



Parashat Toldot: Alright and Not Alright

Dear Friends,

Parashat Toldot is the parasha in which I was born. I like it very much, but not because it was in the air when I breathed my first breath.

I like the fact that Yaakov and Eisav are twins. I find this to be perfect! I like Yaakov's complexity. I like Eisav's humanity. I like Rivka's activism, and I like Yitzchak's love of his firstborn, Eisav.

I also like the parasha because I identify with its central characters. Please excuse the personal note, but my wife and I also waited twenty years of marriage - like Yitzchak and Rivka - until we were fortunate enough to become parents. I, like Yitzchak, prayed for a child, and like Yitzchak and Rivka, the prayer was answered.

God's ways are wondrous!

This week that son of mine for whom I waited had a very challenging social experience. When I put him to bed that night I whispered in his ear that everything will be alright. And then he surprised me by asking: "Do you promise?" "Yes, I promise," I answered.

But in my heart I wondered... was this a false promise? After all, we don't actually know that everything will be alright.

But somehow, while we were talking, I was filled with a great sense of confidence that yes, everything will be alright.

I believe with great conviction that not only will everything be alright, but that it already is.

When we use the words "alright" and "not alright" we are telling ourselves and others that there is a "rightness", an order in the world and that we know what it is; that we know when it is breached and when things are not all right.

Right and not alright, or how things should be, are thoughts we humans have. It seems to us that things are right when they work out as we wish them to. Not alright is a judgmental, human reaction when things appear differently from what we think we want or expect.

Even though it is “only” a thought, it is valid! It is okay to believe that certain things are not alright. It is also alright to take action and even fight for change. The sense of things being not alright goads us into action, creativity, and blessed involvement in the world.

It would be very difficult for us to conduct any social order, be it family, community, city, or country, without the thought that there is a right order that must exist. I was extremely irritated, for example, when the municipality demanded (rightly...) that I prune my favorite tree because it was protruding into the public domain and bothering pedestrians. They threatened me with a large fine if I did not take care of it. On the other hand, I strongly object that my country recognizes the wedding ceremonies performed by one Jewish tradition, which most Israelis do not belong to, and do not recognize others. I am angry at the different levels of medical treatment, by which those without means can wait months for tests and treatments, while those who can afford private medicine enjoy quick, advanced, and excellent care. I am also disturbed that those with means can get good legal advice and those without cannot. These things are not alright.

A sense of deprivation and lack of justice motivates us to work to right what is wrong, and this is a good thing. This, too, is part of the rightful order of the world.

The problem begins when the thought that something is not alright makes us miserable; when it drives us crazy or is very painful; when the sense that things are not alright overwhelms us with sorrow, fear, anger, hatred, and even paralysis.

This is the point at which, in my humble opinion, there is value in faith - faith that everything's already alright, that there is a dimension of existence - perhaps even a higher consciousness - beyond thoughts, world views, and limited human beliefs. I believe that there is a dimension of awareness which transcends “alright” and “not-alright”, in which our judgment of how things “should” be or “are supposed” to be no longer exists. In this dimension there is radical acceptance of what is.

This faith is not irrational! And neither is it a form of denial. This topic deserves its own, much longer explanation, but for now just remember that our human understanding is severely limited.

It is possible to live in both dimensions simultaneously - the human one, in which we think know what is right and what isn't, in which we fight for justice; and the “Divine” dimension, in which everything is already totally, deeply alright?

In our parasha the first twins are born, Yaakov and Eisav. Our Sages didn't like Eisav. He scorned his birthright, and for that they could not forgive him. On the other hand, they praised Yaakov and excused his exploits as justified: he was “supposed” to be born first, but evil Eisav pulled him back, held him back and burst out first. This is the explanation given for the purchase of the birthright for a bowl of lentil stew, and stealing Yitzchak's blessing for Eisav. Yaakov was just correcting an evil mistake.

This interpretation is a difficult one. The Torah itself does not accept it. The parasha relates that Yitzchak loved Eisav. If Yitzchak loved Eisav - as a child and as an adult - Eisav could not be evil.

As I suggested last week, Yitzchak's blindness was unique. It was a blindness to judgment. He did not judge the world the way we do, dividing into "alright" and "not alright." Yitzchak saw beyond our measures of ethics, our preferences, and our judgments. This is how he was able to love both sons.

I would like to end with the idea that Yitzchak's prayer for Rebecca's fertility was answered in full because he was willing to accept all possibilities. He prayed for Rivka: "Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren." (Bereishit 25:21) Perhaps this is also why Avraham sent his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak, as Yitzchak's sense of judgment was "defective." Yitzchak did not see "right" and "not right", okay and not okay. Avraham could trust only the servant who would know how to bring a worthy wife for Yitzchak, a woman who was active and full of energy. Perhaps if Rivka had been less so, and also less judgmental and definite, she would not have sent Yaakov to trick his father and steal his brother's blessing. And who knows, perhaps our story would be entirely different.

As I waited for a child there was a very significant moment which I will never forget. It was a moment in which I gave up. I realized that I no longer knew what is supposed to happen. Perhaps I was not meant to be a parent. I knew I wanted a child - I even prayed for it - but I released my hold on this desire and its results. I understood that it was not in my hands. I can pray and make every effort, but the rest is up to the Creator, because there is a higher dimension, in which there is no right and not right, okay and not okay.

Soon afterwards, Yehonatan (God-given, as his name implies) came into our lives.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov,

Elisha