

JACOB AND ESAU: THE RELATIONSHIP RECONSIDERED

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After long suffering the wiles of Laban, Jacob, now with a large family and rich in livestock, decides with God's approval to return home to the land of Canaan (Gen. 32:13). As he approaches from east of the Jordan he faces a dilemma: Whether to notify his brother Esau of his coming, or to proceed unannounced to his parents' home in Hebron. And the question may well have been a matter of life and death! For, on the eve of his departure, 20 years earlier, Esau had threatened to kill him. Was it safe now for him to return? Their mother, Rebekah, had promised to send for him once Esau's anger had passed, but there is nothing in the text to indicate that she had done so.¹

To appreciate Jacob's decision to notify Esau of his homecoming we must explore his understanding at this point of the character and temperament of his twin brother. For those of us today, familiar with the tradition, it is extremely difficult to obtain an "objective" understanding of Esau. Over time, layers of historical symbolism, most of them negative, have been associated with Esau who was also called Edom (25:30). That land, settled by the descendants of Esau, was already hostile in the days of Moses (Num. 20:14) and proved to be a treacherous neighbor during the period of the First Temple.² Later, the forced conversion of the Idumeans by John Hyrcanus produced the troublesome careers of Antipater and Herod. In addition, the world of rabbinic midrash somehow connected Edom with Rome and, by extension, with Christianity.³ Any one of these associations was enough to blacken the name of Esau-Edom. How much more, when both prophet and sage express themselves in such unequivocal terms: *Says the Lord, yet I loved Jacob and Esau I hated* (Mal. 1:2). "It is a well known rule [*halakha*] that Esau hates Jacob" (Sifrei *Behalotcha* 69). With this as background, many traditional commentators felt justified in adopting the most negative interpretations of the ac-

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tions and words of the biblical Esau, who is now referred to as *Esav ha'rasha* [Esau the wicked].

However, as unfortunate as much of this history may be, it does not free us of our obligation to seek out the true character of the individual human being called Esau in the Book of Genesis and his relationship with Jacob. In the beginning we are given intimations of conflicts in their relationship. While yet in the womb, we are told, *the children struggled within her* (Gen. 25:22) and the Divine oracle foretells deep divisions and rivalry (v. 23). However, these are directed at the distant future. While these pronouncements surely influence Rebekah and should be noted by the reader, they do not seem to have been known to Isaac, Jacob or Esau, and are not otherwise relevant to the story as it unfolds.

Although twins, they are different in physical appearance, in temperament and in choice of occupation, which, of course, happens quite often. *And Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field and Jacob was a quiet man* [ish tam] *dwelling in tents* (v. 27). Nor is it unusual that the father should favor one child (Esau) and the mother the other (Jacob), particularly when the reasons given are quite apparent and benign (v. 28). No value judgments attend these descriptions and none seem intended. Two crucial events follow, one quite early, the other much later, which shape the relationship between the two brothers:

1. Esau is persuaded by Jacob to sell him his birthright [*bechora*] for some red [*adom*] pottage (vv. 29-34).
2. Jacob deceives Isaac into giving him the blessing [*bracha*] intended for Esau (27:1-40).

The text does not make it clear as to precisely what privileges or benefits the "birthright" confers, or in what sense it could be "sold." Nor does it describe the nature of the coveted "blessing" that Isaac confers on the disguised Jacob or what value a "blessing" could have when given under false pretenses. Understandably, however, Esau sees them both as acts of deliberate trickery by his brother in which items of great value are in effect "stolen" from him: *'Is he not rightly named Jacob* [Yaakov] *for he has deceived me* [yaakeveini] *these two times: he took away my bechora and now he has taken my bracha'* (27:36). This sense of hurt leads to intense hatred: *And Esau hated Jacob and he said in his heart: 'Let the days of mourning for my father be at*

hand, then will I slay my brother Jacob' (v. 41). It is then that Rebekah sends Jacob away to her family in Haran for safekeeping, while she tells Isaac that he is going there *to take a wife from the daughters of Laban* (v. 46).

