

## **Shabbat Toledot - Nov 2025**

### **Fillet a Fish! Bar Mitzvah of Jamie**

#### ***A sermon about taking history into your hands***

Jamie, I have to confess that I do not usually read the bios that our young b'nei mitzvah write about themselves, those little articles that appear in the Shabbat leaflet some of you have in your hands, and that arrives in our weekly Shabbat email. But I'm so glad I did. I already knew about your tennis, but I only found out yesterday about your love of scouts and that this is where you learned the cool skill of filleting a fish!

I don't know if it was a fish that you actually caught yourself, but the skill in filleting a fish must mean and turning it from something wild into something that is ready to eat, puts you in a place closer to Esau than to Jacob, whom you describe as his perfect twin brother. Isaac loves Esau, his favourite because Tsayd b'pfiv, the game that Esau catches is in his ,mouth. Esau knows his father loves the deer he traps and kills. A connection to fatherly love, and a comfort perhaps that he knows that their mother cannot feel the same way about him. Esau uses food to prove his father's love for him. But Jacob uses food as well, to trap his hungry brother into giving away his inheritance.

As you so rightly point out, the blessing that Isaac ends up giving Jacob is all about having enough to eat: Isaac blesses him with the dew of heaven, and the fat of the earth, grain and harvest. When poor Esau finally arrives, and sees that Jacob has taken the blessing meant for him, Isaac painfully says that he has already promised Jacob the grain and the harvest, but he blesses his Favourite, Esau, also with the fat of the earth and the dew of heaven: these are the same phrases, but in the opposite order.

When you take a fish and filet it, you are turning an animal into something fit to eat. Now, it's your food. Isaac's blessings are a kind of prayer for his two sons to be safe in nature, watered by heaven and fed by the earth. Reversing the order of dew and fat, in a way that their order too had been changed. The natural power of the first-born now is gone. Because both mother and son knew, it was their job to overturn the ordinary way of things, to put a stop to how things usually are, in short, to intervene.

It is fascinating to me that they also use food, the way to Isaac's heart must be through his stomach, to change the course of history. Not one goat, which let us face it, would have been more than enough but two of the choicest goats from their herds. These two goats are the powerful symbol of a future that will one

day come, possibly Judaism's most powerful ritual, one we no longer have, but we read about on Yom Kippur.

How to make sense of all this?

It was your experience of filleting a fish, turning it from something in nature a fish swimming in a river to **food**, that helped me to see how much these stories depend on something in nature that makes that powerful transition. The **game** that Isaac goes out to hunt and brings back as a gift for his father. The two goats that are made into a tempting **stew** by Rebecca to trap her husband into giving her favourite son his blessing. The red lentils that Jacob turns into a delicious stew. All of them come as a result of that blessing, from the fat of the Earth and dew from heaven. But each one of them **transformed from something in nature to a meaningful dish in human hands**, then becomes a meal that brings changes the course of history

None of these people is waiting for God to step into time and do the work for them. Everyone knows that this is their moment. And they use each one of them what they have to hand. A bag of lentils, a goat from the flock.

As each dish makes its journey from natural item to food to a dish to a stew to a soup handed from one to the other given or taken as part of the transaction, we see the power of taking action in our history. Be like our ancestors. Do not wait for someone to come and serve you, but fillet a fish, collect some lentils, go out into the wild and make the most of it. Do not accept the ordinary way of the world with its power structures and the automatic idea of who is in charge.

Even Isaac, who he might like to think was being tricked, knew exactly what he was doing and advancing his younger son over the old one he was giving away so much of his automatic patriarchal power. His secret message to his son Jacob was *"I know what you are doing. Step into the world, take hold of it, use this moment to overtime the automatic transfer of power. Step into your future and claim your destiny."*