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Don’t Give Up On Your Brother

In this week’s Torah portion we have the enigmatic story of the struggle between Yaakov and Eisav over acquiring the blessings from their aged father, Yitzchak. Yitzchak sets the drama in motion by summoning Eisav and telling him to prepare to receive his blessing.

> "See, now, I have aged; I know not the day of my death. Now sharpen, if you please, your gear – your sword and your bow – and go out to the field and hunt game for me. Then make me delicacies such as I love and bring them to me and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die" (*Bereishis* 27: 2-4).

What was Yitzchak thinking? How is it possible that Yitzchak did not recognize the extent of Eisav’s depravity, and wanted to bless him?

Eisav’s Destiny

It is a mistake to think that Yitzchak was a blind old man, somewhat out of touch with reality, who was easily deceived by Eisav. Yitzchak understood full well how depraved Eisav was – but he also clearly saw his enormous potential and the pivotal role he could play in enabling the Jewish people to accomplish their mission.

The Torah describes how Eisav looked when he was born: “The first one emerged ruddy (*admoni*), entirely like a hairy mantle; so they named him Eisav” (ibid 25:25). Rashi explains that the fact that Eisav was “*admoni*” was a sign that he would have the propensity to shed blood (*Bereishis Rabbah* 63:8). Does this mean Eisav was destined to become a murderer?

The word “*admoni*” is used in only one other place in Tanach, and that is in describing the young David, whom the prophet Shmuel meets for the first time. “He [David] was ruddy (*admoni*), with fair eyes and a pleasing appearance. Hashem then said, ‘Arise and anoint him, for this is he!’” (I *Shmuel* 16:12). How can the same word be used to describe the essence of the evil Eisav and the righteous King David?

David indeed had the propensity to shed blood, like Eisav. But unlike Eisav, he took that innate inclination and channeled it toward good by battling the enemies of the Jewish people and defending Hashem's honor.

All traits can be used for good or evil. Eisav was not compelled to become a murderer; he could have used his inborn traits to accomplish great things.

Partnership

Yitzchak had a strategy. He wanted Yaakov and Eisav to form a partnership that would combine their inherent strengths to perfect the world. Yaakov would lead the spiritual realm while Eisav would rule the material world, freeing Yaakov to focus on the loftier mission of spreading Hashem's word to humanity.

Yitzchak never intended to give Eisav the "*birkat Avraham,"* the spiritual blessing that represents the transfer of the covenant originally forged between Avraham and Hashem, and the inheritance of the Land of Israel. Yaakov was always the intended recipient of this far more important blessing, which Yitzchak gave him at the end of the Torah potion, when he knew that he was blessing Yaakov. "May He grant you the blessing of Avraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may possess the land of your sojourns, which God gave to Avraham" (*Bereishis* 28:4).

The blessing that Yitzchak intended to give Eisav – which Yaakov received after he dressed up as Eisav – was for material abundance and political domination. "And may Hashem give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth, and abundant grain and wine. Peoples will serve you, and regimes will prostrate themselves to you; be a lord to your kinsmen, and your mother's sons will prostrate themselves to you…" (ibid 27:28, 29).

The Seforno (ibid 27:29) explains why Yitzchak deemed this blessing appropriate for Eisav, and what his intention was in telling Eisav that he would rule over his brother. He thought it would be best for Yaakov to remain in Eretz Yisrael and not be burdened with the responsibilities of the physical world. Yaakov could then focus all of his efforts on Torah, while Eisav, working toward the same objective, would rule the material world.

Yitzchak was correct in his assessment of Eisav's potential and the impact that the combined abilities of Yaakov and Eisav could have on the world. His mistake was in strategy. He realized Eisav was immoral, but he thought that if Yaakov would just reach out to him he would be able to set him on a righteous path. Yitzchak thought that forging a partnership between his two sons would force Yaakov to influence Eisav. But Rivka realized that this strategy was terribly mistaken, because empowering Eisav before he did *teshuvah*, repented, would remove his greatest impetus to change. Once Eisav would have this power, he would never be motivated to face his demons and improve.

Eisav's Tears

Yaakov's potential to reach out to Eisav and turn him around sheds light on another curious statement of Chazal. The *Zohar* (*Shemos* 12b) says that the prolonged exile of the Jewish people

is because of the tears Eisav shed upon discovering that Yitzchak blessed Yaakov. “And Eisav said to his father, ‘Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!’ And Eisav raised his voice and wept” (*Bereishis* 27:38). The redemption will come, the *Zohar* says, when our tears (of repentance) will cancel the tears of Eisav.

Why should the Jewish people have lost the *Beis Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple, and gone through a lengthy, brutal exile due to Eisav’s tears? Eisav was evil, and did not deserve the blessing Yitzchak intended to give him. So why were Yaakov and his descendants punished for the poor choices Eisav made that caused him to be undeserving of the blessings?

The Torah’s answer is that it was not entirely Eisav’s fault. Ultimately, the Jewish people share the blame for Eisav’s conduct, because Yaakov should have reached out to his brother. Had he done so, he would have succeeded in bringing him back to Hashem.

We find the same point made in the Torah portion of *Vayishlach*, with regard to Yaakov’s preparations for meeting his feared brother Eisav: “But he got up that night and took his two wives, his two handmaids, and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Yabbok” (ibid 32:23).

Rashi comments: “And where was Dinah? [Yaakov] put her into a chest and closed it over her, so Eisav would not set his eyes upon her. Yaakov was punished for withholding his daughter Dinah from his brother, for [had Dinah married him] she might have returned him to virtuous conduct. So she fell into the hands of Shechem.”

Yitzchak’s vision of his two sons working in tandem – with Yaakov ruling the spiritual realm and Eisav ruling the physical realm – was indeed correct. And Yaakov is faulted for not doing what he could have to prompt Eisav’s *teshuvah*. Imagine the consequences for not doing all we can to reach out to our Jewish brothers and sisters who are innocent victims of assimilation and ignorance.



Your Spiritual Progeny

It’s interesting to note that both this week’s Torah portion and the Torah portion of Noach begin with the same phrase: “These are the generations of…” As discussed in the analysis of *Parashas Noach*, instead of continuing with the names of Noach’s children, the Torah describes his deeds. *Rashi*, citing a Midrash, explains that the Torah was teaching us that the good deeds of the righteous also are viewed as their progeny. A person’s progeny is not exclusively limited to offspring but encompasses one’s own spiritual growth and positive acts. Metaphorically

speaking, Noach gave birth to a progeny of refined traits and good deeds.

With this in mind, we can better understand why the Torah also views *toldos*, progeny, as being our positive deeds. Ultimately, they determine who we will become. Figuratively speaking, it is through our deeds that we give birth to ourselves. In Torah terms, it is clear that our deeds comprise a legacy, and our children, we hope, are an extension of it.

"And these are the offspring of Yitzchak, son of Avraham—Avraham begot Yitzchak."The double reference to Avraham being the father of Yitzchak is to emphasize his paternity. The Torah repeats this point because of the possible scoffers of that generation who might have doubted that Avraham was Yitzchak's father. Sarah and Avraham had been unable to conceive a child together. *Rashi*tells us that Yitzchak looked so much like Avraham that there could be no doubt that they indeed were father and son.

On a deeper level, "Avraham begot Yitzchak" alludes to how the name of Avram was changed to Avraham. Avram and Sarai, as they originally were named, were incapable of producing children. However, the changing of their names to Avraham and Sarah signified a changing of their destinies. The challenges and tests that they endured profoundly altered their natural inclinations. In the case of Avram, each test that he passed elevated him spiritually. A new name was necessary to reflect a new person and to express a redefined destiny. Avram, therefore, morphed into Avraham. His new name represented the profound inner transformation that transpired. Because of his deeds, Avraham begot Yitzchak—his spiritual heir.

Even before there is any mention of Yitzchak's offspring, we are told of his righteous deeds. He prayed "abundantly" on behalf of his wife, Rivkah, beseeching God that she should be able to conceive a child. Even though he was aware of the promise that God had made to his father—that Avraham's destiny would be realized through the offspring of Yitzchak—Yitzchak beseeched God that the blessing be fulfilled through Rivkah.

Yitzchak, being the righteous child of a righteous father, might be assumed, naturally, to merit equally righteous children. Yet the very next verse indicates that such an assumption is false. Even in utero, the offspring of Yitzchak and Rivkah represented two struggling and conflicting ideologies. The current concept of "nurture versus nature" plainly can reference the Torah as a primary source and "playbook." The nurturing upbringing that both Eisav and Yaakov received from two righteous parents of sterling character nevertheless produced two children who were complete opposites in character.

This great disparity was not completely obvious until the age of thirteen, when it clearly became noticeable that their behaviors were in opposition to one another. Eisav exhibited a crude, aggressive nature—becoming a hunter and turning to idols—while Yaakov spent his days in study. Growing up in the same environment did not alter their inherent natures. Our character traits can be modified throughout our lifetimes, but only if we choose to exert the efforts. This becomes a central part of our human quest. Man

can change his nature if he strives to direct it, rather than allowing his nature to direct him.

It is important to note that the Torah doesn't claim that its great personalities were flawless individuals. The narrative doesn't gloss over their defects, but rather highlights the process of their spiritual development. In contemporary terms, "dysfunctional families" have always existed, as we can see from the family dynamics described in the Torah's narratives.

Since the Torah's teachings are always applicable, why is it so challenging to transmit the Torah's lessons from one generation to the next? Each individual must recognize how the Torah speaks directly to his or her unique circumstances. The Torah must be effectively explained in a way that is clearly relevant to the challenges of that generation. Such relevance is perennial, much like a well-tended and nurtured garden. Not every seed will mature to fruition, even when planted in fertile soil. Yet a foundation of fertile soil always is conducive for most seeds to grow and reach full bloom. Likewise, Torah values and core beliefs are best transmitted when authentically modeled and emulated. Since people mature at different rates, sometimes it can take a lifetime to internalize. Life's tests are designed to help bring out our unrevealed potentials. The Torah's lessons help us to be proactive rather than merely reactive when we are faced with a major challenge. Timeless values don't change—that's why they are timeless—yet we, as finite individuals, evolve and develop through the seasons of our lives. In simple terms, "life happens." The Torah's timeless lessons serve to influence a Jew's responses to living in an ever-changing world.

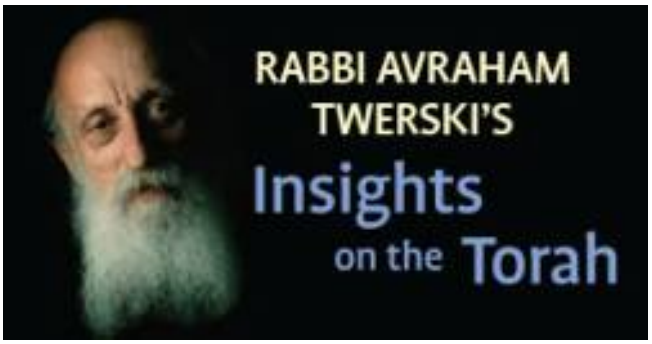
The parenting style within any given family is influenced by many variables. Children can experience vastly different parenting styles within the same family. There isn't a "one-size-fits-all" style of dealing with the diverse needs and traits of siblings growing up in the same household. The goal of parenting is not to produce clones that mindlessly mimic their parents' behaviors. While good parents strive to help develop their children's positive qualities, actualizing their latent potentials poses a far greater, more comprehensive challenge.

Ultimately, effective and successful parenting can be measured by how well our children have actualized the lessons we've taught them, thereby making their parents' Torah into their own. While we can control our best efforts, the outcomes are not entirely within our control. We are well

aware that not every child will turn out the way his or her parents would have desired. Therefore, the Torah has expanded our view of parenting to include parenting ourselves. We as individuals are solely responsible for exerting our best efforts to invest in, and to parent, ourselves. Sometimes, this requires us to act in place of the parents we wished we had but did not. Though not an easy undertaking, sometimes it becomes necessary to revise the upbringing we were given. If, due to one's own parents' inadequate parenting skills, some of us are deficient, then we are obliged to pioneer and develop our own skills. It is never too late for anyone to strive and labor to become who they have the potential to be.

