PARASHA OF THE WEEK / 06

Toldot תולדות

The water beneath the surface

14 November 2026 · 4 Kislev 5787 · Genesis 25:19-28:9

A well can look like nothing more than a patch of earth. Isaac keeps digging. In a portion filled with family rivalry and contested blessings, his quiet work asks a different question: what might become possible if we looked beneath the surface?

THE STORY OF THE PARSHA

Isaac prays for Rebecca, who has been unable to conceive. During her difficult pregnancy, God tells her that two nations are within her and the older will serve the younger. Esau is born first; Jacob follows, holding his heel. Esau becomes a hunter, Jacob a man dwelling in tents. Isaac loves Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning hungry from the field, Esau sells Jacob his birthright for bread and lentil stew, confirming the bargain with an oath. [2, 25:19-34]

A famine takes Isaac to Gerar. God tells him to remain in the land and renews the promise made to Abraham. Afraid for his life, Isaac says Rebecca is his sister. Abimelech discovers that they are married and orders that neither be harmed. Isaac prospers, provoking envy; the Philistines have filled Abraham's wells with earth. Asked to leave, Isaac moves into the valley and reopens them. Further wells bring disputes, until Rehovot is dug without a quarrel. At Beersheba, God reassures Isaac. He makes a covenant with Abimelech, and his servants find water. [2, ch. 26]

Esau's marriages to two Hittite women grieve his parents. Later Isaac, whose sight has failed, asks Esau to prepare food before receiving a blessing. Rebecca arranges for Jacob to take his place, wearing Esau's clothes and goatskins. Jacob identifies himself as Esau and receives blessings of abundance and authority. Esau returns, discovers what happened and cries out. Isaac gives him a further blessing; Esau plans to kill Jacob after their father's death. [2, 26:34-27:45]

Rebecca urges Jacob to leave for her brother Laban's home, while telling Isaac of her concern about a Canaanite marriage. Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram, openly gives him Abraham's blessing and tells him to marry within Rebecca's family. Seeing his father's displeasure with Canaanite wives, Esau adds Mahalath, Ishmael's daughter, to his wives. The dream on Jacob's journey belongs to next week's portion. [2, 27:46-28:9]

A THOUGHT TO CARRY THROUGH SHABBAT

Digging for what is there

Why does the Torah pause to name Isaac's wells? We could understand the struggle over the blessings without knowing Esek, Sitnah and Rehovot. Yet the Torah lingers over digging, obstruction and digging again. Ramban asks why this account of wells is so long. He reads their names as signs of a history still to unfold. [3]

Before following that deeper reading, stay with the physical work. The Philistines fill Abraham's wells with earth. Isaac's servants remove it. They do not manufacture the water; they make a buried source accessible. A gift can be real and still require someone's patient effort before it can sustain life. [2, 26:15-19]

An inner source of life

A Chassidic teaching of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, adapted by Rabbi Eli Touger, reads well-digging as uncovering the soul's hidden capacity to serve God. Isaac's inward work brings that capacity into daily life. The image is of a relationship becoming personally rooted, rather than remaining dependent on another person's inspiration. [5]

We can apply that image to prayer. Perhaps a familiar paragraph has become hurried; perhaps a question has remained unasked because we are embarrassed to begin. Removing one obstruction might mean learning the meaning of a sentence, finding a quieter moment or asking someone to explain. A small opening can help something inherited become something we understand and choose.

An inheritance that becomes our own

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sees Isaac's reopening of Abraham's wells as the courage of continuity. Isaac gives them their old names; he keeps an earlier generation's work alive. Sacks also emphasizes that opposition does not end Isaac's effort: he moves and digs again. [6]

A melody learned at a grandparent's table can be received with love and still need rediscovery. We may keep its words while asking what they mean, or learn the blessing we have heard for years. Our own attention gives the inheritance a living place in us. The well bears an old name; the work of opening it is ours.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY THROUGH SHABBAT

Making room for another

The wells also change the landscape between people. Esek recalls contention; Sitnah, hostility. At Rehovot there is no quarrel, and Isaac thanks God for giving them room to flourish. Later he questions Abimelech about the earlier rejection, yet welcomes a covenant with him. The story allows both a truthful account of hurt and a new agreement. [2, 26:20-31]

