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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET
ON **TOLDOS** - 5786

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Isaac's Two Sons and the Challenges of Parenting
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

The very dramatic first section of the Torah portion of Toldot begins with the word that gives the portion its name, and also sets the tone for much of what we will read about. "These are the toldot of Isaac (Gen.25:19)" – a word that can be translated a number of ways. Literally, it means "these are the descendants" of Isaac, but it can also be read as "this is the story of the life of Isaac." Those two themes, biography and progeny, are deeply interconnected in the portion. We read about the children of Isaac, but we also read about the legacy of Isaac, and about how his sons define and carry – or fail to carry – that legacy.

Legacy is, in fact, the next note the verse sounds. After "Isaac, the son of Abraham," the Torah adds, "Abraham begot Isaac" – a seemingly repetitive statement. Many commentaries suggest that the message is that Isaac followed in Abraham's path, carried on his mission and legacy. The question of who, among Isaac's descendants, would in turn carry on that mission becomes one of the major themes of this section and of the entire portion.

The text tells us that Isaac and Rebecca at first struggle to have children, and they pray to God that this be resolved. Their prayers are answered, and they are blessed with twins, already prophesied to be the ancestors of different nations. That future is reflected in their personalities. The Torah (25:27) describes Esau as "a man who knows hunting, a man of the field," while Jacob is described as "a simple man, dwelling in tents," a very different kind of person.

The difference between them became, in the eyes of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the basis for a sharp critique of Isaac and Rebecca's parenting. Among other points, Rabbi Hirsch suggests that one source of their later problems was that, despite the obvious differences between Jacob and Esau, they were given the same education – in violation of the wisdom of the verse in Proverbs, "Train a child according to his way," which teaches that different personalities and inclinations require different styles and approaches.

That reading has great power, and it speaks to a real and urgent truth about education. But it is also possible to read the verses somewhat differently.

It is noteworthy that the Torah tells us: "Isaac loved Esau, because game was in his mouth; but Rebecca loves Jacob (25:28)." Each parent, the text tells us, has a favored child, so to speak. Rebecca's love for Jacob is easily understood given his righteous personality. But Isaac's love for Esau is introduced with a troubling explanation: "because game was in his mouth." On the surface, this sounds as if Isaac was susceptible to being won over by bribery, by what Esau put on the table for him.

On a straightforward reading, Isaac seems to emerge looking rather naïve – either bribed or duped. The Midrash, followed by some later commentators, even portrays Esau as consciously manipulating his father with pious-sounding questions and carefully presented food. Rabbi Hirsch takes those traditions seriously and criticizes both parents. It is hard not to feel the force of that critique. And yet, many later writers sensed that this picture is incomplete. The founding Rosh Yeshiva of Kerem B'Yavneh, Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, and its mashgiach, Rabbi Avraham Rivlin, both suggest a very different way of reading Isaac's perception of his sons. It is not that Isaac understood Esau to be purely materialistic and devoted to the hunt, and Jacob to be purely spiritual and devoted to study. Rather, Isaac saw Jacob as only spiritual – a person of the tents of Torah – while he saw in Esau a certain capacity to bring together the spiritual and the material worlds. Precisely as "a man of the field," Esau might, in Isaac's view, be better positioned to carry the mission of the Patriarchs into the broader world. If so, Isaac's preference did not stem from being taken in by a plate of venison, but from a considered judgment about what the mission required.

Another important nuance emerges from the language the Torah uses to describe the parents' love. Rebecca is described as one who "loves Jacob," in the present tense, suggesting an ongoing, almost instinctive affection. By contrast, the verse says that "Isaac lovedEsau," in a way that may imply a more active, deliberate stance. Isaac chose to love Esau. He recognized his more dangerous and materialistic tendencies, and precisely for that reason he directed extra attention and affection toward him. He saw a need to guide Esau's growth, to nurture and develop the spiritual part of his personality so that his worldly inclinations would be merged with a higher purpose. If so, this already diverges significantly from Rabbi Hirsch's interpretation. Rather than presenting one undifferentiated educational approach for both boys, the Torah may be hinting at two distinct educational strategies: Rebecca, with a natural and ever-increasing love for the more obviously righteous son; Isaac, with a consciously cultivated love for the more complicated child.

Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum, in Tiferet Shmuel, points in a similar direction. He suggests that Isaac fully understood Esau's general nature, and was not blind to his profound flaws. What caught Isaac's attention was a specific element embedded within Esau's very attempts to deceive him. The Talmud understands the phrase "game was in his mouth" as alluding to Esau's habit of asking Isaac elaborate halachic questions in order to appear righteous. But, Rabbi Berenbaum notes, even a dishonest attempt to appear righteous can reveal a genuine desire to impress a parent, to be seen as good in the eyes of someone one respects. That desire, misdirected as it was, testified to a latent instinct that could be harnessed for authentic growth.

Accordingly, Isaac "loved Esau" in the sense that he focused his active, intentional love on that kernel of aspiration. He saw a son who, however wayward, still wanted his father's approval. Isaac directed his energy to that point of connection, hoping that it could be nurtured and expanded until it transformed Esau's inner life.

Seen this way, the verse that has long made Isaac look misled may, in fact, be an expression of a deeply sophisticated parental strategy. Isaac is not a naive old man, either bribed or duped; he is a parent making the diffcult choice to invest extra love where the risk is greatest and the need is most acute. Rebecca, for her part, may be described as "loving Jacob" in the sense that her love kept growing – some commentators even read the present tense as indicating that the more she heard of Esau's behavior, the more she reinforced and encouraged Jacob's righteousness. This entire tension between parental responsibility and children's choices is echoed in another place in Jewish life: the blessing traditionally recited by a father at his son's bar mitzvah, "Blessed is He Who has now exempted me from punishment on

account of this child." (Rama OC 225:2). Notably, the Midrash Rabbah associates this practice with the verse that relates that Jacob and Esau "grew up" (25:27).

The classic halachic authority Magen Avraham explains that, before the child reaches the age of thirteen, the father is held accountable for some measure of the child's sins, because he is obligated to educate and guide him. Once the child becomes personally obligated in the commandments, the father is "released" from that direct responsibility.

A different commentary, Etz Yosef, suggests another layer: before thirteen, a child's tendencies are not yet fully visible or fixed. That is precisely the window in which parents must be especially attentive, trying to discern who this child is and to guide those emerging tendencies in the right direction. The blessing, on this view, marks the end of that unique, formative stage.

A third approach, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, adds yet another dimension. Before bar mitzvah, a child may need to hear things primarily in the language of reward and punishment: "If you do this, it will be good for you; if you do that, there will be consequences." After thirteen, the parent is freed – and perhaps obligated – to speak in a more mature vocabulary, appealing to responsibility, meaning, and inner conviction rather than to simple incentives.

All three interpretations circle around the same core: parents are responsible to educate, to notice who their children are, to invest effort, love, and thoughtful guidance. But ultimately, children grow into their own moral independence. The blessing is not a declaration of indifference, but a recognition of the limits of control. This brings us back to Isaac. So why, we might still ask, did he "fail" with Esau?

The beginning of the portion itself complicates that question. Even before the boys are born, Rebecca is told that "two nations are in your womb" and that "the older shall serve the younger." The rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and the distinct destinies they represent, are woven into the fabric of the narrative from the outset. The Torah does not present the outcome as the straightforward product of parenting success or failure. It is, in some deep way, part of the divine script of history.

Moreover, Esau himself is not without redeeming qualities. The Sages famously highlight his extraordinary fulfillment of the commandment to honor father and mother. Whatever else he became, there was a real relationship with his parents, a genuine connection sustained over years. Isaac's efforts were not entirely wasted. Even where a child's larger path diverges painfully from what parents had hoped, strands of the legacy remain: habits of respect, moments of loyalty, residual awareness of the values that were taught.

"These are the toldot of Isaac" thus signals not only a list of names, but a complex, often painful, and yet profoundly instructive story of legacy. Isaac, the son of Abraham, indeed begets Isaac, the one who carries forward Abraham's mission in his own distinctive way. Isaac then faces the agonizing task of trying to transmit that mission to two very different sons – one transparently righteous, one deeply conflicted. He and Rebecca do not simply repeat a single educational formula; they each respond, in different ways, to the different children in front of them. They love, they guide, they hope, and they do so under the shadow of a destiny that is not entirely in their hands.

For parents and educators, the portion of Toldot offers a sober and consoling message. We are commanded to train each child "according to his way," to notice, to differentiate, to choose love actively where it is hardest, and to reinforce goodness where it appears. We are indeed responsible for effort, not for outcome. Isaac does not stand here as a cautionary tale of parental failure, but as a model of the complexity, the courage, and sometimes the heartbreak of a life devoted to building a legacy among children who are, ultimately, their own people. Read more from Rabbi Feldman at riets.substack.com

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from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>
date: Nov 20, 2025, 8:34 PM
subject: Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg - The Cry of the Soul

Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg The Cry of the Soul When Esav heard that Yitzchak had already given the brachos to Yaakov, he cried out an exceedingly great and bitter cry (Toldos 27:34), and he asked that Yitzchak bless him as well. Initially, Yitzchak told him that he does not have another bracha for him. But after Esav begged and wept, Yitzchak then gave him a bracha (27:38-40). If Yitzchok did not have another bracha, then why did he change his mind after Esav wept?

