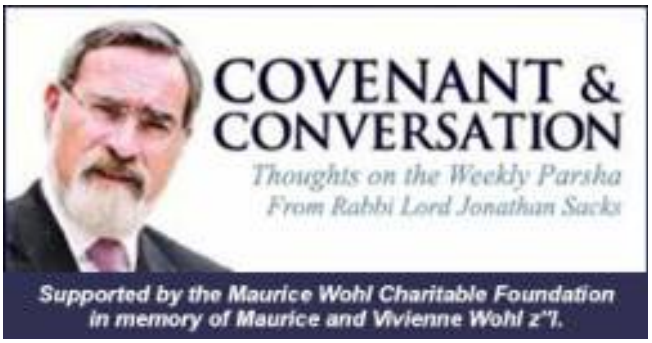
Toldot (Genesis 25:19-28:9)
advanced compendium

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Between Prophecy and Oracle

Rebecca, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [*vatelekh lidrosh et Hashem*] (Bereishit 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future:

> Two nations are in your womb,
> And two peoples from within you will be separated;
> One people will be stronger than the other,
> And the older will serve the younger [*ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir*].
> (Bereishit 25:23)

Eventually the twins are born - first Esau, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Jacob. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rebecca favours the younger son, Jacob. Years later, she persuades him to dress in Esau's clothes and take the blessing Isaac intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you" (Bereishit 26:29). The prediction has been fulfilled. Isaac's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rebecca before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger." The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Esau arrives and discovers that Jacob has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Isaac gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is:

> You will live by your sword And you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, You will throw his yoke from off your neck. (Bereishit 27:40)

This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Jacob

is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Esau had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he able to face Esau with some composure. He bows down to him seven times. Seven times he calls him "my lord." Five times he refers to himself as "your servant." The roles have been reversed. Esau does not become the servant of Jacob. Instead, Jacob speaks of himself as the servant of Esau. But this cannot be. The words heard by Rebecca when "she went to inquire of the Lord" suggested precisely the opposite, that "the older will serve the younger." We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah's narrative devices - the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past. This is the essence of Midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text (see the essay 'The Midrashic Imagination' by Michael Fishbane). The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now.

This is the significance of the great revelation of G-d to Moses in Shemot 33:33, where G-d says that only His back may be seen - meaning, His presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation.

We now see that this was not an idea invented by the sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rebecca heard - as will now become clear - seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words *ve-rav yaavod tsair* seem simple: "the older will serve the younger." Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities.

The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word et, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Job 14:19 for example, the words *avanim shachaku mayim* mean "water wears away stones," not "stones wear away water." Thus the phrase might mean "the older shall serve the younger" but it might also mean "the younger shall serve the older". To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is: a poem.

The second is that *rav* and *tsa'ir* are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of *rav* as "older." The opposite of *tsa'ir* ("younger") is *bechir* ("older" or "firstborn"). Rav does not mean "older." It means "great" or possibly "chief." This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are not - the opposites would have been *bechir/tsa'ir* or *rav/me'at* - further destabilises the meaning. Who was the *rav*? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third - not part of the text but of later tradition - is the musical notation. The normal

way of notating these three words would be *mercha-tipcha-sof pasuk*. This would support the reading, "the older shall serve the younger." In fact, however, they are notated *tipcha-mercha-sof pasuk* - suggesting, "the older, shall the younger serve"; in other words, "the younger shall serve the older."

A later episode adds a yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a second instance in Bereishit of the birth of twins, to Tamar (Bereishit 38:27-30). The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Esau and Jacob:

> When her time was come, there were twins in her womb, and while she was in labour one of them put out a hand. The midwife took a scarlet thread and fastened it round the wrist, saying, "This one appeared first." No sooner had he drawn back his hand, than his brother came out, and the midwife said, "What! You have broken out first!" So he was named Perez. Soon afterwards his brother was born with the scarlet thread on his wrist, and he was named Zerah.

Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Esau and Jacob? (See Rashi to 25:26 who suggests that Jacob was in fact the elder.) These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rebecca heard may mean "the older will serve the younger" or "the younger will serve the older."

A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word *chidot* in Bamidbar 12:8, speaking about Moses: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in *chidot*" - usually translated as "dark speeches" or "riddles"). Oracles - a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world - were normally obscure and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase "she went to inquire of the Lord" which puzzled the medieval commentators.

The second - and this is fundamental to an understanding of Bereishit - is that the future is never as straightforward as we are led to believe. Abraham is promised many children but has to wait years before Isaac is born. The patriarchs are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey, though it has a destination, is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Jacob serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle alone at night does Jacob receive the name Israel meaning, "he who struggles with G-d and with men and prevails."

The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Jacob.



Esau

Parshat Toldot tells the tale of the two children born to Isaac and Rebecca, Esau and Jacob.

The Jewish tradition teaches much about the greatness of Jacob, who is known also by his other name Israel. Jacob is the symbol of fidelity to God, the symbol of goodness. Our entire people have assumed his identity.

But his brother Esau is seen as a demonic character. The very name Esau evokes images of mayhem and bloodshed. Though his midrashic reputation is unchallenged, when one reads the biblical text, one wonders if he really deserves it.

We know that Esau was a hunter, an occupation that, despite any ominous overtones, is not intrinsically evil. Perhaps it is the comparison with Jacob that has put Esau in a poor light, though does that alone justify the deep enmity for Esau transmitted across millennia?

We might claim that only due to his descendants -- most notably Amalek -- has Esau earned his inauspicious reputation. Alternatively, we may assume that the actions and attitudes of his descendants helped form the midrashic reading of the texts.

THE EVIL OF ESAU

Be that as it may, the text does provide a few hints regarding the evil of Esau and its origins:

> *And the first came out red, all over like a hairy garment; and they called his name Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau"s heel; and his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. And the boys grew; and Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. And Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his venison; but Rebecca loved Jacob. And Jacob cooked pottage; and Esau came from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Feed me, I beg you, with that same red pottage; for I am famished." Therefore was his name called Edom. And Jacob said, "Sell me this day your birthright." And Esau said, "Behold, I am at the point of death; and what profit shall this birthright do to me?"* (Genesis 25:25-32)

The description of Esau at birth, all red, probably covered with blood, seems to foreshadow the subsequent scene: Esau comes in covered in blood from the field ravenous after a day of hunting. The scene has premonitions of death. Indeed, after a day of killing, Esau comes home speaking of death.

> *And Esau said, "Behold, I am at the point of death; and what profit shall this birthright do to me?"*

The Sages sense yet another aspect of death.

> Another explanation is that Esau did not break loose so long as he (Abraham) was alive ... How do we know that Esau did not break loose while he was alive? Because it says, *And Esau came in from the field and he was faint.* It has been taught [in connection with this] that that was the day on which Abraham our Father died, and Jacob our Father made a broth of lentils to comfort his father Isaac. Why was it of lentils? In the West they say in the name of Rabbah ben Mari: "Just as the lentil has no mouth, so the mourner has no mouth [i.e., is speechless]." (Baba Batra 16b)

Abraham had died that day. God, in His infinite kindness, did not wish for Abraham to witness the recalcitrance of his grandson. Thus, death is in the air and Esau has death on his mind. The Midrash adds yet another angle to this talk of death: Abraham's old nemesis.[1] Nimrod was pursuing Esau.

> Another interpretation is that Nimrod was seeking to slay him on account of the garment which had belonged to Adam [and which Esau now possessed], for whenever he put it on and went out into the field, all the beasts and birds in the world would come and flock around him. (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 65:16)

The connection between Nimrod and Esau and the garment of Adam needs to be explored.

THE NIMROD CONNECTION

Nimrod is introduced as the personification of rebellion against God -- his very name implies rebellion. The *Zohar* connects both of these themes:

> Truly he [Esau] was a man of might, because he was clad in the garments of Adam and was able by means of them to lay snares for people and beguile them. Rabbi Eleazar said: "Nimrod used to entice people into idolatrous worship by means of those garments, which enabled him to conquer the world and proclaim himself its ruler, so that people offered him worship. He was called 'Nimrod,' for the reason that he rebelled against the most high King above, against the higher angels and against the lower angels." (Zohar, Bereishit, Section 1, Page 74a)

The source Nimrod's rebellion is somehow connected with the garments of Adam. These garments are themselves a symbol of Adam's sedition and the cause of all death in the world. Nimrod is attracted to these clothes and inspired by them, as is Esau at a later date.

According to another Midrash, Nimrod died that day at the hands of Esau!

> Rav Tanchuma said, "The two grew up, one on the path of life, the other on the path of death ... Jacob embarked on the path of life for he sat in the tents and involved himself in Torah his entire day. Esau followed the path of death, for he killed Nimrod..." (Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer chapter 31)

While Abraham is alive both boys follow similar paths.[2] Abraham's death unleashes within Esau a murderous rage and a preoccupation with death. Apparently, during Abraham's lifetime as a child, sitting on Abraham's lap and hearing the tales of Abraham's belief in God and the futility of the pagan gods and the pagan way of life, Esau was able to hold that odious side of himself in check.

It does not seem a coincidence that with Abraham's death, Esau seeks out Nimrod and challenges him at his own game. The object of his desire is the garment of Adam and Eve, the symbol of man's failure, the symbol of the futility of man's actions, the symbol of death. The great loving Abraham had died; Nimrod, too, will die, as will Esau himself -- and all men.

The philosophical problem of theodicy tormented the mind of Esau. The unfathomable ways of God brought Esau to seek a pact with evil, and death.

> And Esau said: *Behold, I am at the point to die* (ib. 32). Resh Lakish said: "He began to revile and blaspheme as it is not written, *What is [the birthright] to me,* but, *What is this to me?* He denied Him of whom it is written, *'This is my God.'*(Exodus 15:2). (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 63:13)

THE DESPAIR OF ABRAHAM

The Midrash actually records the antecedents of such an approach within Abraham himself, as he contemplates his own death:

> *Then I said in my heart: as it happens to the fool, so will it happen even to me.* (Ecclesiastes 2:15). "I have been called 'king' and the wicked Nimrod is called 'king'. Both alike died; in that case, why was I then more wise? Why did I [Abraham] jeopardize my life for the sanctification of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and warn people, saying, 'There is no God like Him among those above or below'? Then I said further, *For there is no remembrance of the wise man together with the fool for ever, seeing that in the days to come all will long ago have been forgotten.* Why [should he have said so]? When adversity befalls Israel they cry, *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants* (Exodus 32:13); but do the heathen nations [in their distress] cry, 'Remember the deeds of Nimrod'? That is what is written, *So how shall the wise man die even as the fool!*" (Midrash Rabbah - Kohelet 2:16)

Esau identifies with this articulation of despair more than any other "teaching" of Abraham. In this soliloquy, Abraham concerned himself with the world-view of the simple man, and not only

the philosopher, and therefore considered the world from a superficial perspective. Abraham was worried that due to the human condition, with death in the world, he and his teachings would soon be forgotten, his deeds dissipated like so many other passing trends. Realistically, without Abraham, the world stood a serious chance of becoming a dark and ugly place again, sliding back into the dark age from which it had emerged. Indeed, on the day that Abraham dies, all hell breaks loose:

> Rabbi Johanan said: "That wicked [Esau] committed five sins on that day. He dishonored a betrothed maiden, he committed a murder, he denied God, he denied the resurrection of the dead, and he spurned the birthright." (Baba Batra 16b)

The concept of resurrection, which his father Isaac had all but experienced, could have provided Esau with the hope he needed to continue in his fathers' path. Yet this concept, this comfort, eluded his tortured mind. Ironically, Esau with his philosophy of despair, helps extinguish the light of Abraham which had shone so brightly up to that very day.

THE FATAL FLAW

This "fatal flaw" of Esau seems consistent with other things we know of him and his actions. Esau seems to have been a superficial man, interested in the "clothes" but not the substance beneath. When his parents express their contempt for his choice of brides, Esau, the son so concerned with his filial responsibilities, obeys the command and takes new wives, but neglecting to distance himself from the evil woman whom he had already wed.

> *And Esau was forty years old when he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bos'mat the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they made life bitter for Isaac and for Rebecca.* (Genesis 26:34-35)

> *And Rebecca said to Isaac, "I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Het; if Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Het, such as these who are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life be to me?"* (Genesis 27:46)

> *And Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased Isaac his father. Then Esau went to Ishmael, and took, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nevayot, to be his wife.* (Genesis 28:8-9)

This action speaks volumes of Esau, myopically adhering to the letter of the law while abusing the spirit of the law. Only a superficial individual would even have the audacity to conduct himself in such a manner. It is likewise fascinating that of the entire population of the land he marries Hittites, who are remembered for selling the cave where Sarah and Abraham are interred. Perhaps this is another indication of Esau's obsession with death.