A hope larger than the quarrel

Ramban reads the three wells as allusions to the two destroyed Temples and a future third Temple, associated with an end to strife. Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher, the Sephardic commentator, carries this reading further: the third well's explicit association with God points toward an enduring sanctuary. These are the commentators' symbolic readings of Israel's hope. [3, 4]

For our table, Rehovot can become a question about the room we give each other. During a disagreement, are we still trying to protect something that nourishes the relationship? Making room may mean hearing a concern without interrupting, naming a boundary calmly or returning when everyone can speak more honestly. Some conflicts require distance and help. The image asks us to seek a life-giving outcome.

Seeing beyond a single story

In his published Toldot video transcript, Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis recalls the sages' account of Esau dressing carefully to honor Isaac. He draws attention to a virtue in a deeply troubled figure: respect for his father. A person's failures need not prevent us from recognizing a real good we can learn from. [7]

Tanya, chapter 32, gives Jewish fellowship an inward foundation: souls share a root in God, deeper than the differences that separate bodies. Attending to that shared root supports love of another Jew. [8] At home, we can ask whether a label has stopped us noticing an actual person: the child who is always "difficult," the relative whose every word we expect to dislike.

Recognizing goodness still leaves us responsible for truth. Toldot includes deception, tears and a threat of violence. Its pain remains part of the reading. Our task is to notice a genuine opening for good while facing what needs repair. No one at the table needs to pretend that a wound has disappeared.

This Shabbat, we might choose one well to reopen: a prayer we want to understand, a conversation that needs a gentler beginning, a family practice worth learning again. We cannot command the water to rise. We can clear a little earth, make room and return to the work. There may be more life beneath the surface than we have allowed ourselves to see.

Around the table

What is one good thing you received from an earlier generation that became more meaningful when you explored it for yourself? It might be a prayer, a custom, a skill or the way someone welcomed a guest.

Isaac keeps digging, but he also changes location. How do you recognize the difference between a worthwhile effort that needs patience and a quarrel that needs a different approach?

Where could you make a little more room this week: for understanding a prayer, for hearing someone fully or for seeing a strength you have overlooked? What would a first, practical opening look like?

SOURCES & FURTHER LEARNING

[1] The week's reading

14 Nov 2026, 4 Kislev, Israel and Diaspora. Torah: Genesis 25:19-28:9. Haftarah: Malachi 1:1-2:7.

Hebcal · Toldot 5787

[2] Torah · Genesis 25:19-28:9

Full annual portion; wells in 26:15-33, blessings in chapters 27-28. Narrative distinguished from commentary.

Sefaria · Genesis 25-28

[3] Ramban · Genesis 26:20

The textual question about the wells and their symbolic connection with the three Temples. Hebrew and translation read.

Sefaria · Ramban on Genesis 26:20

[4] Rabbeinu Bahya · Genesis 26:19

Bahya ben Asher develops Ramban's reading of the third well and the enduring sanctuary. Hebrew and translation read.

Sefaria · Rabbeinu Bahya 26:19

[5] The Rebbe · Inwardness

Eli Touger's adaptation of Likkutei Sichot XV, p. 191ff; XXV, p. 123ff. The inward meaning of well-digging.

Chabad · Inwardness

[6] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks · Toldot 5779

The Courage of Persistence. Published essay; brief paraphrase of continuity and renewed effort.

Rabbi Sacks · Courage of Persistence

[7] Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis · 7 Nov 2018

D'var Torah: Parashat Toldot. Publisher's written transcript accompanying a YouTube video; the passage on Esau's respect.

Chief Rabbi · Video transcript

[8] Tanya · Likutei Amarim 32

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Shared root of Jewish souls and love of one's fellow. Text and elucidation read.

Chabad · Tanya, chapter 32

Sources checked 7 November 2026. An original Kavaná letter with brief attributed paraphrases. The published video transcript was read; no claim is made to have watched or independently transcribed the recording. Everyday examples and the synthesis are editorial reflections.

Print at actual size on US Letter paper. Four pages: two sheets, double-sided. Please treat these Torah pages respectfully.