Let us now fast-forward to Genesis 32:3, where Jacob, as he approaches the land of Canaan, decides to send messengers ahead to his brother Esau to apprise him of his coming home. Apparently, Jacob had concluded that his brother's hatred and rage had somehow dissipated. What made him think so? Jacob reviewed his role in the two crucial events to gauge the extent of his own guilt.

1. *Bechora*: There was nothing deceptive or really coercive about the "sale." Had Jacob demanded too high a price for his "red" pottage? Value is, after all, in the mind of the individual. Evidently, the *bechora*, whatever its material, social or religious benefits, was evaluated differently by each one. As he got older, Esau apparently regretted the sale and felt he had been cheated. Jacob, in retrospect, felt he had done no wrong.

2. *Bracha*: Obviously, this was a clear case of blatant deception of Isaac with consequent loss to Esau and therefore morally wrong. Esau's pain, sense of loss and anger against the perpetrator, were real and justified. However, whatever guilt Jacob may have felt at the time was mitigated by the thought that after all he had followed the bidding of a loving and respected mother. And in the end Esau receives an alternate blessing (27:39,40). It is not at all clear even to the careful reader precisely what it is that Esau "lost" and Jacob "gained" as a result of the deception. Particularly when before Jacob leaves home we read: *And Isaac blessed Jacob and said, 'May God give you the blessing of Abraham'* (28:4). This would indicate that the "blessing of Abraham" which designates who is to be the successor to the Abrahamic covenant, and was the only spiritually significant element possibly involved in either the *bechora* or the *bracha*, was never contemplated by Isaac as something to be given to Esau. Therefore, both events may well have been cases of "much ado about nothing." Neither Jacob nor Esau (nor I imagine Rebekah) seems to have had a proper understanding of the *bechora* or the *bracha*.

However, aside from these points of conflict, Jacob, as any other sibling, must have garnered certain insight into his brother's character and general feelings towards him. As twins growing up together, sharing the same home, there are myriad opportunities for each in the course of the interactions of

daily living to get to know each other on deeper levels of personality. Jacob surely must have appreciated Esau's unusual relationship with their father, Isaac. While "hunting" is hardly an occupation for a "nice Jewish boy," the aging patriarch and his "outdoor" son found a common interest in the venison brought home by Esau.⁴ The sages added that Esau honored his father to such an extent that he kept a special suit of fine clothing in his parents' home into which he changed when he came to serve his father (27:15).⁵

On the basis of these considerations, Jacob concluded that Esau's fit of rage must have long run its course, what with him, Jacob, the object of his resentment, out of the picture for so long and the natural affection of brother for brother having taken its place. And so he sends the following message to Esau:

'Thus says your servant Jacob, I have lived with Laban and stayed until now. And I have oxen and asses and flocks, men servants and maid servants and I have sent to tell my lord that I may find favor in your sight (32:5,6).

Jacob reasoned that Esau believed that his (Jacob's) actions in both the *be-chora* and *bracha* events were driven by an unbridled ambition to rule over him, to become the head of the family after Isaac, with its material and social benefits. Therefore, in this conciliatory message Jacob: (1) Describes himself as *servant to my lord Esau* – indicating that he does not consider himself superior and has no desire to rule; (2) states that he has become independently wealthy and has no need for the family inheritance; and (3) points out that by being banished from their parents' home for so long, he has been amply "punished" for his alleged misdeeds.

We can therefore imagine Jacob's shock when his messengers return earlier than expected with the startling report that, *he [Esau] is coming towards you and four hundred men are with him (32:7)*. A very threatening "welcoming committee" indeed! Afraid that he had tragically miscalculated, Jacob desperately prays to God for salvation (32:9-12), divides his people into two camps to afford a possibility of escape for some if attacked, and then prepares a "reception" of his own for his brother Esau. He selects from his livestock a very substantial gift [*mincha*] to be sent ahead to his brother, consisting of five different species: goats, sheep, camels, oxen, asses, each with a proportionate number of males and females so as to insure their natural increase, for an im-

pressive total of 580 animals. The instructions to his accompanying servants are precise: (1) *'You are to say to Esau, "this belongs to your servant Jacob sent as a gift to my lord Esau and behold Jacob, your servant, is behind us'"* (32:11-19). The servants are further instructed to keep each species as a separate group and to maintain a considerable space between each herd. In explaining his action, Jacob says: *'I will appease him with the gift that goes before me and afterwards I will see his face, perhaps he will accept me'* (32:20).

