



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Toldot

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December 3, 2016

Toldot

**Education Lessons  
from the Womb**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mark Twain once famously quipped that he never allowed his schooling to interfere with his education.

The Talmud says that a Jewish child’s education begins in the womb, where an angel teaches the entire Torah to the yet unborn baby.

This week’s Torah reading – *Parshat Toldot* – relates that, when Jacob was still in his mother’s womb, he would struggle to get out every time she passed the yeshiva of Shem and Eber.

Why would Jacob want to run to the study hall when he was learning the entire Torah while in the womb from an angel?

And what can this teach us about education today – education for our *toldot*, our offspring, our future generations?

Explanations of the first Modzhitzer Rebbe (Rabbi Yechezkal of Kuzmir) and the Chasam Sofer, help illuminate the matter.

Education begins by being enveloped in the warm cocoon of the womb. But it does not end there. Education is about wanting to leave the womb to teach the world.

## EDUCATION LESSONS FROM THE WOMB

### 1. Physics 101 (Joke)

Physics teacher: "Isaac Newton was sitting under a tree when an apple fell on his head and he discovered gravity. Isn't that wonderful?"

Student: "Yes sir, if he had been sitting in class looking at books like us, he wouldn't have discovered anything."

### 2. Map Reading (Joke)

The teacher of an earth science class was giving a lecture on map reading.

After explaining about latitude, longitude, degrees and minutes the teacher asked, "Suppose I asked you to meet me for lunch at 23 degrees, 4 minutes north latitude and 45 degrees, 15 minutes east longitude..."

After a confused silence, a voice volunteered, "I guess you'd be eating alone."

### 3. Desirable Traits

The classroom is great for teaching basics, principles and tools. But, as these humorous anecdotes convey, only in real life may these tools be applied.

As Mark Twain once famously quipped that he never allowed his schooling to interfere with his education.

Which brings us to our topic of today – the true meaning of education.

The month of *Kislev*, the month of light, began two days ago, on Thursday. The central event of *Kislev* is Chanukah. And the word Chanukah shares its root with the word *chinuch*, “education.”

This week’s Torah reading – *Parshat Toldot*. *Toldot* means chronicles or offspring or generations. And education is the key to inspired offspring and inspired and eternal generations.

Let us see what it has to tell us.

#### 4. Parshat Toldot

As our Torah portion opens, we learn that Rebecca is pregnant, and that it is a complicated pregnancy. Something is going on in the womb that troubles her greatly:

*And the children struggled within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to seek an answer from G-d.<sup>1</sup>*

Rebecca was pregnant with twin boys, Jacob and Esau, who were in effect having a wrestling match in her womb.

A famous Midrash, cited in Rashi, explains what was really going on:<sup>2</sup> When Rebecca passed by the entrance to the yeshiva of Shem and Eber, Jacob would struggle to come out; when she passed the entrance to a temple of idolatry, Esau would struggle to come out.

Jacob, who would grow up to be a “wholesome man, dwelling in tents,” a man of light and holiness, was drawn to the study hall even while in the womb. Esau, who would grow up to be a “man who understood hunting, a man of the field,”<sup>3</sup> a man of the dark arts, was attracted to idolatry even while in the womb.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 25:22.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah 63:6.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 25:27.

But here's question number one: Esau would be born first – he was the elder twin – which means Esau was at the entrance of the womb. So he was stopping Jacob from being born when they passed the yeshiva. But who, or what, was stopping Esau from coming out of the womb when they passed a temple of idolatry?

Question number two: The Talmud<sup>4</sup> tells us that while a baby is in the womb, an angel comes and teaches the baby the entire Torah. Then, when the baby is born, the angel taps the baby's upper lip, and it forgets everything it had learned. This applies to every baby. So if Jacob was studying the entire Torah in the womb with the angel, why was he struggling to get out of the womb to enter the yeshiva to study Torah?

## 5. Some Answers

Rabbi Yechezkal of Kuzmir<sup>5</sup> answers the first question: Esau was struggling not to get out of the womb, but to prevent himself and Jacob from being born, because all he really cared about was stopping Jacob from coming out to learn more Torah. He was ready to forgo his idolatry as long as Jacob would not be able to study Torah.

