

# TOLDOT

Genesis 26: 23 – 27: 27

Presented on 21 November 2020 by Roslyn Bryan-Walker

Toldot, is translated as generations, descendants, genealogies, offspring, births, histories, stories, or accounts, and begins with the following story:

“And he went up from there to Beersheba...and he pitched his tent there, and Isaac’s servants began digging a well there.” Then Abimelech, his councillor, and captain came to Isaac to make peace. “ And he made them a feast and they ate and drank. And they rose early in the morning and swore to each other, and Isaac sent them away, and they went from him in peace. And it happened on that day that Isaac’s servants came and told him of the well they had dug, and they said to him, “We have found water.” And he called it Shibah. Therefore, the name of the town is Beersheba to this day.” (26: 23 - 33)

Esau and Jacob were introduced in the previous chapter, but their history was interrupted by the story of Isaac’s relationship with his neighbours in Gerar and Beersheba. Why? What connects this relationship or Beersheba with the histories of Esau and Jacob?

**Relationships are like wells. You invest in them and when you withdraw, you dig up either dirt, or an abundance of blessings.**

Wells are extremely important. Life would cease without water. But what have wells got to do with relationships? Isaac related the two:

Isaac named his first well ‘Contention’ because after he dug it, the herdsmen of Gerar came out and contended with his shepherds. He dug a second well and named it “Hostility” because of a dispute with the same herdsmen. He moved further into the Negeb, away from Gerar, and dug a third well. He named it “Broad Places” because he had finally escaped the Philistines and had ample space. Isaac named his wells based on his relationship with his neighbours. (Genesis 26:17-22)

**And, like any relationship, there are two versions to the same story:**

Isaac’s version: “Why have you come to me when you have been hostile toward me and have sent me away from you?” His neighbours’ version: “Let us seal a pact with you, that you will do no harm to us, just as we have not touched you, and just as we have done toward you only good, sending you away in peace. “ Same situation. Two opposing points of view. (Genesis 26:27-29)

Can we make peace with others who hold opposing views? Can we make peace even when we believe we have been wronged? Does peace come naturally or is it a choice we make? What does it mean to make peace?

Note that it is only **after** the covenant of peace that we are told water was found. Genesis 26:32:

“And they went from him in peace. And it happened on that day that Isaac’s servants came and told him of the well they had dug, and they said to him, “We have found water.”

Are there parallels between Isaac and the Philistines and Israel and the Palestinians?

**Having good relations with neighbours is essential to a peaceful life.** Earlier this year, I read the following in an online article:

Canadians expressed hurt when their neighbour blocked shipments of N95 protective masks from the United States early in the pandemic. Bruce Heyman, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada, calls it a low point.

“I just couldn’t imagine living next door to somebody and they are in need of something to survive and I’m like, ‘You can’t have it.’ That is just unthinkable,” Heyman said. “The relationship is like family. It’s like a trusted neighbour and we have a president that doesn’t value any of those things. He was so transactional for a win for him.”

Unthinkable that someone would treat a neighbour that way? What about a brother? When Esau was starving and exhausted after working in the field all day, what did his brother say to him? “I know you are hungry, and I have food prepared right in front of me. But I will feed you only if you first sell me your birthright.” (Genesis 25: 27-34)

Esau was so famished and exhausted that his future reward was worth less to him than preserving his life at that moment. Jacob was so consumed with the reward that he could not see his brother’s need above his own desire.

Isaac made peace with his neighbours, but unfortunately, within his own family, there was competition and contention. Made worse by parental favouritism.

**This dysfunctional family did not understand true relationship peace.** Even when Jacob returned home and the brothers reconciled in a later parasha, Esau greeted his brother warmly, but Jacob kept Esau at a distance. We are told:

“And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” Jacob on the other hand, called him “**lord**” throughout their conversation, declined his company on the journey, promised to meet with him in Seir, saying “till I come to my lord in Seir”, but did not meet with him. He went in the other direction. “And Esau returned that day on his way to Seir, while Jacob journeyed on to Succoth.” (Genesis 33)

When Abimelech approached Isaac, he made clear his intentions. Isaac communicated his concerns, and they made peace. And ate. And partied all night. Their open communication led to a covenant of peace.

**Sometimes in our relationships we have unspoken expectations and when these expectations are unmet or broken, they become a source of bitterness to us. Then only the water of honesty, humility, and openness can cleanse the relationship and bring the blessing of peace.**

When Esau was forty years old, he married two Hittites, and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah. (Genesis 26:34-35) But was Esau even aware of his parents' preference for family members as marriage partners? The text suggests not.

"When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women," and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and gone to Paddan-aram, Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. " (Genesis 28:6-8)

### **This lack of communication infected relationships within the household.**

The translator and commentator Robert Alter made the following comment on the verse, " And Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to Esau his son." (Gen 27:5):

"According to the convention of biblical narrative, there can be only two interlocutors in a dialogue (as in Aeschylean tragedy), though one of them may be a collective presence – eg., a person addressing a crowd and receiving its collective response. Within the limits of this convention, the writer has woven an artful chain. The story, preponderantly in dialogue, is made up of seven interlocking scenes: Isaac – Esau, Rebekah – Jacob, Jacob – Isaac, Isaac – Esau, Rebekah – Jacob, Rebekah – Isaac, Isaac – Jacob. ( The last of these occupies the first four verses of chapter 28.) The first two pairs set out the father and his favourite son, then the mother and her favourite son, in opposing tracks. Husband and wife are kept apart until the penultimate scene; there is no dialogue at all between the two brothers – sundered by the formal mechanics of the narrative – or between Rebekah and Esau. Although one must always guard against the excesses of numerological exegesis, it is surely not accidental that there are just seven scenes, and that the key word "blessing" ( berakhah ) is repeated seven times."

### **Conversations can have life changing consequences. We choose whether we use them to divide or to bless.**

Both Esau's and Jacob's lives were changed at Beersheba due to seven scenes and conversations.

Beersheba means both Well of Oath (shevua) and Well of Seven (sheva). Beersheba united three generations: Abraham, Isaac, and Esau and Jacob. Both Abraham and Isaac made peaceful oaths at Beersheba. The story of the Beersheba well, however, split the account of the history of Esau and Jacob into two parts, just as their lives and their descendants' histories were split at Beersheba. How different their lives would have been if they had learned to live in peace and bless each other.

**My hope, and prayer is that we would learn to live in peace and that our lives and our conversations would pour out wells of blessing to our families, our neighbours and to others.**