

TOLDOS (GENESIS 25:19-28:9)

The So-Called ‘Rabbi’

2011 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

When someone does something wrong, should we speak out against it? Does every negative act require a reaction and a protest?

Rebecca had decided that generally, it was best not to rock the boat.

Rebecca was unhappy with the behavior of her older son Esau. Esau was a thief, a killer, an adulterer, and an idol worshipper. Her younger son, Jacob, was a kind and righteous scholar.

One of them was destined to carry on the Tradition of Abraham and Isaac. One of them was not.

Esau was a first-class con man. He used to ask his father intricate questions about Torah Law. Esau asked his father how to separate tithes from straw and salt. Straw and salt are exempt from this obligation. Esau knew that; he asked the question in order to support the illusion that he was dedicated to the fulfillment of G-d's will.

Our Sages compare Esau to a pig that lies down with its front feet sticking out, as if to say, “Look at me! I have split hooves! I’m Kosher!” Of course, in order to be Kosher, an animal must also chew its cud, which a pig does not do. The pig sticks out its front feet, pretending to be Kosher. (See "What Lovely Kosher Pig's Feet You Have!")

In a similar vein, Esau “stuck out his front feet” to his father, trying to give the impression that he was a virtuous young man, diligently following in his father's footsteps.

Isaac swallowed the bait. He believed his son was genuinely concerned about how to properly serve G-d. He was not aware of what a scoundrel his son was.

Isaac's wife Rebecca was not about to burst that bubble. She chose, for various reasons, not to reveal to Isaac the truth about Esau.

However, she carefully monitored Esau's actions to insure that his behavior would do nothing to jeopardize her **legitimately** righteous son Jacob.

But now there was a serious challenge:

He (Isaac) said (to Esau), “I am old; I don’t know when I am going to die... Go to the field and capture an animal for me. Prepare for me some good-tasting food, the way I like it. Bring it to me so I can eat it so that I can bless you before I die.” (Genesis, 27:3-4)

Rebecca was very concerned. She resolved to see to it that Esau would not receive that blessing.

The Commentaries discuss at length what exactly was going on. Isaac was not naive. He knew that Esau was not the spiritual giant that Jacob was. He had several reasons why he felt these blessings should go to Esau. After all, among other things, Esau was the Firstborn. But apparently he was not aware of the extent of the negativity of Esau’s actions.

Till now, Rebecca had held her tongue. She never told her husband how bad their older son was. But now there was a serious problem. Isaac’s blessings were about to be bestowed upon Esau. And that just couldn’t be.

What was the problem? Let Isaac bless him! Who cares?

Again, the Commentaries discuss the problem. I would like to suggest an answer of my own.

The problem, I suggest, was, in part, one of perception. It was bad enough that Esau eschewed his father’s values. Ok, if Esau wants to worship idols and live a life of immorality, there wasn’t anything that Rebecca could do to stop that.

We can’t prevent every negative act by every person. But we need to insure that others don’t learn from those negative activities.

A blessing from Isaac would imply approval. Being blessed by our great Patriarch could be construed as endorsement of Esau’s unacceptable behavior. That endorsement would lend an air of legitimacy to activities that were far from legitimate.

What would future generations say when they would look back at Esau’s way of life and see that he had received Isaac’s endorsement?

They would say, “Well, if it’s good enough for Isaac, it’s good enough for me!”

To this, Rebecca said, “Enough!!”

The gig was up. Esau could no longer be permitted to fool his father. This charade had to end.

Due to Rebecca’s and Jacobs efforts, Jacob received the blessings instead of Esau. [For an analysis of the means and justification of Rebecca’s actions, see “Walking the Talk”.]

Soon after Jacob received the blessings, Esau showed up. Isaac was, at first, confused and afraid.

However, he soon learned that Esau had long ago spurned the Birthright and sold it to Jacob. Esau was no longer officially the “Firstborn”; he was not entitled to Isaac’s blessings.

Isaac’s bottom line: “...indeed, he (Jacob) will be blessed!” (ibid, verse 33)

Isaac now understood that his older son was not a dedicated “Torah Jew.” Isaac didn’t want, any more than Rebecca did, for Esau’s’ actions to be misinterpreted as acceptable behavior for a son of Isaac.

And now Isaac’s legacy was secure.

Before you read another word, I want to be very clear about something. The lesson I want to extract from this week’s Torah Portion is that it is wrong to misrepresent who and what a person is; there is no intention to compare any person to Esau. Any attempt to state that I have made that comparison would itself be an act of gross misrepresentation.

If you haven’t noticed, I am an Orthodox rabbi. My Torah lessons, I would hope, should clearly illustrate that fact.

I believe that the Written Torah and the Oral Torah were divinely given to Israel. I believe that the Torah, as interpreted by the traditions of our Sages, teaches us the Will of G-d.

Many people disagree and offer their own interpretations.

