into reality. He does not have the muscle backing his vision. The brain lacks the brawn to see it through.

On the other hand, brawn without brains is even more problematic and could be destructive.

9. Brain versus Brawn cont.

Jacob, our forefather, was a deep individual, an introvert who spent his time inside, in the tent studying and understanding the world. He had clear direction, and this direction would inform his family for all generations to come. Indeed, Jacob's second name, Israel – a name which expresses his clear and eternal vision – is the name by which his descendants have been called. All his grandchildren, you and I included, are the Children of Israel.

His brother and our great-uncle, Esau, was the exact opposite. He had no vision whatsoever – I mean, the Torah tells us that later he sold his entire legacy for a bowl of soup! What Esau had, though, was some serious muscle. The man was a brawny beast. Esau was a man of the field, an extrovert with the stamina to hunt.

Asks Antoninus: seemingly these two divergent elements cannot co-exist, one counteracts (and exonerates) the other.

Says Rebbe: we place one atop the other and create one unified unit. This is how we live. We join body and soul into one unit, with the seeing soul guiding the aggressive hunter.

The introspective Jacob directs the extroverted Esau.

And this is what we must do with these two disparate elements that reside within us. To fulfill our life's mission of repairing this world, we must combine the clarity and vision of our souls with the skills and know-how of our bodies.

10. Life is a River

Let us say that life is a river, and we are in a boat riding its waves. (Yes, like in that joke – but we all know that humor can convey the deepest truths.)

Tides pull us this way and that – currents pitch us up and down. The crew on our boat consists of 1) the oarsmen, the rowers who propel the boat in the direction we choose, and 2) the man on the bullhorn, shouting out instructions to the oarsmen: “Row this way, row that way, go straight, turn right, be careful of the shoals, don’t run aground...”

At times, we have great direction and vision – all we need do is to row, row, row the boat gently up the stream ... until we reach our destination.

At other times, we could row the heck out of that boat, but we lack the right direction.

Often times we are at work, going through the motions of rowing the boat, but like the blind yet muscular watchman, we do not see the destination – we lack the vision, and we find ourselves asking: “Why am I rowing this boat day after day? And where am I heading? What is my greater objective?”

And, sometimes, it is the exact opposite. We have a great idea and dream, a powerful and far-reaching vision but, like the paralyzed yet seeing watchman, we have no way to get there, to implement that dream.

Sometimes we are afraid to leave the warm cocoon of the tent to change the world. And sometimes we are so consumed by the hunt in the field that we lose sight of the objective.

Comes Rebbe and says: You must place the eyes, vision and direction on the shoulders of your muscle, atop the broad back of your vessel and steer your boat through the rivers and currents of your life's coordinates.

We must provide muscle to our ideas, and we must use our ideas to flex our muscles.

A racing crew such as this – directed by intense focus and purity of vision, and implemented by the brawny muscle of a well-oiled machine of rowers – such a racing crew can never lose.

Shabbat Shalom!