

November 19, 2009
Shabbat Shalom!

At a meeting in the community this week, we were discussing how, sometimes, a situation makes it necessary for us to, in some way, temporarily change “who we are” so that we can better deal with our surroundings. I told the group about the times when Rhonda, Adam and I would travel to Boston from Topeka, Kansas to visit my brother and his family. We would land at Logan Airport and get our rental car, and then, I would be coached, with a running background commentary and flow of advice, on how to drive in Boston. Where I might have been totally relaxed as a driver otherwise, I realized that there was no room for being tentative at the wheel. I HAD to change my driving style to be, at the very least, staunchly assertive. One of the other members of the group talked about driving south on I-93 and, once she crossed the border from New Hampshire into Massachusetts, she seemed like a different person, losing all of the calm that had characterized her behind-the-wheel persona in the Granite State.

This discussion made me look at the Torah reading for this week in the portion TOL'DOT with a new perspective. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, believed that her son Jacob (known for his passive character and for being at the family home) deserved to have his father's main blessing rather than her first-born son, Esau, the rugged outdoorsman/hunter. Rebekah prepared food for Jacob to take to his father and put animal skins on Jacob's arms to make them feel like the skin of his brother. When Isaac asked Jacob who he was, he said, “It is I, Esau, your first born.” Isaac responded, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” While most reactions to this passage focus on the aspect of Jacob deceiving his father, it may be that, in this episode, Jacob found something in himself he had not shown before. In order to confirm that HE was worthy of his father's first-born blessing, he had to act like a first-born by being a leader, by taking a risk, by demonstrating that carrying on the family legacy passed down from Abraham was all important to him. Some commentators suggest that Isaac wasn't deceived at all, but that he knew all along that it was really Jacob in front of him. His comment, “the hands are the hands of Esau” could be seen as an acknowledgement that Jacob had found his assertive inner self in order to stand proudly before his father as a personal declaration that he deserved the blessing that was about to be bestowed upon him. It is true that this still leaves Jacob in a precarious moral position, but it also demonstrates how a person can take on identity on the outside that may have been dormant on the inside, a persona that could bring benefit and growth.

We should, of course, always try to be who we are, but that can include discovering new possibilities for who we can be. May we always explore our own potential and find paths that will lead us to honesty and blessing.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry