

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Toldot**  
**November 14, 2015**

**פרשת תולדות**  
**ב' בכסלו תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 25:19-28:9

In this *parasha*, we read about the births of Yaakov and Eisav, their growing up, Eisav selling his birthright to Yaakov, and Yitzchak's blessings for his two sons.

The *parasha* begins with an interesting scenario. Rivka is pregnant with her twins. The text says, "וַיִּתְרָצוּ הַבְּנִים, בְּקֶרְבָּהּ, וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן, לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי; וַתֵּלֶד, לְדָרֵשׁ אֶת-ה'." – "the children struggled within her, and she said, 'If this is so, how can I survive?' and she went to inquire of God."

Rashi quotes the Midrash from *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:6: "*The children struggled within her.*" They sought to run within her. When she stood near synagogues or houses of Torah study [an anachronism of course, but one that is intelligible], Yaakov struggled to come out...while when she passed idolatrous temples, Eisav eagerly struggled to come out..."

The Midrash posits other theories to explain the text's statement of struggle: each one tried to kill the other in utero; or perhaps Eisav was antagonistic to Yaakov even while still in his mother's womb.

Whether or not one believes the historical veracity or the homiletic validity of the Midrash, the text clearly tells us that Yaakov and Eisav were already animated – had souls, if you will – within their mother's womb.

When and how the *neshamah*, the soul, enters and exits the body and what the soul actually is have been the subjects of much discussion among the rabbis as well as spiritual leaders and seekers in other religions. The Talmud relates in Tractate *Sanhedrin*

91b the following exchange between Rabbi Yehuda (who redacted the *Mishna* around the year 200 CE) and Antoninus, the Roman governor of Judea: “Antoninus said to Rabbi, ‘When is the soul placed in the human being – as soon as it is decreed that a zygote will be formed or when the embryo is actually formed?’ He replied, ‘from the moment of formation.’ He objected, ‘Can a piece of meat be left unsalted for three days without becoming putrid? But it must be from the moment that God decrees its destiny.’ Rabbi said, ‘this thing Antoninus taught me, and Scripture supports him.’”

The Torah makes clear in this *parasha* that, indeed, we have souls even before we leave our mothers’ wombs. How the soul enters the body, how it leaves the body, and how it works in concert with the body is beyond human ken. There is knowledge that is already available to us; there is knowledge that we don’t yet have but one day will; and there is knowledge that will always elude human understanding. I believe the details of the soul fall into the last category.

What we do know is that we have souls; that we strive to raise our souls to the highest and purist level possible; and that we can do this through *mitzvot* – obeying God’s words and treating God’s creations and earth with kindness and compassion.

One of the downsides of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western world is that, although people are in touch with their physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological selves, many of us are out of touch with our spirits. But our *neshamot*, our souls or spirits, are as real as our minds or bodies. Let us each take some time on Shabbat, the spiritual time of the week, to confront, revel in, and reflect on our *neshamot*, our souls.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What is a soul?
- How would you describe your personality?
- How do you think a person develops a personality? How do you think a personality is connected with the soul?