The Alshich explains that initially, Esav thought that Yitzchak was the source of the bracha. So he begged Yitzchak to also give him a bracha. But when Yitzchak told him there was nothing else he could do for him, Esav realized that Hashem was the real source of the bracha, and that He had given only one bracha to Yitzchak to bestow upon his children, and that bracha had already been given to Yaakov. At that point, Esav cried and begged that Hashem grant a second bracha to Yitzchak. Hashem agreed and gave Yitzchak an additional bracha for Esav.

Why did Hashem agree to give Yitzchak a second bracha? After all, Chazal say that Esav violated the worst sins (see Midrash Rabbah, Toldos, 63:12). He certainly does not seem to be one who was deserving of a bracha! The Alshich suggests that tears can achieve what a regular tefillah cannot. Chazal comment (Bava Metzia 59a) that from the day the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, the gates of tefillah have been closed, but the gates of tears are still open. When Esav wept, his tears penetrated those gates of tears and were accepted by Hashem, and as a result, Hashem gave Yitzchak the power to bless Esav as well.

What do Chazal mean that even after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, the gates of tears have not been closed? And why were Esav's tears enough for him to merit receiving a bracha? The Beis Hamikdash, the home of the Shechina, is the universal place for tefillah (see Yeshaya 56:7). After the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, it is harder for a tefillah to be accepted because the gates of tefillah are no longer as welcoming as they used to be. But there still is another place where the Shechina dwells even after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, and that is in the heart of every Jew. The posuk says, "They shall make for me a Mikdash, so that I may dwell among them" (Terumah 25:8.) The Alshich (Ki Sisa 31:13) points out that it says "among them", not "in it" – b'socho lo ne'emar e'la b'socham – to imply that the primary place in which Hashem wanted His presence to dwell was in the hearts of the Jewish people, and from there the Shechina would spread and dwell in the Mishkan as well (see also Nefesh Hachaim 1:4).

The soul of every Jew is an expression of his true essence. Its source is from Hashem Himself, as the posuk says, "He blew in his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being" (Bereishis 2:7.) Hashem infused His spirit, so to speak, into man, into his neshama. It is through this neshama, this God-like essence, that a person connects with Hashem. But usually, it is challenging for a person to connect because his soul is covered in so many layers of physicality. When a person cries, he peels away those external layers and he penetrates to his very essence, his soul. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is quoted as saying that tears are the sweat of the neshama. This means that tears express the innermost feelings of a person. They could be tears of joy or sadness, tears of anger or stress. But they reveal the essence of a person's soul.

A tefillah accompanied by tearful crying is one that expresses the deepest emotions in a person's heart. Through a tearful tefillah, one's neshama can connect with Hakadosh Boruch Hu in the purest way, and that connection allows the tefillah to be accepted.

In the climax of the Selichos of Ne'ilah on Yom Kippur, we say, "I have placed my reliance on the thirteen attributes (of mercy), and on the gates of tears for they are never closed; therefore I have poured out my prayer to Him Who discerns hearts, I am confident in these, and in the merit of the three Avos." Why are we so confident that Hashem will answer our tefillos just because we cry out to Him? The answer is that our tears reflect our deep heartfelt desire to have our sins forgiven and to connect with Hakadosh Boruch Hu. Since Hashem discerns the hearts of His people and understands the true meaning of our tears, we are confident that He will answer our tefillos favorably.

This perhaps is why Esav's tears were so effective. Despite the fact that Esav was far from a tzaddik, his tears expressed a sincere desire for Hashem's bracha. They revealed a part of his neshama, however small, that still wanted to feel a closeness to Hashem. It was that part of his essence which through his tears connected with Hakadosh Boruch Hu, and enabled his tefillah to be answered favorably.

Tefillah is not about reciting a formula. It is about connecting with Hashem. When we invest our heart and soul in the process of tefillah, and we cry out to Hashem to draw us close to Him, we can hope that our tefillos will penetrate the gates of tears and that Hashem will respond to us with kindness and mercy

Lonely, but Certain

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Yaakov endured a far more turbulent life than his two predecessors. He entered this world clutching the heel of his older brother. Though he was better suited to guide our destiny, biology placed him second, and he had to struggle to claim the role meant for him. Twice he was forced to dislodge Esav, who was unfit for leadership or for carrying the mission of our nation. Esav lived for immediate gratification and showed little interest in long-term purpose, public duty, or selfless service. He spent twenty years beyond the borders of Eretz Yisrael in the home of a deceitful father-in-law and later confronted tensions within his own family—conflicts that ultimately led him into exile in Egypt. His journey was marked by instability, pulled between external adversaries and internal turmoil.

Ya'akov's life unfolds in the shadow of struggle. From the moment he grasped Esav's heel, both his name and his experiences reflect a lifetime of navigating conflict.

Unanswered questions

Perhaps no challenge was as mentally taxing for Ya'akov as remaining committed to his inner conviction when it was not affrmed by those around him. He was forced to secure the berachot through disguise, allowing his father to believe he stood before him as the older son. It must have been unsettling for Ya'akov to receive the berachot of Jewish leadership in such a fraught and morally complex manner.

Esav immediately cast him as a deceiver and pursued him with threats of violence. In Esav's narrative, Ya'akov was the criminal who stole the birthright and then compounded the offense by taking the blessings as well.

As Ya'akov arrives in the home of his relatives, his troubles only deepen. After working seven years to marry Rachel, he is deceived by his father-in-law, who swaps Leah in place of the woman he had labored for. This moment must have cut Ya'akov sharply. He now confronts the very pattern he once set in motion: just as he had stepped into Esav's place as the older brother, the older sister is now being slipped into the place of the younger, Rachel—the woman he loved.

The questions that must have flooded him are easy to imagine. Is this my punishment? Is this what comes back to me? Is Hashem signaling that my earlier actions were tainted? Is this a measure of retribution? Over the next twenty years in Lavan's household, the pattern repeats. Lavan alters the terms of employment, shifting agreements and manipulating Ya'akov. Each time he is swindled, Ya'akov must have wondered whether he was encountering human deceit or a deeper accounting for the berachot he secured from Esav.

When he ultimately returns to Eretz Yisrael, Ya'akov confronts discord within his own family. His sons wrestle over succession and status, and once again he is thrust into the painful dynamics that emerge when leadership is contested. The echoes of his own struggle with Esav must have been unmistakable—the same dangers and the same jealousy that accompany the question of who will carry the future.

Painfully, Ya'akov never received explicit affrmation or validation from his father. His father never openly acknowledges that he had misjudged the situation or that Ya'akov's actions, however diffcult, were necessary for the future of the nation. Yitzchak dispatched Ya'akov to Aram Naharayim with heartfelt blessings, yet the Torah records no reconciliation, no healing moment between them. They never meet again.

Ya'akov is left without closure, forced to draw strength from the truth he knows internally—that he acted to secure the destiny he was meant to carry, even when that truth was not confirmed by the person whose approval he most longed to receive.

The Quiet Power of Conviction

All these experiences could have left Ya'akov doubtful and unsteady. Yet out of this swirl of uncertainty emerges his strength: his courage lies in his faith and inner resilience. Even without his father's endorsement, and even when circumstances seem stacked against him, Ya'akov holds fast to his conviction. His mother had instructed him, and the choice was clear: Esav could not lead a nation meant to live by the command of Hashem and carry a historical mission. Ya'akov's inner clarity sustains him, even when public validation is absent and the path forward is clouded with doubt.

Ya'akov's ability to trust his inner truth becomes a blueprint for moments when a nation must stand firm without applause.

Our Moment of Conviction

Our people are facing a similar trial. As the war reaches its end—or even a temporary pause—the world has lined up to accuse us with fabricated claims. For some, the hostility began on October 8th, before a single retaliatory shot was fired. For others, their anger toward Israel had been building for two years of manipulated images, false reports, and a global campaign that cast Jews and the Jewish state as criminals even as we were confronting the most brutal assault imaginable.

As the military phase recedes, the struggle shifts to the diplomatic front and to the charged arena of public opinion. Here, too, our resolve is tested, as our principled defense of land and people is distorted and condemned.

We carry the rightness of our cause. October 7th left no alternative. We have fought an excruciating urban war, doing everything possible to spare noncombatants while striving to return our hostages. If parts of the world refuse to acknowledge the moral clarity of that effort, we must still remain attentive to it ourselves.

History's verdict will emerge in time. We stand on firm moral ground—and, ultimately, on the foundations of nevuah as well. The task is to move forward with quiet certainty, holding fast to the truth we bear even when others cannot or will not see it.

What Ya'akov mastered in the realm of destiny, we face in the ongoing demands of ordinary life. His courage reminds us how hard it is to stay rooted in conviction without the comfort of public affirmation.

Modern identity is fragile We live in a world that makes it diffcult to follow our inner convictions when they aren't popular. Social media has left many dependent upon public approval and attention. By broadcasting private lives, we invite others to judge, affrm, or admire the choices we make and the way we live. The more we rely on feedback, the harder it becomes to hear the quiet voice of conscience. This craving for external validation weakens our ability to remain anchored in our own convictions and values. We spend more energy shaping how we appear in the public square than nurturing the inner compass that guides us toward what is right.

