

# Example Divrei Torah

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**Association of Jewish Families & Children's Agencies**

Most of us know from experience that parenting is a difficult and complicated job. If we haven't been parents ourselves, we have all been children and know the problems we caused for our own parents, even the best intentioned and well-behaved among us. This week's parashah, Tol'dot, is a story of intrigue and deception that exposes the trials and tribulations of parenthood, and ultimately the rewards as well.

We learn that Jacob and Esau struggled with one another from the womb and throughout their lives. Isaac favored Esau because he was a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors. Rebekah favored Jacob, a mild man who stayed in camp. They are distinct personalities, although early in the narrative there does not seem to be an objective reason for a preference of one over the other. However, our tradition clearly values Jacob over Esau, not only for their later actions, but for their natures from the womb. Esau fulfills the promise of his nature by spurning his birthright, marrying the wrong women against his parents' wishes (3 times), and threatening his brother. But how about the contemplative Jacob, who takes advantage of his brother at a time of need and conspires in one of the great tricks and disguises of all time? Where is the value in that?

There is a lesson here for parents. It is no surprise that children from the same family, even twins, can be quite different. Esau is an experiential learner, he needs to go out and do things to grasp their meaning, and he is quite impulsive. Jacob is more of a scholar, a conceptual thinker who is able to problem-solve and develop a plan, and who is able to work methodically to accomplish his goals. Jacob is deliberate, patient, and able to take and follow directions (including his mother's plan of deception). Esau is all about immediate gratification and acting "on emotion."

Does one child deserve to be treated differently than the other? Absolutely, but also with fairness. Fairness means giving our children what they each individually need, not in treating them identically. This is true whether they are your own children, your students, or your clients. Hopefully, if we act and react to our children with a sense of them as individuals, they will all grow to become more like Jacob, not the trickster, but the head of a great nation and himself, a loving spouse and parent.

Shabbat Shalom.

I have always felt that of all the major Jewish holidays, I understood Shavuot the least. Maybe it was because Shavuot falls at the end of the traditional school year (late May, early June) and did not get much attention in my Hebrew School. Or, maybe it was due to the lack of an obvious symbol of the holiday, unlike the seder, the sukkah, or even the solemnity of the High Holidays (not sure cheesecake qualifies). Also, I have always felt a little baffled in trying to put together the elements of the holiday that I was taught: the receipt of the Torah, one of the three major agricultural festivals, and the reading of the Book of Ruth.

In particular, I have spent some time the past few years trying to gain a greater understanding of the Book of Ruth and its connection to Shavuot. I know that Ruth gleaned from the fields of Boaz, so the grain harvest nexus is there. But, surely there is more. Ruth is a person of commitment and devotion. Ruth is both the giver and recipient of acts of loving kindness. Ruth exhibits the strength of character to support her mother-in-law and the sense of belonging that invigorates a community. Her rewards for her good deeds are to emerge from poverty and to plant the seeds of a nation- she is the great-grandmother of David.

The story of Ruth, her commitment and devotion and the acts of loving kindness, is rooted in the Torah values that were received at Mount Sinai on Shavuot and have been continually received by every succeeding generation. The small acts of kindness that each of us can do every day, and that our agencies do for the thousands of lives that they touch, are a reflection of the life of Ruth and grounded in the same roots of Torah. The connection is a bit clearer to me now.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Shavuot Sameach.

**Leah Berry**  
**Director, Leadership & Development**

This week's Parsha (torah portion), Bamidbar, describes the Bnei Yisroel (Jewish people) in the desert. Each of the twelve shevatim, (tribes) had their own unique flag, representative of the characteristics of the shevet. Together they assembled as the Bnei Yisroel.

Why was it necessary for each shevet to have its own flag? Why not have one united flag representative of the entire nation? The answer that our chachamim (Rabbis) gives is that each shevet had unique talents that only they could provide to the entire nation.

Just as each individual instrument contributes to the beautiful sound of the symphony, so does each Jew contribute to Klal Yisroel.

There are sh'vim panim l'Torah, (seventy facets to Torah) so that everyone can find his or her portion. It is not one size fits all.

So it is with the DFI. We offer courses that meet the needs of the individual. It is not one class that appeals to all. Just like each of the shevatim had their own unique flavor, the diverse Jewish communal professionals in the Baltimore community have their own unique talents and interests as well.