Making It Relevant

1. Contemplate specific positive deeds that you would want to develop into your legacy. For what do you want to be remembered?
2. Isolate a defect in your character. Strive to make a strategic plan to improve it. Record your progress and setbacks. Resolve to keep working on yourself consistently.
3. Provide an update to your Torah education to supplement that which you did not receive growing up.



Different Blessings for Jacob and Esau

When Isaac blesses Jacob, the verse states: "And may God give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth" (Genesis, 27:28).

When he blesses Esau, the verse says, "Behold, of the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling and of the dew of the heavens from above" (Genesis, 27:39).

Although the blessings to Jacob and Esau appear similar, there are two striking differences between them. To Jacob, Isaac said, "May God give you," whereas in Esau's blessing he does not invoke the Name of God. Secondly, in Jacob's blessing, the blessing of "the dew of the heavens" precedes the blessing of "the fatness of the earth," whereas in Esau's blessing the order is reversed.

Although Isaac thought he was blessing Esau, the Divine Spirit motivated him to give Jacob the blessing appropriate for him. Jacob was to know that everything he possesses, even if it appears to be the result of his own efforts, is a gift from God. Moses warned the Israelites that when they inherit the Promised Land and become affluent, they should not think that it was their skill, prowess and work that produced their affluence, but that it was God Who gave them the ability to acquire wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). Jacob's descendants can have this faith, but to Esau's descendants it is an alien concept. Living by the sword, Esau's descendants gained their wealth by plunder and robbery.

The Divine Spirit also bestowed upon Jacob the awareness that the goal and purpose of life is spiritual, "the dew of the heavens." This is achieved via the fulfillment of the Divine will. Inasmuch as one cannot fulfill the mitzvot without the physical means to do so, earthly belongings, "the fatness of the earth," are a necessity, but they should be seen only as a means, not as an ultimate goal.

Esau, on the other hand, lives for earthly pleasures. "The fatness of the land" is primary, and any spirituality is but an afterthought.

The two nuances are related. We can live spiritual lives only if we are aware that all mundane

possessions are Divine gifts. If we lose sight of our utter dependence on God, we can degenerate into creatures that seek only physical pleasures, and we thereby lose the dignity of spirituality that elevates us above all other living things.



Jacob and Esau: The Divine Partnership That Never Was

Every family has its stories of rivalry and reconciliation, but none have generated as much theological discussion and debate as the tale of Jacob and Esau. In this foundational biblical narrative, we witness a sibling rivalry that starts in the womb, a father's unwavering faith in his wayward son, a mother's intervention, a traded birthright, and a stolen blessing. But beneath these familiar plot points lies a revelation that will transform our understanding of their story, forever.

The Biblical Account

The story begins even before birth, during Rebecca's difficult pregnancy: "And the children struggled within her" (Genesis 25:22). Rashi explains that when Rebecca passed by a house of Torah study, Jacob would push to emerge, while near houses of idol worship, Esau would fight to escape.[1]

When the twins are born, Esau emerges first, with Jacob holding onto his heel. As they grow, their paths diverge dramatically: Esau becomes a skilled hunter, a man of the field, winning their father Isaac's favor, while Jacob becomes "a wholesome man, dwelling in tents," dedicating himself to study and spiritual pursuits and winning the favor of their mother, Rebecca.

The narrative reaches its first turning point when Esau returns from hunting, famished and exhausted. Finding Jacob preparing a pot of lentil soup, Esau trades his birthright—his inheritance of spiritual leadership for eternity—for the immediate satisfaction of his hunger. This impulsive decision sets the stage for the story's climactic moment.

As Isaac nears the end of his life, he sends Esau on a mission to hunt for game in order to give him a blessing. While Esau is out hunting, Rebecca orchestrates an elaborate deception. She disguises Jacob as his hairy brother, complete with animal skins and Esau's clothes. Jacob approaches his blind father and, through this subterfuge, receives the blessing intended for his brother. When Esau returns and discovers the theft, his anguish and rage force Jacob to flee for his life.