When conviction erodes, identity becomes hollow and fragile. If we can no longer name the values we believe in, we lose the cornerstone of who we are. In that vacuum, people grasp for shallower forms of identity—especially political identity. Much of modern identity politics springs from a world in which conviction has been weakened, and values diluted, leaving individuals to build identity not on belief or principle but on ideological affliation and group alignment.

In our climate of noise and borrowed identities, Ya'akov's story becomes a guide. He held fast to his truth without applause, without consensus, without the reassurance of being understood.

Ya'akov walked with conviction in silence; we must learn to walk with conviction amid the noise.

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Ein Bishul Achar Bishul –

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter 5786

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Introduction

A crucial rule permitting us to enjoy hot food on Shabbat is the principle of Ein Bishul Achar Bishul (literally, "there is no cooking after cooking"). There are several crucial debates concerning this central idea.

Liquids

The Rishonim debate whether Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies only to solids or even to liquids. The Biur Halachah (318:4 s.v. Yeish) notes that the Rambam, Rashba, and Ran adopt the lenient position that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies even to liquids. However, Rashi, Rabbeinu Yonah, the Rosh, and the Tur are stringent and believe that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies only to solids. The Acharonim (see Pri Megadim Eishel Avraham 254:1 and Eglei Tal Ofeh 8:11) explain that the stringent view believes that the effect of the cooking of a liquid is nullified after it has cooled down (Azil Lei Bishulei). By contrast, solids retain the impact of cooking even after the food has cooled. The lenient opinion believes that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies even when its reason is irrelevant.

Many Yemenite Jews follow the Rambam and will reheat liquid (such as the famed Yemenite soup) on Shabbat. Sepharadim follow Rav Yosef Karo, who codifies the strict view (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 318:4 and 15). According to Rav Karo, one may not reheat liquids that have fallen below Yad Soldet Bo. The Rama (O.C. 318:15), however, cites the lenient view.

The Rama records the Ashkenazic practice to follow the lenient opinion if the liquid "has not completely cooled." Acharonim debate how to understand the Rama's phrase, "not completely cooled down." The Eglei Tal (Ofeh 8) explains that it refers to liquid that is less than Yad Soledet Bo but is still sufficiently hot that people regard it as a hot drink. The Chazon Ish (O.C. 37:13) indicates that the Rama is lenient if the liquid is not entirely cooled.

Acharonim also debate the reasoning behind the compromise. At first glance, the compromise appears difficult since reheating a liquid that fell below Yad Soledet Bo constitutes Bishul according to the strict opinion. On the other hand, the lenient opinion permits reheating a liquid even if it has completely cooled down. The Halacha appears to attach no significance to the liquid not having been completely cooled down.

The Chazon Ish (ibid.) explains that the Rama fundamentally accepts the lenient view as the normative position. However, there is concern that if an item is completely cooled down, it will be difficult to distinguish between the cooled liquid and liquid that has never been heated. The common practice seeks to avoid this potential confusion.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited by Rav Mordechai Willig, Beit Yitzchak 21:181), on the other hand, suggests that the Rama fundamentally accepts the stringent opinion as the normative position. Rav Soloveitchik explains that the strict view believes that when a liquid cools down, no impact remains from the cooking (Azil Lei Bishulei). Accordingly, as long as the liquid has not completely cooled down, some of the original cooking effect remains, and one is not considered to be cooking.

Defining Liquids and Solids

Acharonim have debated the definition of liquid and solid in this context for centuries. Some Acharonim (the Bach, Vilna Gaon, and Mishna Berura) believe that a food must be free of any liquid to qualify as a solid. Other Acharonim (including the Taz, Pri Megadim, and the Kaf Hachaim) believe that if the majority of an item is solid, it is classified as a solid (the opinions are summarized by Rav Shimon Eider, Halachos of Shabbos, p. 259 footnote 114).

Rav Yosef Adler ZT"L cites Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who offers the following practical guidelines. If the food is eaten with a fork, it is solid, and if it is eaten with a spoon, it is liquid. Rav Ovadia Yosef (Teshuvot Yechaveh Daat 2:45) also follows the lenient view. On the other hand, Rav Moshe Feinstein (Teshuvot Igrot Moshe 4:74:Bishul:7), Rav Ben Zion Abba Sha'ul (Teshuvot Ohr L'Tzion 2:30:13), and Rav Shalom Messas (Teshuvot Tevu'ot Shemesh Orach Chaim 66) are strict. Rav Mordechai Willig advises following the strict view.

Rav Eider (ibid.) defends the lenient view based on the Chazon Ish's understanding of the Rama. The concern of confusing cooled-down liquid with another is not relevant if the liquid is mixed in a majority of food.

Practical Application – Tea Refills

An interesting question arises regarding refilling a cup of tea or coffee. Some Poskim (Rav Aharon Kotler and others, cited in Halachos of Shabbos, p. 295, note 423) require wiping the remaining few drops of completely cooled water on the cup's bottom. Many authorities, though, are lenient. The Chazon Ish (ibid. note 424) rules leniently, arguing that we fundamentally accept that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies to liquids. The Ashkenazic custom to follow the strict view if the liquid has entirely cooled down, argues the Chazon Ish, does not apply if one merely reheats a minute amount of water and does not care about reheating the few drops.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Teshuvot Igrot Moshe O.C. 4:74:Bishul:19) argues that one may be lenient because of multiple doubts (S'feik S'feika). One lenient consideration is that many Rishonim permit reheating liquids. The second lenient consideration is that one is not concerned about reheating such a minuscule amount of water. This is a situation of a פסיק רישיה דלא ניחא ליה (an unintended side effect) and is permitted by some Rishonim (most notably the Aruch). The combination of these two lenient opinions allows for a lenient ruling. This ruling also applies to returning a ladle to a Kli Rishon if it has a few drops of previously cooked liquid that have cooled completely.

However, Rav Mordechai Willig (Cooking and Warming Food on Shabbat, p.26) follows the strict view, keeping with Rav Soloveitchik's understanding of the Rama's compromise.

Ein Bishul Achar Bishul – Part Two By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

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Cooked Sugar, Cooked Salt, and Instant Coffee

The Mishnah Berurah (318:71) notes that if salt was cooked during its processing, we may even place it on food in a Kli Rishon if the Kli Rishon was removed from the fire. The Mishnah Berurah says that the same applies to sugar that was cooked during its processing. He notes, however, that Rav Akiva Eiger (at the end of O.C. 253; and see *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata* 1:note 138) questions this ruling. Rav Akiva Eiger believes that a solid item designated to be melted and turned into a liquid may have the status of a liquid. Accordingly, the Ein Bishul Achar Bishul rule does not apply even to cooked salt and sugar. The Mishnah Berurah concludes that it is best to avoid placing salt and sugar in a Kli Rishon. He permits relying on the lenient opinions regarding a Kli Sheini.

Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata (1:49) notes the many applications of this rule. They include instant coffee, instant tea, soup bouillon, powdered milk, and powdered cocoa. The *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata* follows the Mishnah Berurah and recommends avoiding placing any of these items in a Kli Rishon. However, Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Teshuvot Yechaveh Da'at* 2:44) endorses the lenient view as it is supported by leading Poskim such as Rav Zvi Pesach Frank and Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg.

Cooking after Baking

The Beit Yosef (318 s.v. V'katav Harav Eliezer Mi'Metz) cites a celebrated dispute concerning Ein Bishul Achar Bishul's scope. He cites the *Sefer Yere'im* who limits it to identical processes such as cooking after cooking, baking after baking, or roasting after roasting. However, he forbids dissimilar processes, such as cooking after baking or roasting after cooking. The Beit Yosef, though, quotes the Raavya who adopts an expansive view of Ein Bishul Achar Bishul. He rules that it applies even to dissimilar processes, such as cooking after baking. A ramification of this dispute is whether one may place bread in very hot (Yad Soledet Bo) soup.

In the Beit Yosef, Rav Yosef Karo cites the many Talmudic texts cited by both the Yereim and the Raavya as proof for their respective opinions. In the Shulchan Aruch (318:5), Rav Karo mentions both the Yere'im and the Ra'avya (Yesh Mi SheOmer and Yesh Matirim) without explicitly endorsing either opinion.

Sephardic Practice

Rav Ovadia Yosef (Livyat Chein 318:49) believes that Rav Karo accepts the lenient opinion since he presents it second. Rav Ovadia notes that when Rav Karo presents both opinions as "there are those who say and those who say", the second view is primary (since he gives it the last word). Moreover, Rav Ovadia notes that Rav Karo presents the Yere'im's view as Yesh Mi SheOmer in the singular and the Ra'avyah's opinion in the plural Yesh Matirim, signaling that the Ra'avyah has greater support. Nonetheless, Rav Ben Zion Abba Sha'ul (Teshuvot Ohr L'Tzion 2:30:6) favors stringency, since a Torah prohibition is at stake.

Ashkenazic Practice

However, the Rama records the Ashkenazic custom to refrain from placing bread in Yad Soledet Bo soup even in a Kli Sheini since there would be cooking after baking. Interestingly, the Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchata (1:61) permits placing fried soup croutons or fried noodles into Yad Soledet Bo soup, since deep frying is the Halachic equivalent of cooking (Sanhedrin 4b with Rashi d"h Derech Bishul and Mishnah Berurah 451:65).

The Mishnah Berurah (318:47) rules leniently if the soup is in a Kli Shelishi. He believes that the possibility that cooking does not occur in a Kli Shelishi, in addition to the Ra'avyah's view, support a lenient ruling. Thus, he permits placing Challah in very hot soup, if the soup is in a Kli Shelishi.