The Chasam Sofer<sup>6</sup> answers the second question: Jacob was struggling to get out precisely because of the environment he was in. Jacob did not like his study partner, Esau, who desired idolatry and fought against Jacob's light.

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<sup>4</sup> Niddah 30b.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir (1755–1856), is the founder of the Modzitz Chassidic dynasty. He established yeshivas and taught in the manner of his rebbes, the Seer of Lublin and the Kozhnitzer Maggid.

<sup>6</sup> The Chasam Sofer, Rabbi Moses Schreiber (1762–1839), was one of the leading Orthodox rabbi of European Jewry in the first half of the nineteenth century. He was a teacher to thousands and a powerful opponent of the Reform Movement as the chief rabbi of Pressburg, Austria, where he established a yeshiva which become one of the most influential yeshivot in Central Europe, producing hundreds of future leaders of Hungarian Jewry.

Furthermore, Jacob knew that there was more to learning than just learning. The problem with learning in the womb is the same problem as learning in a protected environment, in the ivory tower – it's great for a child, but eventually it must be applied to the real world.

Jacob studied Torah nine months in the womb with an angel, preparing him for the work to come. But then comes the time to leave the insulated womb, and bring the light of Torah to the outside hostile world. Once he was born, Jacob became the “dweller in tents,” studying and living Torah all the time, *outside* of the womb.

## 6. What Torah? (Optional)

Now, some of you might be wondering – exactly what was the Torah that Jacob studied? After all, the Torah was not given on Mount Sinai until 340 years later.

Says the Talmud,<sup>7</sup> that our forefathers and foremothers kept the entire Torah, even before it was formally given at Sinai. And they studied it in the yeshiva established by Noah's son, Shem, and his grandson Eber.

In fact, the Midrash<sup>8</sup> teaches that Torah preceded creation by “two thousand [conceptual] years.” Yes, the Torah was formally given to the world, via the Jewish people, at Mount Sinai 2448 years *after* creation, but it existed even *before* creation.

Thus, it is well established in Judaism that the righteous people from the beginning of time were permeated with the principles and insights of the Torah, even before it was given to the world at Sinai.

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<sup>7</sup> Yoma 28b.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis Rabbah 8:2.

## 7. Fifteen Years of Study

Here is an interesting fact: The lives of our three forefathers – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – overlapped by 15 years.<sup>9</sup> Abraham, as we read at the end of last week's portion, passed away at the age of 175. Jacob was born when Abraham was 160. This means Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived on this earth for 15 years together. And they studied 15 hours a day together.

The number 15 is not coincidental. It is the numerical value of one of the names of G-d, spelled *Yud-Hei*. Indeed, the Mishnah<sup>10</sup> recommends that a person should begin studying the Talmud at the age of 15 for the same reason.

But wait a minute: Why would Jacob want to leave the womb – where he was studying Torah with an angel 24 hours a day – to come out into this world, where he could only study 15 hours a day?

Because only in this world could Jacob learn while doing – he could learn while living the Torah at the same time!

Torah is much more than just an academic study. It is called *Torat Chaim* – the Torah of life, or the living Torah. Torah is a dynamic living, breathing force, which energizes our lives – it is our life and our sustenance (*chayeinu v'orech yomeinu*), providing us with the spiritual and moral nourishment and direction.

As comfortable as one may be in the womb, the purpose of existence is not to remain sheltered and insulated. We begin our development in the womb learning Torah from the angel, empowering and preparing us for the challenges and battles to come; but then once the nine-month training has ended, we emerge armed with a formidable arsenal to take on any challenge that presents itself.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Sefer Midveret Kadmot. Also see: Likkutei Sichot vol. 35, p. 101-106.

<sup>10</sup> Avot end of chapter 5.

The Talmud<sup>11</sup> states that our forefathers studied 15 hours a day and also prayed for 9 hours every day.<sup>12</sup> The Talmudic sages then discuss the practicalities of this reality: *When* exactly did our forefathers eat, drink, sleep, work, embrace guests, and everything else that's necessary for survival? They explain that these simple human actions were indeed part of our forefathers' Torah learning – they were learning by doing. By welcoming guests, eating, even sleeping, they were enveloped in and indeed implementing Torah.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Jacob desired to run out of the womb to learn Torah in the real world, where it could transform the routine of daily life – effectually turning the routine of life into anything but a routine. In the womb, one may learn, but one may not live what one learns. Only in the real world, with its many challenges, may one apply the divine wisdom to change reality.

