

ESAU AND JACOB REVISITED: DEMON VERSUS *TZADIK*?

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The treatment of the Esau-Jacob story in many of the early midrashim is an example of rabbinic interpretation independent of *p'shat*, the close literal reading of the biblical narrative. This approach is deliberate. By transforming *p'shat* into *drash*, the liberal open-ended method of homiletics, the rabbinic *darshan* believed he was articulating an alternative legitimate point, no less valid than that which is derived from the exact literal *p'shat* reading.

As we shall see, this trend did not go unchallenged in rabbinic exegesis. The Esau-Jacob *drash* dichotomy, where the former is transformed into the villain and the latter into the *tzadik* unleashes a counter-school of midrash which sets the record straight by asserting Divine fairness and justness by means of *midah k'neged midah* [measure for measure].

We begin with the tendency in early rabbinic literature to excuse negative behavior of biblical personalities. This left its mark on subsequent biblical commentaries of the Middle Ages. Such defending would appear even when the close reading of the scriptural text points in opposite directions. Typical is the statement of R. Shmuel bar Nahman who, commenting on . . . *and Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine; and Israel [Jacob] found out* (Gen. 35:22), stated "Anyone who claims that Reuben sinned is mistaken." Similar exculpations are presented on behalf of the sons of Eli (I Sam. 2:12), the sons of Samuel (I Sam. 8:3), King David (II Sam. 11:2-27; 12:1-25), and King Solomon (I Kgs. 10:26-29; 11:1-11) among others: "Anyone who claims that [so and so] has sinned is mistaken."¹ Commenting on the chapters which narrate the sibling rivalry of the twin sons of Rebekah and Isaac (Gen. 25:19-34, 27), rabbinic literature adorns Jacob in garments of righteousness and virtue, the *tzadik*. Esau is portrayed as wicked [*rasha*].

Expounding upon the verses: *When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into fierce and bitter sobbing and said to his father: 'Bless me too, father!'* Isaac answered: *'Your brother [Jacob] came with mirmah and took away your*

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blessing (27:34-35).² R. Yohanan,³ for example, taught: "He [Jacob] came with the wisdom of his Torah" – that is to say, "*mirmah*" not in its literal meaning of "deceit" or "fraud," but in the sense of ingenuity and acumen gained in the study of Torah.⁴ Since he lawfully acquired the birthright, according to this opinion, the blessing rightfully belonged to him. R. Yohanan applies this lesson for Jews throughout time. The deeds of our predecessors guide future generations. R. Yohanan, concerned with Jewish continuity under hostile conditions, urges his people to resist the evil designs of *the hands of Esau* by means of *the voice of Jacob* (27:22).

Obvious questions now come to the surface. If, indeed, Jacob acquired the birthright legitimately and lawfully, why was there need to stage the disguise and bring a tasty dish of venison to support the deception of his blind father: '*I am Esau your first-born. I have done as you told me*' (27:19)? But it was Jacob, not Esau, who is speaking! It was to Esau that his father made the request, not to Jacob. And was it not Rebekah who had prepared the dish for Isaac and instituted the deception? The ethical Gordian knot tightens.

Another question: Was birthright so critical in Israel's antiquity that it justified a fraud that led to hazardous sibling hatred? That is to ask: Is the person at the dawn of biblical monotheistic ethics judged by the order of his birth rather than by his deeds? Abraham was a firstborn (11:27), but he is chosen for the qualities of his character: '*For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right*' (18:19). Generations later, the blessing of kingship was given to Judah, not to Reuben the firstborn (49:10). Moses, though "senior of the prophets among all who preceded him and those who followed him,"⁵ was not a firstborn. Aaron was. King David, symbolizing Israel's eventual redemption, was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons (I Sam. 17:12-14). Thus it went throughout the generations of biblical Israel.

Admittedly, birthright may have assumed significance during Israel's early patriarchal foundation. Why, then, was Isaac, the current patriarch, not informed of the transaction between the older and younger brother? The tragic trickery could have been avoided. The father could have served as the intermediary and adjudicated the matter. Each son could have received his appropriate blessing, as Jacob eventually blessed his own children prior to his death (Gen. 49:1-28).

Perhaps these were the questions posed by those rabbis who challenged the *darshanut* which tended to idolize Jacob and vilify Esau. And there were sages who closely observed events which pursued both Rebekah and Jacob in the wake of the birthright affair. They arrived at different conclusions, more balanced and sober.

REBEKAH OUR MATRIARCH

Rebekah urged her beloved son Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran: *'Stay with him for a few days, until your brother's fury subsides'* (Gen. 27:44). The "few days" stretched out to 20 years of separation in an alien environment that seethed with deception and fraud. Now it is Jacob who is the victim. It is likely that Rebekah never again saw this son in her lifetime. She would never be certain whether the sought-after blessings were ever realized. Neither Rebekah's death nor a eulogy for her is recorded in Scripture. Is there a message here that even if deceit may be perceived as "justified," biblical heroes and heroines cannot escape retribution?

Now, Jacob the Patriarch: The first seven years in the abode of Laban *seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her* [Rachel] (29:20). Then, on his wedding night, he is trapped through a deceitful substitution contrived by Laban.⁶ Leah assumes Rachel's identity in the matrimonial bed. The "measure for measure [*midah k'neged midah*]" symmetry here is remarkable. The collaboration between Rebekah and her younger son Jacob in the birthright-blessing intrigue is now matched by a puzzling alliance between a younger sister (Rachel) and an older sister (Leah) depriving the younger son (Jacob) of his conjugal rights in matrimony.⁷

The cycle of reward and punishment, measure for measure, continues in the life of Jacob. As part of the intrigue to conceal from their father the abduction and the sale of Joseph, the brothers showed him the tunic he recognized in horror as his gift to Joseph whom he loved *best of all his sons* and said to him: *'We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not?'* (37:32). To trick him into believing that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast they had drenched the garment in the blood of a young goat – akin to the goat skins worn by Jacob to trick his father into believing he was Esau. Jacob's absence from his beloved parents for 20 years is almost matched in kind by

Joseph's 22 years of tormented time away from his beloved grieving father. This is an example of immediate retribution.

The relentless dynamics of measure for measure radically traverse the generations. The Bible relates, *When Esau heard his father's words he burst into wild and bitter sobbing* (27:34) of which R. Hanina teaches in Genesis Rabbah:⁸

Anyone who claims that The Holy One, Blessed be He, is overly lenient (that is to say, He indulges those who violate the feelings of others saying: 'I will follow my own inclinations since God is forgiving,') will forfeit his life. When did these consequences (of Esau's sobbing) come to the fore? In Shushan, the capital [of Persia] as it is written: [Mordechai went through the city] *crying out loudly and bitterly* (Est. 4:1) against Haman's decree to destroy the Jews. And Haman descended from Amalek, who is descended from Esau (Gen. 36:16). It was he who issued the decree to destroy the Jews.

ESAU

As alluded to at the outset, there were alternative voices among the sages who give Esau the benefit of the doubt. Prior to their momentous reunion after 20 long years, Jacob fears that his elder brother's merits may have shifted the balance of integrity and virtue in Esau's favor at the expense of his own image of uprightness. He is portrayed as *greatly frightened; in a state of anxiety* (32:8). The Midrash elaborates upon these concerns:

"During all these years Esau resides in The Land of Israel. Shall it be assumed that he will now confront me with the power of the merits of residing in Eretz Yisrael?"⁹

All these years he devotes his efforts at honoring his parents, shall it be assumed that he will now confront me with the power of honoring ones parents?¹⁰

In this vein, R. Shimon ben Gamliel declares: "All my life I took care of my father. Yet it did not even amount to one hundredth of Esau's efforts when he attends to his own father."¹¹

Having modified the perceived Jacob-Esau contrasts we can begin to address the larger issue: If the sages were sensitive to Jacob's blemishes as well as to Esau's merits, why the huge division in Jewish tradition which continues

to identify "Jacob" with the just and righteous while "Esau" remains fated to represent the camp of villainy and immorality? This question deserves serious consideration and extensive study. For the present, one of numerous possibilities is offered for discussion:

First, it must be remembered that Genesis 36:1 identifies Esau as *the same as Edom*. The harsh expressions of censure directed against "Esau" and "Edom" by Jeremiah (49:7-22), Ezekiel (26:12-14), Obadiah (1:1-14), and Malachi (1:2-5), are to be viewed in this context rather than the personal sibling rivalry that is the focus of our discussion. The fury of the prophets against Esau-Edom reflects an almost uninterrupted pattern of hostility by Edomite tribes plotting against Israelite and Judean interests up through the Babylonian exile.¹² Almost a millennium separates the Esau-Jacob sibling rivalry from these relatively late biblical prophetic texts antagonistic to "Edom." Another 600-700 years elapse until "Esau" is again transposed during the early rabbinic period and symbolically identified with Rome or early Christianity.¹³

The sages were astutely discriminating about biblical personalities, human beings of flesh and blood, neither angels nor demons, with their assets as well as their idiosyncrasies. They wrestled with man and God in the turbulent arena of life, in real time. The idealistic integrity of "Jacob" pitted against the inherent iniquity of "Esau-Edom" can be seen as belonging to another world – the realm of eschatology, the End of Days.¹⁴ This will indeed be the final theological-national-cultural conflict between Light and Darkness affirmed and presaged by the prophets and their rabbinic successors.

The battleground would lead through the ancient roads of Babylonia, Persia, and Edom and from the Second Temple period onward along the major highways of the Greek empire, Hellenism, Rome and early Christianity. The "Jacob"-*"Esau-Edom"* symbolism which portrayed this apocalyptic confrontation served as a useful camouflage to deflect the true identity of Israel's adversaries. Pragmatism dictated avoiding a reckless frontal confrontation with them.

This approach may have guided the external policy affairs of Jewish leadership in its long history of survival among the nations. Internally, often as a threatened minority within its own people, Jews stubbornly remained attuned to the *voice of Jacob* (Gen. 27:22) which reached out to them from the ap-

proaching darkness of night (28:11) on their lonely exilic paths of time. This voice would reconnect with these people of faith. They would be revived and challenged by dreams of ladders set on the ground reaching upwards to the heavens accompanied by angels of God (28:12).

But these transcendental voices, resonating also in the redemptive valleys of modern Mount Zion, seeking eventually to be vindicated, and reconciled with Mount Esau (Obad. 1:21) are not the voices of Esau and Jacob of 12 chapters in Genesis. The voices in Chapters 25 through 36 are originally those of children and parents, and they teach their message in real time to parents of children at all times. The simple unadorned *p'shat*, the actual biblical drama of Rebekah and Isaac blessed with twins was written for all who read this story and who bring children into this world. In fact, parents do often favor one child over another. Tragic rivalry is not created in the womb of a mother. The unadorned close reading of the story is a message conveyed in these chapters of Scripture. Like Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob, parents are guided and misguided by complex considerations, at times bound up with ego expectations of the parents themselves, in their relationships to their offspring. Jacob and Esau were not identical twins. They were to evolve differently and uniquely, a combination of nature and nurture. Had the parents related to these differences with sensitivity, awe, and wonder,¹⁵ rather than taking sides in confrontational combat, perhaps the Esau-Jacob rivalry would have had a different resolution. In turn, the homiletic projection on the historical-theological-eschatological plane would surely have employed disguises other than Esau-Jacob as eternal enemies.¹⁶

The contemporary struggle to maintain a stable family within the vicissitudes of daily life compels the biblical reader to study carefully the lessons, admonitions and wisdom of its Genesis narratives. Prior to looking at the eventual larger picture of emergence as a people, nation, tribe and major faith community, the patriarchs and matriarchs were struggling to define their new covenanted relationships within the intimate family unit. The modern reader will be rewarded abundantly in internalizing the essentials of the Esau-Jacob drama: to beware of sustaining the potentially fragile interrelations between parents and children, among siblings, giving each his/her due place within the family, and seeing the positive potential of individual deviations as part of a coherent harmonic family partnership.

To this extent, the story of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob is our story as well.

NOTES

1. T.B. Shabbat 55-56.
2. "Deceit" is the standard meaning of "*mirmah*."
3. Fourth-century C.E. Palestinian amora under Roman rule.
4. See Genesis Rabbah 67:4. The second-century C.E. *Targum Onkelos* translates *mirmah* as "*behochmata* [with wisdom]." For other midrashim which demonize Esau and idolize Jacob, see Genesis Rabbah 63:6; 63:9; 63:12; 63:14-16; 63:18-19.
5. The seventh of the 13 principles of belief of Maimonides, frequently printed at the close of the daily morning [*shaharit*] service.
6. Genesis Rabbah 70:19
7. Leah impersonates her younger sister as part of the conjugal disguise. Genesis Rabbah 70:19. Why Rachel would deceptively cooperate with her elder sibling in a matter of such consequence is worth the attention of further study. Was she an intimidated female member of a dominant patriarchal culture? If indeed it was '*not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older*' (Gen. 29:26) then Rachel would have been aware of local practices in her own community. Why would she not have shared this complication candidly with Jacob prior to the nuptials? Why the deception?
- It would seem that deceptions in this period were a normative means of confronting troublesome situations. Two generations earlier, '*Say then that you are my sister*' was the request of Abraham to Sarah prior to entering Egypt (12:10-13); repeated in the subsequent episode involving Abimelech king of Gerar (20:1-3). See also Sarah's denial of her laughter in her disbelief of her ability to be with child (18:12-15); Laban's illicit removal from his flock speckled and spotted animals which were to have been transferred to become Jacob's private flock (30:35-36); Rachel's denial that she had her father's idols (31:34-35); the dissembling manner in which Jacob's sons persuaded the fighting men of the Hivites of Shechem to undergo circumcision so their prince could marry Dinah, and then Simeon and Levi slaughtered them (34:1-31); the brothers selling Joseph into slavery and then deceiving their grieving father with the bloody tunic (37:30-36).
8. Genesis Rabbah 67:4.
9. See: TB. Ketuvot 110b-111b on the merits of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*.
10. Genesis Rabbah 76:2.
11. Genesis Rabbah 65:16.
12. See: Numbers 20:14-21; I Samuel 14:47-48; II Kings 16:6; 8:20-22; II Chronicles 28:6-7; 17-19; and allusions to such hostility in Obadiah vv. 8-10; Lamentations 4:21; Psalms 137:7.
13. See: Gerson D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) pp. 243-269. My appreciation to Prof. Dan Vogel and Rabbi Ted Steinberg for bringing this source to my attention.
14. *Be'aharit Ha'yamim*, the final, ultimate Days of Divine Judgment, when Israel will be vindicated. The nations who did not fathom the larger purpose of Israel's existence, and the sinners

among God's Chosen, will be indicted of wrongdoing and punished. See: Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezekiel 38:8; 38:16; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1; Daniel 8:19 *Be'aharit Za'am*; Daniel 10:14.

15. See: TB Sanhedrin 4:5, in which the Mishnah views with amazement the ability of the Divine "to mint all men from the mold of Adam and not one of them is like his fellow man."

16. On this 900th year anniversary of the death of the incomparable Rashi (1040-1105) we reiterate his basic approach to all biblical reading and comprehension: *ein mikra yotze mi'de peshuto* – a biblical verse or story line can never lose its literal meaning. *Drash* or homiletics may follow once *p'shat* has been established and understood.



QUESTIONS

FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. **How can the census by poll (Numbers 1:18, 20, 22) be reconciled with Exodus 30:12 and other biblical passages which proscribe a count by head?**
2. **Where else in the Torah are the people obliged to drink a potion reminiscent of the water of bitterness that the *Sotah* wife suspected of infidelity is made to drink (Numbers 5:17ff)?**
3. **According to the Torah, what is the significance of the *tzitzit* (fringes)?**

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