Ladle Status

This Mishnah Berurah combines the possibility that a ladle is a Kli Sheini with the Ra'avyah's leniency. Poskim debate whether a ladle used to remove hot food from a Kli Rishon is regarded as a Kli Rishon or a Kli Sheni. The Maharil (cited by the Taz, Yoreh Deah 92:30) views a ladle as a Kli Sheni. The Taz (ibid.) sharply challenges the Maharil's view, arguing that since the ladle was immersed in a Kli Rishon, it assumes the status of a Kli Rishon.

The Mishnah Berurah has seemingly contradictory indications regarding this question (compare 318:45 with 253:84 and 318:87). We may resolve the contradiction by saying that the Mishnah Berurah rules leniently regarding a ladle in combination with the Ra'avyah's lenient view.

The Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata (1:59 with footnote 180) regards a ladle as a Kli Sheini in this context, provided that the ladle was not immersed for a "long period" in the hot pot. A ladle becomes a Kli Rishon if it remains in the hot pot for a significant amount of time. The Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata does not define what he regards as a "long period."

Mishnah Berurah 318:87 and Yalkut Yosef Orach Chaim 318:87 support the standard of the ladle being a Kli Rishon if it was immersed in the Kli Rishon until steam rises from the ladle's contents. Rav Willig (Cooking and Warming Food on Shabbat, pp. 76-77) supports this standard.

Warming Challah on a Blech

Rav Shmuel Fuerst permits placing Challah on a pot to warm on Shabbat as long as it does not change color or become crispy. Although there is considerable debate about whether one can make toast on Shabbat, it is permissible to warm up the bread without the intention to make toast.

My wife Malca advises wrapping the Challah in one layer of aluminum foil so that the heat will not dry out the bread and prevent it from becoming meaty.

Conclusion

The best way to avoid this question seems to be to wait to dip the Challah until the soup has cooled below Yad Soledet Bo. Recall from our prior articles that we may regard Yad Soledet Bo as 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Thus, the soup remains enjoyable even at a temperature lower than Yad Soledet Bo.

Similarly, a practical way to avoid the dispute regarding solids containing some liquid is to reheat such items in a way that they will not reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

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from: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> date: Nov 20, 2025, 7:00 PM
subject: Tidbits • Parashas Toldos 5786

Parashas Toldos • November 22nd • 2 Kislev 5786

The first opportunity for Kiddush Levana is Sunday night, November 23rd. The final opportunity is early Friday morning, December 5th at 12:39 AM Eastern Time.

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Zevachim 69 • Yerushalmi: Yoma 30 • Mishnah Yomis: Chulin 10:1-2. The siyum is this Friday, mazal tov! Masechta Bechoros begins next • Oraysa (coming week): Chagigah 26b - Yevamos 2b. The siyum on Chagigah and Seder Moed is this Tuesday, November 25th, mazal tov! Seder Nashim begins next with Masechta Yevamos • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 20:8-21:2

Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rebbi to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn't speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!

Chanukah begins Sunday night, December 14th. Shabbos Chanukah is Shabbos Parshas Miketz, December 20th.

TOLDOS: Yitzchak and Rivkah pray for children • Rivkah is expecting a child, experiences pain, receives word of twin children • Birth of Eisav, followed by Yaakov • Eisav sells his firstborn rights for lentil soup • Hashem commands Yitzchak not to leave Eretz Yisrael • Yitzchak settles in Gerar • Fearful for his life, Yitzchak claims Rivkah is his sister • Avimelech becomes aware of their true relationship and assures their protection • Yitzchak prospers and the envious Avimelech sends him away • Avimelech's men claim Yitzchak's wells • Avimelech comes to make a treaty • Yitzchak's men find water at Be'er Sheva • Eisav marries at the age of forty • Yitzchak wishes to bless his son, Eisav • Rivkah commands Yaakov to intercept the blessings • Eisav is bitterly disappointed and vows to kill Yaakov • Rivkah sends Yaakov to stay with her brother Lavan • Yitzchak exhorts Eisav not to marry a Canaanite woman • Eisav marries Yishmael's daughter in addition to his other wives Haftarah: Despite Eisav being the firstborn, it was divinely ordained for Yaakov to be granted the bechorah and to merit the twelve Shevatim and to build the nation. The nevuah of Malachi (1:1-2:7) speaks of the love of Hashem for Yaakov and His hatred for Edom, the descendants of Eisav. Yet even with His love for our forefathers, each Jew individually must strive to be deserving of inheriting Hashem's endearment.

Parashas Toldos: 106 Pesukim • No mitzvos listed

וַיֶּעְתַּר יִצְחָק לְנֹכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ...וַיֵּעָתֶר לוֹ ה' וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ "Yitzchak pleaded with Hashem [for a child] opposite his wife… Hashem accepted his prayers, and his wife Rivkah conceived" (Bereishis 25:21) Rashi quotes the Midrash that notes that although they both davened earnestly for a child, it was Yitzchak's tefillos, not Rivkah's, that effected salvation, as Yaakov was the son of a Tzaddik and Rivkah was the daughter of Besuel, a wicked man. One may question that if it was Yitzchak's tefillos that accomplished a yeshuah and not those of Rivkah, why does the Torah even mention that Rivkah prayed at all? Similarly, we find that the Torah describes that Hagar davened for Yishmael who was deathly ill in the desert. However, the Torah says that Hashem heard "kol hana'ar", that it was Yishmael's prayers that were accepted. So why does the Torah tell us about Hagar's tefillos? Rav Yitzchak Feigelstock zt"l answers that we can derive from here that certainly Rivkah's prayers played a role in securing their salvation. However, ultimately, it was Yitzchak who secured salvation from Hashem. Hagar's prayers were vital as well, yet ultimately it was the ill person, Yishmael himself, whose cries accomplished the salvation. Rav Yitzchak zt"l explains that every tefillah is received by Hashem and there is no such thing as a prayer going to waste. Although we may not notice the effectiveness, each and every tefillah brings about a measure of good and salvation.

Halachos of Chanukah: Menorah - What to Light? It is preferable to use olive oil. Other than the shamash, one should use either oil or candles, but not a mix of both. There should be enough oil in the cup at the time of lighting for the Menorah to burn for at least a half hour after nightfall (tzeis hakochavim). If, inadvertently, any of the candles go out before tzeis, it is not necessary to relight them, so long as the original lighting was done from

shekiah and onward. However, it is praiseworthy to re-light them (without a berachah). Unlike Neiros Shabbos, most Poskim say one cannot use an electric Menorah, even under extenuating circumstances.

Please reach out to us with any thoughts or comments at: klalgovoah.org Ira Zlotowitz - Founder | iraz@gparency.com | 917.597.2197 Ahron Dicker - Editor | adicker@klalgovoah.org | 732.581.5830

Rabbi Reisman – Parshas Toldos 5782

1 – Topic – A Thought from Rav Chaim Kanievsky on the beginning of the Parsha.

As we prepare for Shabbos Parshas Toldos and the beginning of Chodesh Kisleiv. Let's share a number of thoughts on this week's Parsha. Let's start at the beginning of the Parsha with the birth of Eisav and Yaakov. It is interesting that it says in the Parsha by Eisav as is found in 25:25 (וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ, עֵשָׂו) they called him Eisav and by Yaakov it says 25:26 (וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ, יַעֲקֹב) in a Lashon Yachid. Why is that? You may understand because Eisav's name had to do with the way he was born, he was Asa, he was completely made so to speak, he was hairy already, but Yaakov also had to do with way he was born, Eikev. So people called Eisav this and people called Yaakov this. So why is one Lashon Rabbim and one Lashon Yachid?

Rav Chaim Kanievsky in the Sefer Taima Dik'ra (page 33) says something extraordinary. As you know, we have a custom to give a name to a boy at the time of the Bris Milah. That has been the custom by Klal Yisrael at least going back to the time of the Gemara. Where does that come from, what is the Mekor, what does the name have anything to do with the Bris Milah?

I think that we have spoken about this once before. I might have mentioned that someone suggested to Rav Pam and he found it a good suggestion, that because Dovid Hamelech had a Yeled born from Bas Sheva and it says that the Yeled died when he was 7 days old as is found in Shmuel II 12:18 (וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, וַיָּמָת הַיָּלֶד). From there it seems that they didn't give a name until a Bris.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky says the following. The Minhag was to give a name at a Bris. Yaakov Avinu had a Bris (וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ, יַעֲקֹב). However, Eisav was born red and since he looked red they didn't give him a Bris Milah because they thought maybe it is jaundice or another illness that makes him look red. So Chazal say they pushed off the Bris. When he got older he didn't let them do a Bris. So it comes out that Eisav was never given a Bris. So there was no moment that they gave him a name. (וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ, עֵשָׂו). They called him Eisav as he was never given a name by his parent's so people called him Eisav. Therefore, it says Lashon Rabbim. By Yaakov when his parent's gave him a name it says (וַיִּקְרָא) in Lashon Yachid. This is what Rav Chaim Kanievsky says. This is the way to learn up a Posuk in Chumash. Beautiful!