When Klal Yisroel came to Har Sinai, the pasuk says, "VaYichan Sham Yisroel Neged HaHar" - "And the Jews camped near the mountain". "VaYichan" is in the singular - "And he camped" - although it is referring to all of Klal Yisroel. Rashi says that this is to teach us the unity that Klal Yisroel had. They were, "K'Ish Echad BiLev Echad" - "like one person with one heart".

The Jewish people were at Har Sinai for a common purpose, just like the people in this room. We come from diverse communal organizations, but we are K'Ish Echad BiLev Echad" to ensure the vitality and future of a vibrant Jewish Baltimore.

**Cass Gottlieb**  
**CCEL Leadership Support Committee Member**

IF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE WERE PROPHETS....

This week we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot – a time of revelation, a time of renewal, and a time of recommitment to Jewish covenant and Jewish learning. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, in his book *The Jewish Way*, talks about the challenge of teaching Judaism, in the context of this holiday:

“As with any transmission of tradition, there is a danger that the freshness and depth of covenantal commitment will be lost .... The work of all previous generations would be forfeit, if one entire generation of relay runners dropped the torch .... The holiday of Shavuot is a response to these concerns. It celebrates and renews the covenant of the Jewish People.”

The challenge that we face today in Jewish education is finding those “relay runners” -- finding them, engaging them and empowering them to learn. In this week's parsha *Beha'alotcha*, there is an incident that speaks to this very issue:

In response to Moshe's frustration with Bnei Yisrael's ongoing complaints, God instructs him to select 70 elders (the precursors of the Sanhedrin) to help him govern the people. We then learn that two of these chosen elders, Eldad and Medad, are prophesizing in the camp. Joshua advises Moshe to put a stop to this, but Moshe responds differently:

“*U'mi yitain kol am Hashem nevi'im.*” (If only all of God's people were prophets.) Moshe understands that if Bnei Yisrael are to progress in their journey from slavery to freedom, if they are to learn what it means to build a Jewish community, they need to feel empowered and to be fully engaged in the enterprise.

And so it is today, that the new e-words in Jewish education are engagement and empowerment. However, I worry sometimes that too many of our communities are diverting their limited resources for Jewish education to engagement, and may be losing sight of that other e-word which we've been striving towards these past years -- excellence.

Don't get me wrong. Engagement and empowerment are critical to moving Jewish education forward to new levels of access and reach. If we can't engage those "relay runners," we won't be able to transmit our tradition, no matter how brightly the torch burns. On the other hand, if the torch is barely burning, what exactly do we expect these "relay runners" to transmit?!

These questions and the metaphor of the torch bring me back to the parsha. *Beha'alotcha* opens with instructions to Aaron regarding the daily lighting of the Menorah in the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, which was dedicated in the previous parsha *Naso*. The commentators ask why this passage is inserted right after the list of dedication offerings presented by each of the tribal leaders. Rashi responds that Aaron was upset that the tribe of Levi had no role in the dedication ceremony; so God comforted him with the news that he would be responsible for lighting the Menorah every day.

The Or HaChaim takes this one step further and teaches that, in order to clean and prepare the lamps of the Menorah, they had to be removed; so that, in effect, Aaron was rebuilding the Menorah and rededicating the Mishkan on a daily basis. This image of the Menorah being rebuilt and rekindled every day can serve as a model for us, as we struggle with the issues of quantity and quality in Jewish education.

The Menorah is our heritage, our values, our language, our texts. We may take it apart, analyze it, and put it back together again; but it remains the immutable essence of who we are as a Jewish people. Its role, however, is to support and contain the flames which, unlike the Menorah, are in a constant state of change.

The lit Menorah, then, represents the balance between tradition, and its relevance in an ever-changing world; the balance between teaching what is essential to understanding Judaism, and what is meaningful to today's learners in their highly-connected universe; the balance between engaging a multitude of Jewish learners, and ensuring the quality of what they learn.

If JESNA and its partners are to succeed at achieving meaningful change in Jewish education -- change that incorporates innovative thinking and practices, and moves Jewish life forward to new levels of access and excellence -- then we need to ensure that the initiatives, which we identify, develop and promote, are characterized by the balance of the lit Menorah.