

“They Ate and Drank”

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Our American Thanksgiving purports to be a feast of coming together across differences: racial, ethnic, religious, political, sex and gender. The emergent narratives of Native Americans complicates this aspiration, as do the narratives of the “1619 Project.” As do the stories that continue to unfold after Stonewall. And so forth.

Many of us want to learn these horrific stories, acknowledge them, embrace them, and somehow integrate them into our larger picture of Thanksgiving, in the hope of going forward “together.”

I cannot tell you that our Rabbinic tradition helped us in that regard with respect to the stories we read in our parashah for today, *Par’shat Tol’dot*, but I can say with some confidence that the Torah itself wanted to go there.

The Rabbis see Esau as the placeholder for Rome, and thus as the Evil Empire. For Jews in Rabbinic times, Rome was indeed the Evil Empire in ways too numerous to mention. But because Esau, and Edom, became synonymous with Rome in the Rabbis’ minds and in the collective mind of subsequent millennia of Jews, our tradition teaches us to read both of Jacob’s famous deceptions in *Tol’dot* as if Jacob is acting heroically and Esau boorishly at best.

That is, both the exchange of the birthright for the lentil porridge, and the disguise that leads Isaac to give Jacob Esau’s firstborn blessing. Esau’s lashing out and threatening to kill Jacob only solidifies this point of view for them. You

yourselves can easily read your way through the text and come up with a more balanced understanding of what the Torah is telling us, including a more sympathetic view of Esau, and yes, a less sympathetic view of our eponymous ancestor Jacob.

I have enormous sympathy for the Rabbis, and for Jews throughout the centuries of exile, discrimination, degradation, inquisition, and slaughter. They – we - came to call this collective experience “Esau.” The hostile foreigner.

So be it. We cannot begin to fit into their shoes. This includes the shoes of Jews who washed up on these shores a century or more ago and most decidedly did not enjoy “white privilege.”

The irony, for me, in this slanted reading of *Tol'dot*, comes to light in the *middle* section of the *parashah*, the section having nothing to do with Esau or Jacob, but nonetheless with Isaac experiencing hostility in his interaction with “foreigners.”

First, a literary note. Both deception scenes involve the purposeful preparation and partaking of food. In the first, the bowl of stew is the prop that creates the distance between the brothers, the unbridgeable gap of mistrust. In the second, both Jacob’s fake venison and Esau’s actual venison are meant to celebrate the passing of a covenantal blessing to the next generation, but end up bequeathing only mistrust and the opposite of blessedness for the family. Esau will ultimately do fine, though he will be read out of the central family narrative. Jacob will write that narrative large, but it will be filled with squabbles, mistrust, deception, and heartache.

In other words, a meal that could have become a moment of sacred exchange turns on itself.

By contrast, when Isaac and Rebecca migrate temporarily to Gerar (probably the Gaza Strip) to find pasture land in a time of famine, their terrible experience with Avimelech and company ultimately ends well – and over a festive meal, no less!

Avimelech resents Isaac's agricultural skill, or perhaps beginner's luck, and accuses him of exploiting his reluctant hosts for his own benefit. That's *his* narrative. He and his men stop up Isaac's wells, which happen to have been dugged by Abraham in the previous iteration of this story.

The Torah tells us *vayis't'mum p'lishtim*, "the Philistines stopped them up," using a verb that begins with a *samekh* but nonetheless has to be a pun on the name of one of Isaac's retaliatory wells, *Sitnah*. *Sitnah*, with a *sin*, means "dispute" or "strife," thus giving us Isaac's point of view of what happened, since the Torah has already allowed us to hear Avimelech's side of the story. That is, Isaac's wells – and his names for those wells - represent defiance against the discrimination leveled against him by his hosts.

But after a mystical visit from God, Isaac builds an altar and offers thanksgiving, as it were, and before he can look up, Avimelech and his top brass appear in a gesture of peace. Both sides agree to bless each other, to make a non-aggression pact, to acknowledge each other's conflicting narratives, and to seal it with – you guessed it – a festive meal.

Vaya'as lahem mishteh vayoch'lu vayish'tu – "Then he made a feast for them, and they ate and drank."

As part of this ceremony, they not only acknowledge each other's version of events, but they recite each other's version. That recitation seems to be what

opens the well, to borrow the metaphor. The last of Isaac's wells is appropriately called *rechovot*, "broadway" or "ample space."

In other words, the Torah sharply contrasts one type of "feast" with another "feast." In the Jacob-Esau scenes, the food reinforces intractable differences of identity. In the Isaac-Avimelech story, the meal allows enemies to create a new way forward. It is, if you will, a utopian Thanksgiving feast.

Do we dare draw an analogy for ourselves in divided America, in the America of much *sitnah* and less and less *rechovot*? Are we who have long been pretty happy with our long-standing version of Thanksgiving willing to expand the story behind it to include the genocide of close to 100 million Native people and the enslavement of God-knows how many Black people?

Are we willing to open our table-telling to include the tales of oppression against fellow Americans of differing genders and sexual orientations? Of differing economic and educational identities? Are we willing to try to create a Thanksgiving narrative that discourages, rather than encourages, the *sitnah* that manifests itself in mass shootings and other hate crimes? The *sitnah* that comes from *s'tumah*, from "closing" our ears and minds to the Other?

Here our Rabbinic tradition may not be so helpful, but the voice of Torah may give us a way forward. Why else would it juxtapose Isaac's and Avimelech's reconciliation feast with the irreconcilable scenes between the two brothers? Why else but to tell us that the only way to create a society worthy of our gratitude is to use the gift given to us and no other creatures: the gift of story-

telling. The gift of speech. And, I suppose, the gift of cooking our food and creating a culinary culture that tells our story like nothing else can.

The Book of Deuteronomy offers this touchstone on the full meaning of the experience of eating: *V'achalta v'sava'ta uveyrach'ta et ado-nai elohecha al ha'aretz hatovah asher natan lach*. "You shall eat and satiate yourselves, and then bless the One who gives us this good land." Says the S'fas Emes (late 19th century Polish Chassidic commentator), it is the divine word within the food that sustains the soul, just as the physical food sustains the physical body. By reciting the blessings for our food, we find the inner food, the "soul food."

So it should be with the recitation of a new, all-encompassing narrative as we partake of the Thanksgiving meal. Those words – that "telling" – might release within us a new spirit of acceptance, of soulfulness, of *rechovot*, of ample space for one another's humanity. That would be a very utopian – but very achievable – Thanksgiving feast.