2 – Topic – A Thought based on a Yesod of Hashkafa from Rav Pam

I would like to share with you a Yesod in Hashkafa, a Yesod that I heard from Rav Pam and we will see what connection it has to do with this week's Parsha. Rav Pam used to say in the name of the Chazon Ish in Yiddish, "Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos." We don't rip down Mezuzos. What is the context, what is the idea?

The Shaila is a person has a Mezuza that is 100% Kosher. However, you could get a nicer neater Mezuzah that is more Mehudar. Should he replace the Mezuza? To that, the Chazon Ish writes in one of his letters, Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos. The way Rav Pam explained, if the other Mezuza is Kosher according to more Shittos then of course as it is Mehudar in Kashrus, however, if it just a Hiddur Mitzvah in neatness then Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos.

I saw a similar thing in the Igros Moshe in Orach Chaim Cheilek Bais Sof Siman Lamed Zayin (The Teshuvah is on page 225 of Krach Daled) where Rav Moshe writes the same thing about Yerios in a Sefer Torah that if the Yeria is Kosher and just you can get a nicer one you don't replace Yerios. There is a Halachik source for this discussion in the Teshuva Seforim which has to do with the month of Kisleiv. He brings a discussion between the Shvus Yaakov and the Chacham Tzvi if someone set up his Menorah with candles because he had no oil and later they bring him oil, should he take away the candles and replace it with oil? The Shvus Yaakov held no. Once you have something that is Kosher you don't replace it, you don't change it. The Chacham Tzvi disagreed as you haven't yet started the process of lighting the Menorah. But everyone agrees that once you started you certainly don't change it to do it more Mehudar if you are doing it correctly. Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos. What you do if it is good, it is good.

I used this as a possible answer to a big Kasha. I had a Kasha which I must have asked. Moshe and Aharon are buried in Eiver Hayarden the same time that the Jews are carrying the bones of the 12 Shevatim to be buried in Eretz Yisrael. When Moshe and Aharon died they were busy carrying the Mitah of Yosef that he should be buried in Eretz Yisrael and then when Moshe Rabbeinu dies they bury him where he is. Why didn't they take him into Eretz Yisrael proper?

It may be the same idea. Yosef died in Mitzrayim so they took him to bury him in Eretz Yisrael. Moshe and Aharon died in Eiver Hayardein which is also Eretz Yisrael. For a bigger Hiddur of going across the Yardein that you don't do. Mir Rai'st Nisht. What you have is also good. What you have in front of you if it is good you do it.

We find a similar idea if a king dies and his oldest son is Rau'i to be king, even if the second son is more appropriate for king. If you do a better job if the first one is suitable and would do a good job, we accept him. The same idea, Mir Rai'st Nisht, you don't go and take something that you have and throw it out because you can get something better. No! If you have something you go with it. In the first place, when you are heading to do things, do it the best way you can. However, if you already have something in front of you don't be Mevaze it, don't embarrass it to get rid of it for something that is better.

Yitzchok Avinu knew that Yaakov is a Tzaddik Gamur, yet, since he thought Eisav was okay he went with Eisav. Everyone wondered did he not know the difference between Eisav and Yaakov? The Teretz is Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos. The Teretz is you don't go shopping, you don't say well this one is good but look at that one. You don't go shopping. You do go shopping before you came to the Mitzvah, but once you are somewhere you do with the Cheftzah of the Mitzvah that you have.

Just like a king goes with his older son even though the second one might be Yaakov Avinu, so too, Yitzchok knew that Yaakov is better but he said look he is the B'chor and I should go with him. Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos, Mir Rai'st Nisht Bechor. That would explain why once Eisav spilled the beans and he said, he took my Bechora and now he took my Berachos. Yitzchok said what? Yaakov is the Bechor then he should certainly get it. 27:33 (גַּם-בָּרוּךְ, יִהְיֶה). Of course Yitzchok understood what was going on, but he felt that if Eisav could do a good job that is adequate to that degree, he was fooled.

3 – Topic – A Vort from Rav Schwab

Rav Schwab in his Sefer on Chumash Mayan Bais Hashoeva (page 67-68) (this topic was also discussed in 5771) says a beautiful explanation from the fact that Yitzchok wanted to eat food that Eisav cooked before he gave him a Beracha. Not only that but afterwards when he ate from Yaakov and Eisav came in he said as is found in 27:33 (וְאֹכַל מִכֹּל בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא, וָאֲבָרְכֵהוּ). I ate everything. That is the way a Gadol Hador speaks, I ate everything? That (מִכֹּל) is Bakol, Mikol, Kol. We consider it to be something that Achila. What is going on with Yitzchok's eating?

Says Rav Schwab, Yitzchok Avinu was able to sense the Kedusha in the food in which a Mitzvah was done. For all his failings, Eisav was really Mekayeim Kibbud Av V'aim, it wasn't a fake. The Gemara says that Tannaim said that my Kibbud Av V'aim is only a fraction of Eisav's. Eisav was Mekayeim the Mitzvah. When Eisav was Mekayeim the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av V'aim with food that food was imbued with the sense, with the Kedusha of the Mitzvah which was done. That is what Yitzchok wanted. He wanted to have the Kedusha of that Mitzvah that Eisav did. Now he says prepare food and I will give you a Beracha, Eisav will certainly do it with a tremendous Cheishek for the Mitzvah, and that will be fantastic with the Cheishek of the Mitzvah so that will be a special Maachal.

Then Rivka tells Yaakov you bring your father food. Yaakov said my food will not have the Kedusha of Kibbud Av like when Eisav prepares it. So

Rivka tells Yaakov 27:13 (עָלַי קִלְלָתְךָ בְּנִי). (וְלֵךְ קַח-לִי). Go do it for me. Do it with Kibbud Aim. You will have the Mitzvah of Kibbud Aim with Mesirus Nefesh because you don't really want to do it. You are afraid as it says in 27:12 (אוּלַי יְמֻשֵּׁנִי אָבִי). Why are you doing it? Because your mother told you. That food will have the sense of the Mitzvah of Kibbud Aim and Kibbud Av V'aim is the same Mitzvah in the Torah. Mimeila it will be Murgesh, it will be felt. That is the explanation of (וָאֹכַל מִכֹּל). He says I ate it and I felt the Kedusha of Kibuud Av V'aim and Mimeila (גַּם-בָּרוּךְ, יִהְיֶה). What an insight, a Cheftza D'mitzvah.

You have to know that Tashmishai Kedusha like Mezuzas, Tefillin and Sefarim and things that are used for them are Shaimos. Tashmushai Mitzvah Nizrakin. Certain things you are allowed to throw away. You are allowed to throw away a Shofar, a Lulav, and Schach. You are allowed to throw it away. But Im Kol Zeh, to understand that when you use something for a Mitzvah it becomes a Cheftzah D'mitzvah. It becomes something with a very special Chashivus, a special Kedusha. If your home is a home of Mitzvos the whole home gets imbued with the Kedusha of the Mitzvos that you do.

With that I want to wish one and all an absolutely wonderful Shabbos, a Chodesh Tov as tomorrow Erev Shabbos is Rosh Chodesh. Let it be a very wonderful and meaningful Shabbos for one and all!

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from: The **Rabbi Sacks Legacy** <info@rabbisacks.org>
date: Nov 20, 2025, 11:16 AM
subject: Between Prophecy and Oracle (Toldot)
COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Between Prophecy and Oracle

TOLDOT

Written by Rabbi Sacks in 2012

Rebecca, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [vatelech lidrosh et Hashem] (Bereishit 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future: Two nations are inside your womb; Two peoples are to part from you. One people will be stronger than the other, And the older will serve the younger [ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir].

Bereishit 25:23 Eventually the twins are born – first Esau, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Jacob. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rebecca favours the younger son, Jacob. Years later, she persuades him to cover himself in Esau's clothes and take the blessing Isaac intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "May nations serve you; may nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you." (Bereishit 27:29) The prophecy has been fulfilled. Isaac's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rebecca before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger." The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Esau arrives and discovers that Jacob has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Isaac gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is:

By your sword you will live, And your brother you will serve; But when you break loose, You will throw off his yoke from your neck.

Bereishit 27:40 This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Jacob is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Esau had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he able to face Esau with some composure. He bows down to him seven times. Seven times he calls him "my lord." Five times he refers to himself as "your servant." The roles have been reversed. Esau does not become the servant of Jacob. Instead, Jacob speaks of himself as the servant of Esau. But this cannot be. The words heard by Rebecca when "she went to inquire of the Lord" suggested precisely the opposite, that "the older will serve the younger." We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah's narrative devices – the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past. This is the essence of Midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text.[1] The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now.

This is the significance of the great revelation of God to Moses in Shemot 33:23, where God says that only His back may be seen – meaning that His Presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation. We now see that this was not an idea invented by the Sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rebecca heard – as will now become clear – seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words ve-rav ya'avod tsair seem simple: "the older will serve the younger." Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities. The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word et, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Job 14:19 for example, the words avanim shachaku mayim mean "water wears away stones," not "stones wear away water." Thus the phrase might mean "the older shall serve the younger" but it might also mean "the younger shall serve the older". To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is: a poem.

The second is that rav and tsa'ir are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of rav as "older." The opposite of tsa'ir ("younger") is bechir ("older" or "firstborn"). Rav does not mean "older." It means "great" or possibly "chief." This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are not – the opposites would have been bechir/tsa'ir or rav/me'at – further destabilises the meaning. Who was the rav? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third – not part of the text but of later tradition – is the musical notation. The normal way of notating these three words would be mercha-tipcha-sof passuk. This would support the reading, "the older shall serve the younger." In fact, however, they are notated tipcha-mercha-sof passuk – suggesting, "the older, shall the younger serve"; in other words, "the younger shall serve the older."

A later episode adds a yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a second instance in Genesis of the birth of twins, to Tamar. The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Esau and Jacob:

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. As she was in labour one child put out a hand, so the midwife took a crimson thread and tied it to his wrist, saying, "This one came out first." But he pulled his hand back and then his brother came out. She said, "How you have burst through!" So he was named Peretz. Then his brother came out with the crimson thread on his wrist. He was named Zerah.

Bereishit 38:27-30 Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Esau and Jacob?[2] These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rebecca heard may mean "the older will serve the younger" or "the younger will serve the older."

A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word chiddot in Bamidbar 12:8, speaking about Moses: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in chiddot" - usually translated as "dark speeches" or "riddles"). Oracles - a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world - were normally obscure

and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase "she went to inquire of the Lord" which puzzled the medieval commentators.

The second – and this is fundamental to an understanding of Bereishit – is that the future is never as straightforward as we are led to believe. Abraham is promised many children but is 100 years old before Isaac is born. The patriarchs are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey - though it has a destination - is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Jacob serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle, alone at night, does Jacob receive the name Israel meaning, "he who struggles with God and with men and prevails."

The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Jacob.

[1] Please see, for example the essay 'The Midrashic Imagination' by Michael Fishbane.

[2] See Rashi to Gen. 25:26 who suggests that Jacob was in fact the elder.

Zera Shimshon by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l Published Mantua 1778 Chapter VI: Toldot (Gen. 25:19-28:9) Essay . Righteous descendants and wicked descendants There is a verse: "And these are the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham" (Gen. 25:19). Rashi interpreted: "The parsha is speaking of Jacob and Esau." [People] question that the words of Rashi are unnecessary, since the Scripture declares forcefully, "There were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red . . . afterward his brother came out" (Gen. 25:24–26). It appears that Rashi felt that since we have established, as Rabbi Abbahu is quoted in Gen. Rabbah 12:3, that "everyplace that the word 'these are' [eleh] is said, it interrupts the preceding text, and everyplace that the word 'and these are' [ve'eleh] is said, it adds to the preceding text." Here, at Gen. 25:19, the subject of the preceding text are the sons of Ishmael, so how does it say, 'and these are' [ve'eleh]? How are Isaac's sons the same topic as Ishmael's sons? Also, as it is said, "And these are the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham," haven't we heard up until now that Isaac was the son of Abraham? [Scripture] could have said, "These are the descendants of Isaac," and nothing more¸ i.e., omitting the prefatory "and" and omitting "the son of Abraham." Rather, certainly Scripture added "the son of Abraham" to inform us that the descendants [of Isaac], including some descendants of Esau, were like those of Abraham, because by the same descendants, the holiness found room to take her sparks [nitzotzot] out from the husk [klipa], as we will write further in Essay 3 of this chapter, on the verse, "But the children struggled in her womb" (Gen. 25:22). This question is asked by Rabbi Avi Ezri Zelig Margolios, in Kessef Nivchar (Amsterdam 1711). This is what Rashi interpreted on the verse of, "Two nations are in your womb" (Gen. 25:23): "These are Antoninus and Rabbi." He did not interpret the verse as referring to the two heads of nations, i.e., as referring to Jacob and Esau, who were the heads and the fathers of the two nations, and who struggled against each other even before they were born. Rather, Rashi highlighted descendants of each who were great men and also great friends of each other. Jacob's descendant, Rabbi (Rabbi Yehuda haNasi), was very wealthy, the redactor and editor of the Mishnah, head of the Sanhedrin, known for his piety. Esau's descendant, Antoninus,2 was a Roman emperor who was according to Avodah Zarah 10b, was a great admirer and supporter of Rabbi. Now it's fine: [Rashi] identified the two of them, Rabbi and Antoninus, as "the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham," because these descendants that will come because of the pregnancy of Rebecca—that is, the two nations that were in her womb—will be like Abraham. In any event, it is written "and these are" [ve'eleh] to add the previously mentioned sons of Ishmael. They are included in the same topic with Jacob and Esau because wicked people also descended from Jacob, as we have learned (Sanhedrin page 90a), "And these are the ones who don't have a portion in the World-to-Come," with the list including the kings Jeroboam and Ahab (and some add Manasseh). Also, Esau was himself wicked, and thus relevant to the same topic as the sons of Ishmael. The descendants were called by the name "Abraham" because he was the first of converts (Sukkah page 49b), and because it is written, "for I make you the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5). That is, Abraham repaired the spirituality of the converts and pulled them from the husk into which they had sunk, as we have written above for parshat Vayeira (essay 2) on the verse, "he was sitting at the entrance of the tent" (Gen. 18:1) and see there. But preparation and thinking were still required in order to take them out entirely. Thus, "And these are" hints at the wicked descendants of both Jacob and Esau, by linking back to the previously mentioned sons of Ishmael, while "the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham," hints at the righteous descendants of both Jacob and Esau. Two likely candidates were the emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (who lived 121-180), or Caracalla (formally Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who lived 188-217). Alternatively, in a different manner, we will investigate what [Rashi] wrote, that the parsha is speaking of Jacob and Esau, for immediately adjacent to our verse, they are mentioned by Rashi. The next verse, Gen. 25:20, states that Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebecca, the daughter of Bethuel and the sister of Laban. Rashi notes that we already knew her lineage, and that it is repeated in Gen. 25:20 as praise, for even though she was the daughter of a wicked man, and sister of a wicked man, and her native place was one of wicked people, yet she did not learn from their way of life. Nevertheless, her background had an effect, per commentators wrote that here from their union there was one righteous [son], Jacob, and one wicked [son], Esau, because Isaac was a righteous man who was the son of a righteous man, while Rebecca was a righteous woman who nevertheless was the daughter of a wicked man. But there is a question about this, for Abraham fathered Isaac who was a righteous man, and yet Abraham and Sarah were not children of righteous people, for their respective fathers, Terah and Haran3 were idol worshippers, and nevertheless [Abraham and Sarah] were able to be righteous. Why couldn't Jacob and Esau both have been righteous? Why was one, Jacob, righteous, and one, Esau, wicked? Rather, it can be said that from the story of the parsha, we learn that the reason that the blessings came to Jacob by deception, even though he deserved them more than Esau, was because the Holy One, Blessed be He, didn't want the blessings to come to Jacob in the way of tranquility and quiet. G-d preferred that Jacob not enjoy [the tranquility and quiet] so much in this world, in order that he would merit them in the World-to-Come. Because of this, the Holy One, blessed be He, mixed up the events so that Jacob and his seed would only enjoy the blessings with worry and trepidation and with the hatred of Esau, as we will write later in its place, in essay 16 of this chapter. Because of this, [G-d] brought out Jacob and Esau from Isaac, and made them quarrel among themselves such that there would be no peace and quiet for Jacob, and in order to fulfill Abraham's choice that the children of Jacob would 3 In Gen. 20:12, Abraham tells Abimelech that Sarah is his half-sister, "She is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife." However, Rabbinic tradition is that she is his niece, the daughter of Abraham's brother, Haran. Thus, Sarah was Abraham's father's [grand]daughter. See Sanhedrin 69b, where Rabbi Yitzchak interprets Gen. 11:29 as saying that Sarai was another name for Haran's daughter Iscah. 4 face exile. This references the midrash, Gen. Rabbah 44:21: "Shimon bar Abba said in Rabbi Yochanan's name: [G-d] showed [Abraham] four things, Gehenna, the [foreign] kingdoms, the Giving of Torah [at Mt. Sinai], and the Temple, with the promise: As long as your children occupy themselves with the latter two, they will be saved from the former two. [If not,] would you rather your children descend into Gehenna or into the power of the [foreign] kingdoms?" [The rabbis then disagree over what Abraham answered. Some say that he chose subjugation by the foreign kingdoms, while other rabbis says that Abraham answered "Gehenna" but that G-d overruled him.] Israel would not have to face Gehenna, but would be subject to Exile and to subjugation at the hands of Esau. These, then are the words of Rashi, "The parsha is speaking of Jacob and Esau," as if to say that because Isaac was the "son of Abraham," and Abraham had chosen exile and subjugation by the foreign kingdoms over a descent into Gehenna, because of this, Jacob and Esau came from [Isaac]. That is, from everything that was written in the

parsha, you learned that Jacob is not able to sit in tranquility because of Esau, to fulfil the words of Abraham, and this is the meaning of "And these are the generations of Isaac," because he is "the son of Abraham," and not because Rebecca was the daughter of a wicked man.