I don’t look down on people who don’t share Torah Judaism’s view of our obligations to G-d. I try very hard not to put down Jews who believe differently than I. I believe, quite simply, that in most cases, they have not had the opportunity to learn and to come to understand what Torah is really all about.

But one thing that really bugs me is when people misrepresent Torah Judaism.

Perhaps you read about the travesty that took place in Washington, DC last week.

“By the power invested in me by the District of Columbia, I now pronounce you married.”

This statement was said to two men.

The District of Columbia doesn’t see anything wrong with two men being joined in matrimony. A ceremony of this type is, of course, is totally unacceptable according to the Torah. The entire human race is enjoined to refrain from such behavior. Such an arrangement undermines G-ds’ will.

However, the District of Columbia doesn’t realize that it is bound by Torah Law. As such, they have chosen to permit this activity. And there is nothing we can currently do about it.

But the bigger problem is the specific details of the ceremony. Those two men stood, wearing white Kittels, under a Chuppah. They recited blessings, and drank wine and exchanged rings, each declaring the other “*Mekudash Li* – sanctified to me.”

Sanctified? SANCTIFIED?!! Wow! But that’s not the worst part.

“By the power invested in me by the District of Columbia, I now pronounce you married.”

The above is a true statement. The District of Columbia has given him that power. And there is nothing we can currently do as citizens to stop it. That’s just the way it is.

The real sham here is that the man who said those words – “I now pronounce you married” – is a man who claims to be an *Orthodox* rabbi!

This man, who celebrates the fact that he too lives together with another man, conducted a ceremony that was designed to look as much as possible like an Orthodox ceremony.

And that’s how it has been reported in the press: “Orthodox rabbi officiates at same sex-wedding in D.C.”

There is no shortage of diverse customs in the Orthodox Jewish community. Some people pray following the Sefardic rite; some follow the Ashkenazic one. Some people eat rice on Passover; some do not. Some people maintain that men must have beards; some feel it’s acceptable to shave. And they’re all Orthodox!

And there are a lot of issues like this. The Orthodox Jewish world is far from monolithic. There are various valid approaches within Orthodoxy.

But this individual, who may have once been Orthodox, is clearly not Orthodox anymore. By definition, anyone who celebrates the intimate union of two men, and shmaltzes it up with wine and blessings is, by definition, not Orthodox.

Everybody has challenges in life. It is not always easy to comply with the rules G-d gives us. I used to smoke although I knew it was wrong. But I wasn’t proud of it. I overeat, although I know that the Torah requires me to protect my health. But I don’t flaunt it. I will never say that it is a Mitzvah to celebrate my weaknesses.

It is not my place to be judgmental of the temptations that drive this man and the two people he “married.” It can’t be easy to comply with the Torah’s paradigm of family values when their attractions lead them elsewhere. But they made a ceremony CELEBRATING their violation of the Torah’s

Commandments!

If this so-called “rabbi” was so overcome by the temptation to live this type of a lifestyle, he could have said, “I know that the Torah prohibits this activity, but I no longer believe in the Torah.”

Or, he could have said, “I know that this is prohibited, and that it is not G-d’s will, but I can’t help myself.”

(It’s not an excuse, but at least it would be honest.)

Instead, he decided to fabricate a new understanding of Orthodox Judaism. Rather than molding his life to comply with the Torah, or, at least, admitting his weakness and inability to do so, he simply redefined Torah Judaism to include something that it never could.

By pretending that the farce over which he presided was an Orthodox ceremony, this man was attempting to lend an air of legitimacy to such activities. It allows people to believe the lie that this lifestyle is a viable option within Orthodox Judaism.

The press has allowed itself to believe that same-sex marriage is now a viable option within the Orthodox community and has sensationalized it to their readers.

My purpose in this article is not to condemn the personal lives of these people, which is, of course, strictly forbidden by the Torah. Rather, I am here to strenuously object to the falsehood of defining this action as Orthodox Judaism.

It behooves the Orthodox community to speak out and distance itself from the actions of this individual. We need to be unequivocal that there is nothing Jewish about the “marriage” of two men.

I am hopeful that the seminary that ordained this individual (many years ago, before he made his proclivities known) will repudiate the dishonesty of calling this Orthodoxy, and make it clear that they no longer view him worthy of the title of Rabbi.

To sum up this week’s message on the Torah Portion:

Rebecca’s biggest problem with Esau was not that he wasn’t a Torah-observant Jew. The problem was that he pretended to be one.

I am not condemning this so-called “rabbi” for not being a Torah-observant Jew. I am condemning the fraud that he is trying to perpetrate.

The lie: Same-sex marriage is an option within Orthodox Judaism, as demonstrated by this Orthodox rabbi.

The truth: He's not an Orthodox rabbi, and his actions have nothing to do with Orthodox Judaism.

Have a great Shabbos.

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