TWO RED-HEADS

The source of Esau's problems seem to date back to his birth, his ruddy pigmentation sending an ominous, chilling message to all who saw him.

But the Sages tell us of another individual who was born with a similar exterior -- King David:

> *And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all your children?" And he said, "There remains still the youngest, and, behold, he keeps the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he comes here." And he sent, and brought him in. And he was red-haired, with beautiful eyes, and good looking. And the Lord said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he."* (1 Samuel 16:11-12)
>
> *Red-haired.* Rabbi Abba ben Kahana said: "Altogether a shedder of blood. And when Samuel saw that David was red-headed ... he was smitten with fear, thinking he too might be a murderer. But the Holy One, blessed be He, reassured him that he had beautiful eyes [which meant] Esau slew by his own impulse, whereas he [David] would slay only on the sentence of the court. (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 63:8)

The beautiful eyes of David are a mirror of inherent kindness, and of David's ability to accept upon himself the law. The Midrash associates eyes with the Sanhedrin:

> *Thine eyes are as doves.* Thine eyes refers to the Sanhedrin who are the eyes of the congregation, as it is written, "If it be hid from the eyes of the congregation." (Midrash Rabbah - Shir Hashirim I:64)

David believed in law and justice, and killed with the blessing of the Sanhedrin. His eyes shone with love for his people. When an intransigent bully (Goliath) threatens their safety, David will kill. For Esau, though, it seems like a sport, a test of his own mortality, a dangerous and futile dance with death.

David believed that there is a "Judge and judgement" both in this world and the next. Esau denied justice in either world, and spent his days pursuing death and causing death, tortured by his own mortality and despising those who found comfort in eternal life.

The first challenge of Esau's life -- the death of his beloved grandfather -- proved too great a test. Esau came away from that experience mean-spirited, a misanthrope dedicated to spreading his disease to all who crossed his path.

1. Numerous Midrashim speak of Nimrod's hatred and pursuit of Abraham, which resulted in Nimrod eventually hurling Abraham into a furnace. The two are seen as spiritual adversaries: Nimrod represents paganism and it's inherent lack of respect for human life, while Abraham represents monotheism and it's ethical base and vision.
2. Rashi (25:27) based on the Tanchuma: Until the age of thirteen, the twins were indistinguishable in terms of behavior.



Past and Present Love

"And Yitzchak loved Eisav, for the game he put in his mouth, but Rivkah loves Yaakov" (Genesis, 25:28).

Even people not normally attuned to grammar are struck by the Torah's strange use of tenses to describe the relationship of Yitzchak and Rivkah with their children. Yitzchak "loved" Eisav, in the past tense, while Rivkah "loves" Yaakov, in the present tense. What is this meant to teach us?

The Dubno Maggid suggests a solution based on a keen observation of the world. In non-Jewish society, people define themselves and are defined by others according to what they do. In Jewish society, people are defined by what they are.

Eisav represented non-Jewish values. He defined himself and expected other to define him by what he did. He wanted to be seen as the athlete, the warrior, the storied hunter. The basis for the admiration and love of other people was what he had accomplished in the past. Should he cease to be a hunter, the admiration would cease as well. Therefore, Yitzchak "loved" Eisav, in the past tense, "*for the game he put in his mouth*," the things he had done in the past. But Yaakov represented Jewish values. He was defined by what he was rather than by what he did. Therefore, Rivkah "loves" Yaakov, in the present tense, a love that continues uninterrupted and is not dependent on his latest feat and achievement.

This is particularly true in our own times. Ask a non-Jewish child what he wants to be when he grows up and he will inevitably tell you he wants to be a doctor or a lawyer or a Silicon Valley entrepreneur or perhaps a rock star. Ask a Jewish child, and hopefully he will tell you he wants to be a *tzaddik* (righteous person), a *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar), a *baal chessed* (kind), and *oveid Hashem* (servant of God). Hopefully.

The Jewish child answers the question directly. He tells you what he wants to "be." The non-Jewish child, however, is not giving a direct answer to the question. He is telling what he will "do" rather than what he will "be." He has been conditioned to believe that a person's entire value is dependent on his profession or vocation. If he is a doctor he is important. If he is a mailman he is not important.

A columnist here in Baltimore recently wrote a piece decrying this tendency in society. Whenever he meets someone new at a function or party, it takes no more than fifteen seconds before he is asked, "So what do you do?" Sometimes, he is so annoyed he identifies himself as an auditor for the Internal Revenue Service, which is a guaranteed conversation stopper. Obviously, he concludes, in America "you are what you do," and what you really are - your character, your interests, your thoughts, your feelings, your opinions - do not really matter that much.

In America, you are measured by your performance, by what you do. Therefore, you may be idolized and adored one day and despised the next. If the level of your performance falls off, if you go through a stretch when you strike out instead of hitting, your fickle admirers will turn on you. After all, it was not what you are that they never admired but what you do, and when you no longer do it, there is no longer any basis for the admiration.

This is not the perspective of Judaism. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Judaism values all people for what they are, for their *tzelem Elokim*, for their character, their integrity, their goodness, their ethical standards, their *menschlichkeit*, their spiritual accomplishments. What they do for a living or for professional fulfillment is only secondary.

A DOSE OF HOLINESS

> And he inhaled the scent of his garments, and he blessed him. (Gen. 27:27)

Yitzchak lost his sight in his old age, but his sense of smell was just fine. Yaakov was counting on that. He put on Eisav's garments, brought Yitzchak delicacies and asked for the blessing. Yitzchak "inhaled the scent of his garments" and gave him the blessing. And the rest is history.

The Midrash offers a completely different homiletic interpretation of these words. The word used here for "his garments" is *begadav*. With alternate vowelization, it can be read as *bogdav*, which means his renegades. In other words, when Yitzchak "inhaled the scent of his renegades," when he sensed prophetically the descendants of Yaakov who would become renegades to the Jewish people, he was inspired to give him the blessings. What exactly does this mean?

Let us consider the renegade the Midrash holds up as an example. His name was Yosef Meshisa, and he was an awful Jew. When the Romans mounted their assault on the *Beis Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple, this Yosef Meshisa served as their native guide. As a reward, the Roman officer gave him permission to take for himself any of the valuables he wanted. He went into the *Heichal* and took the golden *menorah*, but the Roman decided it was too extravagant a treasure for a mere commoner.

"Go back and take something else," the Roman told him.

"I cannot go back in," Yosef Meshisa replied.

"No, you must go back," said the Roman.

"But I simply cannot," said Yosef Meshisa. "Isn't it enough that I defiled the Lord's Temple once? Must I do it again?"

"Aha! What have we here all of a sudden?" said the Roman. "A pious man, no less. Well, I absolutely insist that you go back in."

But Yosef Meshisa would not budge from his resolution. The Roman beat and tortured him mercilessly, but still he refused to go back into the *Heichal*. In his agony, he cried out, "Woe is me, for I have angered my Creator!" Finally, he died.

What had transformed this renegade Jew into a holy martyr in a matter of minutes? One minute, he was prepared to loot the *Beis Hamikdash* and

carry off the golden *menorah*, and the next, he allows himself to be tortured to death rather than violate the sanctity of the *Heichal*. What, asks the Ponovezher Rav, brought about this amazing change?

The answer is simple, says the Ponovezher Rav. Stepping into a holy place transformed him. He may have entered the *Heichal* with the worst of motives. But once there, he was exposed to the aura of holiness, and he emerged a changed man.

This, according to the Midrash, is what Yitzchak saw in Yaakov's future that convinced him to give him the blessings. He saw that even the lowest of the low among Yaakov's descendants, even the most despicable renegades such as Yosef Meshisa, would have such strong spiritual fortitude that they could be turned around by exposure to holiness. As low as they would fall, they would be one mere step from transformation into righteous people willing to die *al kiddush Hashem*. This was the lineage that was truly deserving of the blessings.

History has shown us that these kinds of transformations are not limited to the Inner Sanctum of the *Beis Hamikdash*. In the early 20th century, a Jew named Franz Rosenzweig told his story in a book entitled *The Star of Redemption*.

Franz was a successful author, a respected philosopher and a totally secular Jew. At one point, he was engaged to a gentile woman and was seriously considering baptism. It was during the First World War, and he served as a captain of cavalry in the German army on the Eastern front.

On the night of Yom Kippur, he found himself stationed in a small Polish town. As he made his rounds, he saw the light in the *shul* and heard the voices of the congregants, and out of curiosity, he stopped in to see what was going on. When he walked out a little while later, he writes, he was a religious Jew, a sincere *baal teshuvah*. He broke off his engagement to the gentile woman and led a life of observance from that point on.

In Germany of 1915, the idea of a *baal teshuvah* was virtually unheard of, unlike today when it such a common phenomenon. What brought about his incredible transformation? One thing: exposure to holiness. When he stepped into the *shul* and experienced the aura of Yom Kippur, he became a different person.

Such is the power of holiness, not just the holiness of the *Shechinah* in the *Beis Hamikdash*, but the holiness of just a handful of sincere Jews praying together in a small village *shul*. They too have the power to change a man forever.



Devil in the Details

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In this week's parsha, we are introduced to our patriarch, Jacob, and his twin brother, Esau. Rashi explains (Genesis 25:27) that it was impossible to distinguish between the different natures of the twins while they were still minors, but as soon as they reached the age of 13, their true characteristics emerged: Jacob went off to learn Torah, while Esau went off to corrupt behavior.

It seems strange that Esau's negativity emerged so suddenly - especially since the Talmud (Shabbat 105b) states explicitly that a person's inclination toward negativity (*yetzer hara*) does not operate in this fashion. The *yetzer hara,* rather than advocating sudden change, entices us to sin by urging, "Just do this one small thing." The next day, it tries to persuade us to perform another small misdeed - until eventually, a person can be convinced to serve idols.

So if the nature of the *yetzer hara* is to gradually wear down our defenses, how could Esau have gone off the Torah path so abruptly the moment he turned 13?

Based on our Sages' explanation of the nature of the *yetzer hara,* we must conclude that Esau's behavioral shift was in fact a gradual process. We can understand this by looking more carefully at the wording of Rashi's comment. Rashi states that when Jacob and Esau were children, it was impossible to DISTINGUISH the difference between them - not that there was no difference! Although Esau's external behavior may have been the same as Jacob's; nevertheless, something about them was not the same.

What was this difference? We can suggest that Esau was a "big picture" person, who was more concerned with generalities than with details. Although as a child he performed the same mitzvot as Jacob, he disregarded the nuances and subtleties of the commandments. It was this inattention that ultimately led him reject the Torah path entirely.

'SMALL' MITZVOT

Dismissing the importance of details can lead to two primary dangers. First, our Sages advise (Avot 2:1), "Be as careful with a 'minor' mitzvah as you are with a 'major' one, for you do not know the reward for the mitzvot." Who are we to say that what seems like a minor detail is in fact unimportant? Since we do not know the extent of the reward for our actions, it is foolish to disregard details as being unnecessary.

Furthermore, even if we are correct in our assessment, and what seems small to us is in fact small, the cumulative result of a person's inattention to detail may eventually result in his performing more serious transgressions. The care and attention we put into performing the details of God's commandments can serve as a buffer zone to prevent us from performing more serious misdeeds.

We see this idea in Deuteronomy 7:12, which enumerates all the blessings that will come to the Jewish people "if you listen (*eikev tishm'un*)" to God. The word *"eikev"* literally means "heel," as Rashi explains: "If you observe the seemingly insignificant commandments that a person tramples with his heel, then all the blessing will come." If we are careful with the small mitzvot, eventually we will merit all of them. This shows

how much we risk losing if we focus only on the big picture and ignore the fine points of mitzvot.

HINTED IN THE NAMES

Esau's name hints to his lack of concern with details. Rashi explains (Genesis 25:25) that the name "Esau" comes from the word *"asui,"* meaning "completed." Esau was interested only in the finished, final product, not the details - and this approach led to his eventual rejection of the big picture.

The name Yaakov, on the other hand, contains within it the word *"eikev"* (heel). Jacob is born holding on to his brother's heel, demonstrating his attention to the details that are so easily trampled on and overlooked. For Jacob, the nuances and details of the mitzvot are top priority. This awareness strengthens his commitment to the framework within which the details belong.

May we all merit to serve God in totality, and not miss the trees for the forest (or vice versa). May we recognize that big things sometimes come in small packages, and create, through our attention to details, a shield of spiritual success and blessing.

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