Toldot 5786

When Lying is (Absolutely) Necessary

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's Parsha, Toldot, takes up the life story of the third and final Patriarch, Yaakov Avinu (our forefather). His trajectory was more complicated than that of his predecessors. His task was not merely to sustain and somewhat expand the religious system of Avraham, but to facilitate its transformation into a national movement. The most basic requirement of this endeavor was the establishment of the Twelve Tribes, each of which would be a component of the Chosen Nation. Yaakov and Eisav: Two Paths, Two Natures It should be noted that people, by their very natures, are cut out for different tasks. For example, the Torah clearly delineates the natural differences between Eisav and his twin brother Yaakov. The former was an outdoorsman, who loved to hunt and was apparently very good at it. He was also very solicitous of his father, whom he treated with great respect. The Torah testifies concerning Yitzchak that he loved Eisav because "the hunt was in his mouth" (Bereishit 25:28). What exactly does that mean? On the most straightforward level, it means that Eisav prepared tasty meals from the animals he hunted and served them to his father. This elicited a natural sense of appreciation and love from his father. But is that by itself a sufficient basis to award his father's blessings? The Rabbis interpret the words "the hunt was in his mouth" (Bereishit Rabbah 63:10) to refer to the mouth of Eisav. They mean that Eisav was a very smooth operator who knew exactly how to convey the impression that suited his interests. Eisav very much wanted the approval of his father, and he knew that great hunting skills alone would not be sufficient to impress Yitzchak–who was raised in the philosophy of Avraham Avinu. So Eisav contrived to present himself as one who engaged in physical conquests purely for the sake of performing Mitzvot. First and foremost, he was meticulous in fulfilling the commandment of honoring one's father and mother. But that wasn't all. He knew how effective it was to convey impressions by asking informed and challenging questions–what we would call Shailot (legal Torah inquiry). If you come to your Rabbi every week with a list of detailed and thoughtful Halachic (Torah law) inquiries, which reflect a very deep interest in those areas, the Rabbi will take note. He will assume you are a sincere, meticulously observant individual who is determined to perform the Mitzvot correctly, and it will not occur to him that it's all a charade to make an impression. The ability of the wicked to effectively pose as Tzadikim (righteous individuals) constitutes a great problem for mankind. This was the challenge faced by Yaakov. He knew that Eisav had succeeded in winning the love of his father, who held a very high opinion of Eisav's spiritual potential. But Eisav was not successful in fooling everyone. The verse states simply that "Rivkah loves Yaakov" (Bereishit 25:28). Rivkah's Insight and the Threat to the Abrahamic Mission She recognized and fully appreciated the religious level of her younger son, who was a "wholehearted man, who dwelled in tents" (Bereishit 25:27). As Rashi points out, these were the study houses of Shem and Ever, where Yaakov spent all of his time seeking the Wisdom of Hashem. Both Rivkah and Yitzchak recognized the unique spiritual level of Yaakov, but they disagreed about the true character of Eisav. Matters came to a head when Yitzchak decided to confer the blessings on the elder twin. Rivkah recognized the danger to the Abrahamic movement that this entailed. Throughout history, corrupt demagogues have been able to amass great power by their ability to deceive the masses by posing as their champion. The Jewish people have, unfortunately, suffered greatly from charlatans who distorted Judaism to advance their position. This was a very delicate moment in the process of forming the Jewish Nation. Had Eisav been promoted to be a leading figure of Israel, it would have been a disaster which could have spelled the very end of the Abrahamic religion. But that decision was completely in the hands of Yitzchak, who instructed his elder son to "...make delicacies such as I love and bring it to me and I will eat; so that my soul may bless you, before I die." Rivkah overheard Yitzchak's instructions to Eisav and perceived the great danger that posed for the authentic religious movement of Avraham. She did not want to confront her husband directly as Sarah had done when she decided that Yishmael was a serious threat to the future leadership role of Yitzchak. In order to thwart Yitzchak's intention, she had to solicit Yaakov to participate in her elaborate scheme of deception in which Yaakov would pose as Eisav and bring his father the tasty dishes, which Rivkah would prepare for him. And perhaps the most challenging aspect of this daring plan was the necessity it created for Yaakov to blatantly lie to his father. Yaakov had considerable resistance to doing what his mother wanted and was most fearful that if Yitzchak discovered the ruse it might gravely harm his relationship with his father. But Rivkah reassured him that if things fell apart she would assume the complete blame, and Yaakov reluctantly agreed to pretend that he was Eisav. The Dilemma of Deception: Was Yaakov Allowed to Lie? The scene that took place was most dramatic. "[Yaakov] came to his father and said, 'Father.' [Yitzchak] said, 'Here I am; who are you, my son?' Yaakov said, 'I am Eisav, your firstborn. I did as you told me; please come, sit down, and eat of my game, in order that your soul may bless me.'" (Bereishit 27:18–19) While it seems clear that Yaakov declared a blatant untruth, Rashi seems to take his words differently. Rashi breaks down his statement this way: "I–am the one who is bringing to you, and Eisav–he is your firstborn". At first glance, this Rashi is perplexing. Does he mean to say that it is permissible to pronounce a falsehood as long as the words can be rearranged to conform with the truth? That certainly is not the way that the listener hears the statement. At the very least, it is a blatant deception to say words that clearly mean that you are declaring yourself to be Eisav. What is the meaning of Rashi's challenging interpretation? I believe it may be understood as follows: The Torah says, "Distance yourself from falsehood" (Shemot 23:7). This indicates that man's perfection depends upon his adherence to truth in all matters. Lying is a terrible sin, because it distorts a person's sense of reality and prevents him from living a truthful life. However, there are circumstances in which one is obligated to falsify certain information in order to prevent a catastrophe or to preserve a vital ideal. Sometimes the truth can be fatally destructive—for example, when a doctor knows that a fragile patient will be crushed by the news that they have a terminal illness. A wise and caring person must be judicious in what he says, and must recognize that there are situations in which he must utter words that are not, in fact, entirely accurate. That was the situation in which Rivkah and Yaakov found themselves. Had Yitzchak conferred the blessings on Eisav, it would have conveyed to the world the falsehood that Eisav was the legitimate spiritual heir of the Abrahamic religious movement. That would have constituted a greater distortion of truth than Yaakov identifying himself as Eisav. It was therefore morally correct to thwart Yitzchak's intention and for Yaakov to pretend that he was Eisav and thus attest to his father, "I am Eisav your firstborn son". The Spiritual Cost of Falsehood If it was permitted for Yaakov to lie in this situation, why does Rashi seek to mitigate that fib, by implying that Yaakov did actually speak the truth? I believe that Rashi is saying that Yaakov was concerned that he should not suffer spiritual harm as a result of verbalizing a falsehood. So as he was saying the words, he reviewed in his own mind the actual truth, i.e., "No! I am Yaakov, the one who is bringing you the food. It is Eisav who is your Bechor (firstborn)". He did not want to allow himself to derive any psychological pleasure from the deception he was forced to perpetrate upon his father. This danger of lying, even when it is warranted, is expressed in a story from the Talmud (Yevamot 63a). The Talmudic sage Rav was married to a woman who would cause him distress by not making the meals he desired. If he asked her to prepare lentils, she would make beans, and if he asked for beans, she would provide lentils. When his son Chiya grew up, he switched around his father's requests so that she would make him what he actually wanted. Rav told his son that things had improved, but Chiya then told him about the trick he was employing. Rav responded, "Now I understand what people say: 'You can learn something from your son.' But you should not continue to do this,

because it says, 'They train their tongue to speak falsehood, striving to be iniquitous.'" (Jeremiah 9:4) We all confront many situations in which it is tempting to put a spin on things and manipulate the facts so that they are more in line with our interests. Many have a very sophisticated capability to talk their way out of the most challenging situations. This may fill them with a great deal of pride, and they will brag about their verbal "conquests" to their friends. But we should be cognizant that these arts of deception may be harmful to the soul. Rather we must seek, as the title of an important ethical work by Rav Eliyahu Dessler exhorts us, to Strive for Truth! This lofty ideal is incorporated into our daily prayers. "A person should always be G-d-fearing, privately and publicly, acknowledging the truth and speaking it in his heart." May Hashem assist us in the vital endeavor to attain the true fear of Heaven, whose hallmark is an absolute commitment to truth. Shabbat Shalom.

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Uncovering Judaism's Influence on Western Music

by Yehezkel Laing

November 16, 2025 Before Gregorian chant, before Bach, there were the Levites. Explore how ancient Jewish music quietly shaped the entire Western musical tradition.

If we could travel back to the Jerusalem Temple two thousand years ago, we would find ourselves immersed in a breathtaking scene: hundreds of Levites, robed in white, chanting the Psalms of David as the Cohanim (Priests) offered the communal daily sacrifice. Surrounding them, master musicians filled the courtyards with the sounds of flutes, lyres, harps, cymbals, and drums—a musical pageant unmatched anywhere in the ancient world.

Could this sacred Temple music have anything to do with the rhythms and harmonies of modern popular music? Surprisingly, the connection may run deeper than most imagine.

Music's Evolution

The modern Western music we enjoy today did not emerge suddenly or in isolation. It is the product of a rich, 2,000-year tradition that unfolded gradually, each era adding new layers to what came before. Scholars and music historians widely note that music develops in an organic, cumulative manner, with every new style drawing on earlier forms.

A good example comes from the distinguished American music theorist Professor William Ennis Thomson (1927–2019), former Dean of the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California. In his article "Music as Organic Evolution," Thomson observes: "Music has long been viewed as an evolving organism, with each stylistic period growing out of the previous one. The modal systems of chant gave rise to tonality, which in turn enabled the harmonic complexity of the Baroque and Classical eras."

Gregorian Chant's Influence on Modern Music

Gregorian chant, or plainchant, is widely recognized as the oldest form of Western music. It is a monophonic, unaccompanied sacred song of the Roman Catholic Church, traditionally sung in Latin. Often called "the DNA of modern music," Gregorian chant formed the foundation of Western song for a thousand years.