## 8. Healthy Education

Nothing was stopping Esau, the elder twin, from running out of the womb and into the temples of idolatry. The only thing that was stopping Esau was himself. Esau stubbornly wanted to remain in the womb so that he could stop Jacob from emerging to implement what he had learned in the womb in the real world.

Put another way: the darkness that was Esau would rather see light fail than itself succeed, whereas the light that was Jacob would rather generate more light so that all can succeed rather than worry about darkness.

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<sup>11</sup> Berachot 32b.

<sup>12</sup> The Sefer Chassidim 165 states that our forefathers spent every one of their 24 hours in study and prayer, not a moment of their lives was removed from the desires of heaven.

<sup>13</sup> See Sefer Chassidim *ibid.* Genesis Rabbah 69:7, and Yefai Toar and Etz Yosef *ad loc.*



This is a fundamental difference between – and also the litmus test for – healthy education and unhealthy education. The student given a healthy education desires, when ready, to leave the protective shield of the classroom in order to apply his or her learning into action in the real-world. The student of an unhealthy education can become a negative force, more interested in stopping a healthy person from fulfilling his or her mission, than discovering his own.

One would presume that, while in the womb, Esau was also taught the entire Torah by the angel. However, Esau personified the warrior and hunter, gravitating to idolatry and self-worship. Esau was defined by darkness, and Jacob was defined by light. The nature of darkness is to fight light, even at its own expense. Esau would rather forgo his desire for idol worship in the temples of the earth, just to block Jacob from leaving the womb to study Torah and bring light into this world.

This is the ultimate difference between good and evil – evil is willing to divert its energy from its other devious desires just to block good (as that is its primary devious desire), while good is just good.

## 9. Practically Speaking: Find a Study Partner

Every one of us began our life journey in the best possible school – studying Torah with a divine angel in our mother’s womb. Does it get better than that?

Some may say, that ever since our education goes downhill...

However, Judaism teaches us, that once we were born, though we don’t have an angel for a study partner, and we have been made to forget the Torah we studied – we only consciously forget, but we always retain within our beings all the truths that we were taught.

And instead of an angel as study partner, we must find the next best thing – or perhaps an even better thing: A human study partner.

The Torah extols the virtues of studying with a partner – a *chavrusa*. They include: the clarity and innovation that is derived from dialogue. The synergy and power of intense communication. The social element – the connections and bonding which comes with group study.

It is a great practical exercise to study together with people you are close to. Your spouse, your children, your family. It will solidify a relationship like nothing else.

Additionally, it is also a great idea to find a good study partner. Perhaps your local rabbi could be the one? Today you can even find Torah study partners on the phone or online.

Above all, a study partner brings the best out of you, helping partners access the Torah embedded in the unconscious, not to mention the “collective strength of two mutual colleagues to ward off any “Esau” forces attempting to prevent us from studying and fulfilling our calling.

## 10. Practically Speaking: Change Your Place

Jacob and our forefathers also teach us the value of time. They teach us the power of study and prayer. And how to prioritize.

How precious is every moment given to us? Are we using our blessed moments to the fullest? How much time do we waste?

We spend most of our days in survival mode – working, eating, sleeping shopping, commuting. We are mostly consumed by the means. When it comes to ends – living up to the purpose of our lives – how much time is left? After an exhausting day how much time and energy do we have remaining for Torah study, prayer, performing mitzvot?

Some people think that studying an hour a day is a lot. But remember: Our forefathers studied for 15 hours a day! Why? Because they saw study and prayer as the essence of their life mission – the way to realize the mission of their soul on earth.

We may not be able to match that, but we can learn from them what should be our priority: Every one of us according to our schedule ought to carve out designated time to study Torah each day, preferable with a partner.

Studying opens our consciousness to the divine intellect, to sublime wisdom and to the diversity in Torah. Only when we study, do we learn that “*Aylu v’aylu divrei Elokim Chaim* – These and these are the words of the Living G-d.” Only when we study, can we properly apply the Torah to our everyday actions.

Our education must begin in a protective place – the womb, so to speak – where we can shield our children from the world’s threatening influences. Then it will surely inspire and compel our offspring – our *toldot* – and ourselves, to run out into the world to birth light.

Shabbat Shalom!