

## ***Toldot 2016***

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/2/16

Are there any foods that you associate with your father? Are there foods that in your mind's eye you can see him enjoying, even savoring? Maybe they were special foods that you shared together. For me it was Irish Oatmeal. Any time I think of Irish Oatmeal it reminds me of Sunday mornings when my dad would make me and my brothers that hot cereal. We weren't big fans of it but he liked making it, and eating it with us clearly brought him great pleasure. My brothers and I had a complex relationship with our Dad, but somehow thinking about those Sunday mornings eating the Irish Oatmeal I can only think about love, about the unconditional love that my Dad had for us.

And I bring this to your attention because clearly the complex relationship between Isaac and his son Esau in this Torah portion, focuses on food. Food was their thing, the thing that reminded Esau of HIS father's unconditional love. And really, when we understand the symbolism of the food they shared, and the fact that it represents Isaac's unconditional love for his son, then so much more of this portion begins to make sense. This is not simply a story about food, it's about what the food represents.

The Torah portion begins by telling us, "When the boys grew up (Jacob and Esau), Esau became a skillful hunter; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in the camp. Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rivkah loved Jacob." Really? Isaac loved Esau because he liked *fleishigs* and he could get them from Esau? He loved his son because of the deli he provided?! How shallow of a man was Isaac that he loved his son for the food he provided? "You know why I love my son? Because he makes the best steak!?" Really?

The rest of the details about Esau's life are not presented in the most flattering way. He impulsively sells his birthright to Jacob. Did Isaac know about it? We aren't sure, but if he did it probably did not give Isaac a lot of *nachas*. The next thing we are told about Esau in the portion is that when Esau was 40 years old he took two wives from the Hittites, Yehudit and Basemat, "And they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca." Of course they were. Isaac has a sacred heritage to pass on, and Esau's marrying two Hittite women is not going to make that any easier. By this point, Isaac is probably already thinking that the future of the nascent Jewish People will run through Jacob and not through his son Isaac. How could Isaac not assume that, based on what he has seen?

And yet, in the very next verse, the verse immediately after we are told that marrying the Hittite women was a sourced of *tzuris* to Isaac, Isaac calls to Esau and says, "Go hunt some game and prepare for me the dish you know I like so much, and bring it to me so that I may give you my innermost blessing." What's with the food!? I think it is Isaac's way of saying, "Son, I am getting old and we've certainly had our issues. This hasn't been all smooth sailing, for sure. But I want you to know I love you. So make me that dish, the food that always brings us together - that's our special bond. No matter what's gone on between us, that's our bond." It's not so much the food itself, but what it symbolizes. No matter what, you are, and always will be my son.

But of course Jacob goes, and with his mother's help makes the meat and brings it to his father. Isaac is suspicious but gives Jacob a blessing. But it's what happens next that is most telling. Esau brings the food, Isaac asks who it is this time, and when he realizes that it is Esau, the

Torah tells us "And Isaac was seized by a violent trembling." That Esau would be mad - that makes sense. But why was Isaac so very upset? Because he loved his son and he wanted Esau to know it. It wasn't, "Well, I ate already." It wasn't about the food. It was about what the food symbolized: a father's unconditional love for his son. Isaac had ample reason to withhold his love. Esau was impulsive and hadn't taken to the Jewish way like his father had hoped. Isaac had reason to be disappointed, and chances are over the course of his life he probably showed it. But Isaac wanted Esau to know that, no matter what, he still and always would love him. It wasn't about the food, but what it symbolized.

Parents can be critical of their children's decisions, they can criticize them for their actions. But parents owe their children unconditional love. That's why we call Gd "Avinu Malkaynoo," Gd is our heavenly Parent. Our Father our King means that Gd is our Heavenly Parent who loves us. Period. We may make mistakes. We may disappoint our Heavenly Parent. We may even grow distant from Gd. But Gd never stops loving us, caring for us, and urging us on. If that was not the case then there'd be no reason for Yom Kippur. But no matter how far we stray, no matter how much we test, we cannot ever break the bond entirely. And when we think about that bond, the bond of unconditional love between a parent and a child, it strengthens our own faith. It reminds us that while there might be a lot of work to do, there is always, always a path forward and another chance to grow together.