

**TOLDOS (GENESIS 25:19-28:9)**

## Red Beans and Redskins

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

*DISCLAIMER: In my 20+ years as a rabbi, I have learned that there are certain "safe" topics. (E.g., loving your fellow man and giving charity) Some topics are more "iffy," (Sabbath observance and Kashruth) while others are downright volatile (intermarriage and "terminating" pre-born children). Many listeners and readers want a rabbi to inspire and uplift them, but only as long as he minds his own #\$\$&\*#@\*! Business.*

*I have always served as the rabbi of orthodox congregations with mostly non-orthodox members. I have USUALLY managed to interface with Jews of all backgrounds, stating my beliefs without offending anyone. (Or, at least, so have I allowed myself to believe!) However, there have been times that I've managed to get lots of people upset with me. Today's topic fits into that category. So, I hope you'll read this with an open mind. If you agree, that's great. If you disagree, there's always next week! :-)*

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Esau was Isaac's firstborn. Unlike his twin brother, Jacob, the "pure-hearted man, who dwelled in the house (of Torah study)," (Genesis, 25:27) Esau was a hunter who had little interest in matters spiritual. Our rabbis tell us that Esau was a thief, a killer, and an idol worshiper. One day, he came home from a day in the field, and found his brother cooking a meal of red beans:

*Esau said to Jacob, "Pour into me some of that red, red stuff, because I am exhausted!" (Ibid, verse 30)*

Very polite. There's nothing like a refined, well-mannered request for a bit to eat. "Pour into me some of that red, red stuff..."

Jacob saw this as a golden opportunity. As the firstborn, Esau occupied a position of respect and authority within the family. He was entitled to the birthright to serve as the Kohain, the High Priest of the family. (It was only after the sin of the Golden Calf that the priesthood was taken away from the firstborn of each family, and given to the children of Aaron.) Jacob felt that it would be a mockery for a nonbeliever like Esau to serve as the Kohain. Perhaps he could find a way to get Esau to relinquish his birthright in exchange for a hot meal...

*Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright." (Ibid, verse 31)*

Esau was the firstborn, and did not wish to give up that status. However, he WAS hungry... Jacob's plan worked. *Esau said, "I'm going to die! Of what use is the birthright to me?!"* (Ibid, verse 32)

It was a deal. Esau forswore any interest in being the family Kohain. Rashi explains why: *"I'm going to die! Of what use is the birthright to me?!"* Jacob explained to Esau that there are many complex laws involved in serving as the Priest. Among those laws are sins punishable by death. Officiating in the Temple while "under the influence of alcohol" is one such offence. (Leviticus, 10:9) When Aaron's sons brought inappropriate offerings in the Temple, they were Divinely punished with instant death. (Ibid, verses 1-3) If a High Priest had inappropriate thoughts during his once-a-year Yom Kippur visit to the Holy of Holies, he was immediately struck down.

Esau now saw the birthright in a different light. As long as the Priesthood was an honorary position, it was fine. Esau was not interested in a Judaism that consisted of rules and regulations. Perhaps he preferred a superficial "feel-good" religion of gefilte fish and Matzah balls. Once he realized that true service of G-d entailed serious commitment to actual religious law, he declared with disgust, *"Of what use is the birthright to me?!"*

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A friend of mine once asked me if religious Jews observe Thanksgiving. If you know me personally, or if you've been reading my column for any considerable amount of time, you SHOULD know that I don't always give direct answers.

"Sure we do," I replied with a smile. "My wife makes a big, delicious turkey...with lots of delicious side dishes... and...she brings it all out to the Sukkah!"

My sarcasm was lost on him. "That's really beautiful!" he replied. "You eat your Thanksgiving dinner in your Sukkah!"

Then, with "virtual pumpkin pie" on my face, I went on to apologize for my sarcastic response. Of course, what I actually meant was that Sukkos is the Jewish Thanksgiving. Sukkos is the time that *"... you gather in from your threshing floor and your wine vat. You will rejoice . . . for G-d will bless you in all your crops and all your work, and you will only be joyous."* (Deuteronomy, 16:13-15)

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BEFORE I MAKE TOO MANY ENEMIES for being a "Scrooge," let me be totally clear. I know many very religious Jews who sit down to a turkey dinner every November. I personally happen not to eat a Thanksgiving dinner, but I don't have a problem with those who do. It is ALWAYS appropriate to give thanks to G-d for His generous bounty.

We are blessed to live in a marvelous country that gives us unprecedented freedoms. The Founding Fathers articulated a concept that respects every person's right to practice his own religion. We must be proud to be citizens of the United States of America. We must support her troops and pray for her well-being. I adorn my home and cars with the Stars and Stripes, and my synagogue recites a prayer for our government and our troops.

So what, you may ask, is bothering me? What's wrong with expressing our solidarity with our fellow Americans?

Nothing, really. That's not the problem. What bothers me is that for too many of our fellow Jews, Thanksgiving is the be-all and end-all of our thanks. Isn't it sad that we need the Pilgrims and the Indians to tell us to set aside a day to give thanks to G-d? G-d has given us a miracle land called America. Why don't we celebrate our American freedom with a Sukkah in front of every Jewish house on Sukkos? Why doesn't every Jewish house with an American flag also have a kosher Mezuzah on every door? Why don't we make sure that our Thanksgiving turkey is Kosher??!!!

Could the problem be that we prefer Esau's Judaism to Jacob's? Esau probably liked Jewish food. (Maybe that's why he bought Jacob's "cholent." :-)) Esau preferred the perfunctory form of religion. He was not interested in getting down to the nitty-gritty of religious law.

There is a Torah. There is a Talmud. There is a time to pray, and there are specific details as to how to pray. There is a Shulchan Aruch, a Code of Jewish Law that delineates our religious obligations. We celebrate our American freedom by living according to those obligations.

If you ate turkey on Thanksgiving, that's fine. But if you REALLY want to show your appreciation to G-d, why don't you decide now to put up a Sukkah next Sukkos? Celebrate Thanksgiving with a commitment to live as a more observant Jew. Nothing could be more American!

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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