The key features of Gregorian chant include:

Monophony: A single melodic line without harmony or accompaniment Free Rhythm: Not measured by regular beats; it flows with the natural rhythm of the text Sacred Texts: Drawn from the Bible, especially the Psalms, and used in the Mass Modality: Based on ancient scales known as church modes A Cappella: Performed without instruments, typically by male choirs As the oldest form of Western music, chant's influence was immense. Many scholars argue that much of our modern musical vocabulary originates in chant. More complex forms of Western music developed gradually from chant's simple, meditative structures.

A Gregorian chant

Associate Professor of Music at Stanford University and Editor of Sacred Music magazine, William Peter Mahrt, has long maintained that Gregorian chant is the foundation of the Western musical tradition, influencing everything from Renaissance polyphony to modern music. He emphasizes that chant's modal systems and rhythmic freedom laid the groundwork for later developments in tonality and phrasing. As Mahrt writes, "Gregorian chant is the foundation of Western music – not only historically, but also structurally and aesthetically. Its modal system, rhythmic flexibility, and integration with liturgical text shaped the development of polyphony and the tonal systems that followed."

How exactly did chant influence modern music?

Melodic Structure: Chant's melodies move primarily in small, stepwise intervals, creating a smooth, flowing sound still common today. Harmonic Practices: Its use of parallel fifths and octaves influenced the earliest forms of polyphony and, eventually, richer harmonic styles. Rhythm and Free Meter: Chant's free, non-metrical rhythm encouraged expressive phrasing. Notation: Modern musical notation ultimately descends from systems developed by the Church for notating chant. But above all its effects, chant's most significant influence was its modes. A mode is a sequence of notes with a specific pattern of spaces between notes. It was these Gregorian modes that evolved into the major and minor scales we use today. Most music scholars agree that modern music owes a profound debt to the ancient church modes, which shaped both melodic contours and harmonic foundations. These modes influenced Renaissance and Baroque music and continue to appear in jazz, rock, film scores, and even video game soundtracks.

Richard Taruskin—one of the most influential music historians of his generation and author of the monumental six-volume Oxford History of Western Music—notes: "The church modes provided the tonal framework for virtually all Western music until the rise of tonality. Even after, their melodic and harmonic residues continued to shape musical language."

Chant ultimately led to tonality. In modal chant, the music is meditative and open-ended; tonal music, by contrast, has direction. We hear tension and release, with melodies and harmonies moving toward resolution, giving the music emotional depth. Bach is widely considered the first fully tonal composer.

In the end, Gregorian chant was the perfect foundation for the growth of modern music. Its very simplicity created a stable musical framework that composers could build upon, experiment with, and ultimately transform into the richly varied musical tradition we know today.

From Temple & Synagogue to Church

If Gregorian chant forms the foundation of modern Western music, then we must ask: where did chant itself originate?

Many music scholars now recognize that Gregorian chant developed out of the Jewish chant traditions used in the Temple and in ancient synagogues. Eric Werner, Professor of Jewish Music at New York University, was among the first scholars to conduct a systematic comparison of ancient Jewish and early Christian chant. His pioneering research was highly influential in establishing their shared origin in the music of the Jerusalem Temple. Werner's landmark work, The Sacred Bridge, remains foundational in tracing Gregorian chant's lineage to Jewish psalmody and cantillation. As he writes, "Christianity did not invent its musical forms ex nihilo; it absorbed and transformed the rich musical heritage of Judaism, especially in the realm of chant and prayer."

John Harper, Professor of Music and Liturgy at the University of Bangor (UK), echoes this conclusion in The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy, noting that "Early Christian worship borrowed heavily from Jewish synagogue practice, including the chanting of psalms and scriptural readings."

Similarly, Stanford University music scholar William Mahrt observes that "The Christian Psalm tones have their roots in ancient Jewish hymnody and psalmody."

Similarities of Gregorian & Jewish Chant The shared origins of Gregorian and Jewish chant become clear when we examine their many striking similarities.

Psalm-Based Structure: Gregorian chant is fundamentally rooted in the Book of Psalms—the same texts that formed the core of Temple worship and later synagogue liturgy.

Responsive Singing: Ancient Jewish music employed antiphonal singing in the Temple, with two choirs alternating passages, as well as responsorial singing in the synagogue, where a cantor chanted verses and the congregation replied. Early Christian worship adopted these same techniques, and they became central to Gregorian practice, especially in the chanting of psalms and canticles.

A Cappella Tradition: After the destruction of the Temple, a rabbinic decree prohibited the use of musical instruments in the synagogue as a sign of mourning. This helped shape a strong tradition of unaccompanied vocal music that continues in many Jewish communities today. Gregorian chant similarly developed as an a cappella tradition, performed without instrumental accompaniment.

Both traditions also employed recitation tones (fixed pitches used to chant extended texts), melodic cadences (formulaic phrase endings or transitions), and modal centering (anchoring melodies around a central pitch or finalis).

Jewish Music and Church Music As is well known, Christianity began as an internal Jewish movement in the 1st century CE, and its founders and earliest adherents were all Jews. It is therefore not surprising that Christian liturgy has deep roots in Judaism and the synagogue. The Christian Bible itself acknowledges this connection, noting that Jesus and his disciples sang the traditional Hallel hymn after celebrating the Passover meal (cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26).

Christian chant also inherited its foundational modal systems from Jewish music. Peter Wagner, Professor of Early Christian Music at Freiburg University (Germany) and a leading figure in chant scholarship, conducted influential comparative studies that helped establish the modal continuity between Jewish and Christian chant. As Wagner observed, “The influence of Jewish liturgical music on Gregorian chant is undeniable. The modal systems and melodic contours show clear parallels with synagogue traditions.”

The Temple’s Levitical Choir Now that we have traced Western music back two millennia to the Jewish Temple, we can turn to the Temple’s own musical culture.

One of the highlights of the Temple service was the song of the Levites. They performed music twice each day—during the morning and evening daily sacrifice—and on holy days (Shabbat, the New Month, and festivals) they performed three times.

To qualify for Temple performance, Levites underwent rigorous musical training. The Temple itself housed a music academy with an extensive library. At age 25, a Levite was admitted into this academy, where he studied for five years. Only at age 30 did he begin to sing or play in the Temple. According to Chronicles 23:5, during the reign of King David the academy numbered no fewer than 28,000 Levites.

Following the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE and its replacement by the synagogue, the Temple's musical practices were adapted for the synagogue, shifting from animal sacrifices on the altar to one’s centered on prayer and chanting of Scripture.

Many former Temple Levites became teachers, cantors, and sages, helping to shape the prayers, piyyutim, and psalmody that define today’s synagogue worship. The Talmud mentions several Temple Levite musicians who later became contributors to synagogue worship, such as Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah mentioned in the Talmud (Arakhin 11b).

Cantillation Marks How central is music to Judaism? The Torah itself calls its teachings a song. “Now therefore,” God says to Moses, “write you this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Put it into their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me” (Deuteronomy 31:19–30). It is therefore no surprise that the Torah has always been both studied privately and proclaimed publicly through melody, using a standardized musical tradition.

The practice of chanting sacred texts such as the Torah was preserved through cantillation, a musical system consisting of roughly two dozen special accents placed above or below the words. Many scholars believe the cantillation marks and their melodies originated during Temple or Geonic times. Jewish tradition, however, ascribes them to Mount Sinai, when God gave the Israelites both the Written and Oral Torah.

What Did the Music of the Temple Actually Sound Like? After 2,000 years of global exile—during which Jewish communities became scattered across vastly different cultures—many have assumed that the original melodies were lost forever. In foreign surroundings, ancient chants absorbed local musical influences and eventually diverged into many distinct and sometimes bewilderingly different traditions. Over time, this diversity led some to doubt the authenticity of any surviving form.

Into this challenge stepped Professor Abraham Idelsohn, who from an early age dedicated himself to gathering and cataloguing every known strand of Hebrew chant preserved throughout the Jewish world.

Despite centuries of dispersion, Idelsohn argued that certain modal structures, melodic motifs, and cantillation patterns had remained strikingly consistent across communities—from Yemenite, Syrian, Moroccan, and Persian Jews to Ashkenazi and Polish traditions.

After years of tireless research, he completed his monumental Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies (published in ten volumes between 1914 and 1932). Using the shared musical elements found across these diverse traditions, Idelsohn sought to reconstruct the ancient, pristine melodies of the Temple.

Reviving these great foundational songs—and bringing them back to life for modern ears—may well be the challenge and calling of the musicians of our generation.

Conclusion The story of Western music, when traced back through the centuries, may ultimately lead to the footsteps of the Levites in the Jerusalem Temple. From their psalmody and chant emerged the musical practices of the synagogue, which in turn shaped the earliest Christian liturgy and the Gregorian tradition that became the bedrock of Western music.

Far from being a forgotten relic, the Temple’s musical legacy continues to echo through the melodies, modes, and harmonies that define today’s musical world. As modern scholars and musicians uncover these ancient connections, we are reminded that the roots of Western music are far older, deeper, and more intertwined with Jewish history than most ever imagined. And perhaps, as we rediscover and revive the musical language of the Temple, we may yet hear again the timeless songs that once rose daily from Jerusalem’s holy courts.