I wish to suggest that these particular moves reflect an intuitive psychological insight on how to defuse any residual rage that may be driving Esau. We are told that anger, one of the most seductive of negative emotions, is very energizing. Brooding over one's imagined "hurt" results in the rush of impulse to act that is, however, of relatively short duration.⁶ Earlier, the very mention of the hated name *Yaakov* amid reports of his return had aroused in Esau painful memories of humiliation and loss of dignity. The rush of anger had prompted him to order 400 men to "saddle up" in order to wreak vengeance.⁷ However, by the time the first group of animals reaches them, we can be sure that the vicissitudes of the road had already dampened some of their ardor.

Now imagine the encounter of Esau's party with the first installment of Jacob's gift. Esau, at the head of his 400 charging men, sees the road ahead blocked by a herd of slow-moving animals. He is compelled to halt, to dismount, in order to ascertain their identity and purpose. As he learns of the gift, Esau's image of a grasping hateful *Yaakov* is gradually replaced by a *Yaakov* who calls him *my lord* and whose appearance is preceded by this most thoughtful and generous gift. The road is cleared, the men remount and the charge resumes, only to be similarly interrupted another four times! Each time Esau resumes his journey it is with less enthusiasm and with his anger based on the memory of an old hurt rapidly dissipating.

In psychological terms, the effects of the way Jacob managed his "gift" was to enable Esau to break his impetuous impulse to act, to see his brother differently, to associate him with a pleasant experience, to douse the flames of his old anger. What clinches Esau's turn-about to "loving brother" is the moving scene at their actual meeting. *And he himself [Jacob] passed before them and bowed himself to the ground [vayishtachu] seven times until he came near to*

his brother (33:3). The Hebrew word implies that Jacob's act was one of prostration, which is to lie

fully stretched out, face downward on the ground. To do this seven separate times before he reached his brother was a most graphic and poignant act of submission. Jacob, in doing this, must have cut a truly pathetic figure, particularly since he was now limping because of strained thigh sinews (32:26,32).⁸

Esau's response could now be expected: *And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept* (33:4). We have every reason to believe that this was sincere and wholehearted. Esau's anger has nothing to feed upon. His self-esteem and dignity have been restored. The Jacob before him is no longer a rival who threatens, but the brother with whom he had for so long shared the love and devotion of beloved and respected parents.

Is there a lesson here? Although different in temperament and committed to opposing values and interests, individuals can relate to each other in love and respect, providing there is the patience and wisdom to eliminate misunderstandings and suspicions.

NOTES

1. We are told that Deborah, nurse of Rebekah, died in the camp of Jacob near Beth-el (35:8). What was she doing there? Could it be that she had been sent by Rebekah with a message concerning Esau?
2. See Obadiah 1 and Amos 1:11.
3. See Harry Freedman, "Jacob and Esau, Their Struggle in the Second Century," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXIII:2 (April 1995).
4. Genesis 25:28. Maurice Samuel claimed that Isaac only pretended to like venison so as to maintain a relationship with Esau. His evidence was the fact that Rebekah was able to deceive Isaac by passing off the meat of a young goat as venison. Samuel argued that no one with a taste for venison could be fooled by a substitute.
5. Genesis Rabbah 65:12. Further evidence of Esau's regard for his father is to be found in the matter of his Canaanite wives. *And Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan pleased not Isaac his father so Esau went. . . and took a daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham as a wife unto the wives that he had* (28:8,9). While this may not reflect great wisdom on the part of Esau, it certainly demonstrates good will! Interestingly, while we are told that Esau's Canaanite wives were a *bit-terness of spirit* to *Isaac and Rebekah* (26:35) Esau's act is given as motivated by his regard for his father only.
6. See Daniel Goelman, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam 1995) pp. 56, 60, 63.
7. The mounts they rode were probably racing camels.
8. The effect that this may have had in arousing the compassion of Esau is pointed out by Benno Jacobs in his commentary on Genesis.