The Puzzling Questions

This narrative raises several troubling questions that have challenged readers for generations:

1. How could Isaac and Rebecca, the pinnacle of spiritual greatness, give birth to a son as wicked as Esau?

2. When does destiny begin? During Rebecca's pregnancy, the twins struggled in ways that seemed to predict their future paths. Yet the Talmud[2] teaches that a person's tendency toward good or evil doesn't develop before birth—so what was really happening in Rebecca's womb?
3. Why did God allow Esau to emerge as the firstborn? All this conflict could've been avoided had Jacob come out first!
4. Why is Jacob, whose name means "heel," named after such a seemingly insignificant detail of grasping Esau's heel at birth?
5. What would compel Esau to trade something as valuable as his birthright for a mere bowl of soup?
6. How could Isaac, described throughout Genesis as a man of spiritual insight, maintain such unwavering faith in Esau despite his wayward behavior?
7. Most crucially, how do we reconcile Jacob's deception with his character as a "wholesome man"? Why was such subterfuge necessary to achieve God's purposes?

A Deeper Understanding

The Lubavitcher Rebbe[3] offers a single, revolutionary insight that unravels all these puzzling questions and transforms our understanding not just of this biblical narrative, but of our own life's mission. Let's go back to the womb. Remember how Esau tried to escape towards the houses of idolatry? Seemingly, he sought to worship idols, even as a fetus. But according to the Lubavitcher Rebbe's novel interpretation, Esau didn't want to bow down to idols. He wanted to destroy them!

Not only that, but destroying evil was Esau's entire life's mission! Esau's role was to pave the way for Jacob by eliminating physical and spiritual impediments, thereby allowing Jacob to fill the world with the wisdom and morality of God's Torah. That's why Jacob was literally born on the heels of Esau. Their partnership would be the ideal fulfillment of God's prophecy to Rebecca: "The elder will serve the younger." Jacob and Esau were never meant to be mortal enemies. They were meant to be the ultimate tag-team!

Unfortunately, Esau, in his mission to purify the world, became consumed by it. This descent into physical enmeshment reached rock bottom when he traded his birthright—his destiny of divine service—for the immediate physical pleasure of red soup. Esau's negligence compelled Jacob to take his birthright and blessing and assume the role that Esau was meant to fulfill.

This understanding illuminates Isaac's unwavering faith in Esau. As a man of profound spiritual insight, Isaac saw his son's tremendous potential and believed the blessing could provide Esau with the necessary motivation and divine assistance to fulfill his role of eradicating evil. But Rebecca saw through Esau's character, recognizing that his sinful ways had gone too far. She dressed Jacob up as Esau, representing the union of the two complementary forces within one man, and sent him to receive the blessing from Isaac.[4]

There's one more fascinating dimension to this story. The Midrash explains that, had Esau lived up to his potential, he would have been one of the forefathers of the Jewish People. And Leah was destined to be his wife.

Where Esau was bold and external, Leah was soft and internal – their union would create perfect harmony. No wonder Jacob was naturally more attracted to Rachel, who was vividly beautiful and worldly – the grounding force necessary to bring out Jacob's lofty spiritual potential. When Esau fell, Jacob had to step up in his place – no longer could he settle for his singular role of being the spiritual leader. Now Jacob would need to be both the political leader and the spiritual leader – a man of the field who dwells in tents. Jacob took both sisters as wives in order to give the Jewish nation the DNA necessary to fulfill their divine mission of perfecting the world.5

From Understanding to Action

The story of Jacob and Esau offers us a profound insight into the eternal struggle between physical and spiritual forces within each of us. Just as Esau was meant to serve Jacob, our physical drives are meant to serve our spiritual purpose. Where Esau failed, we must succeed.

Every day presents us with Esau's choice: Will our physical activities become ends in themselves, or will they serve a higher purpose? Judaism teaches that even our most mundane activities can become vehicles for divine service —but only if we approach them with the right intention.

Try this: Before your next meal, pause and ask yourself, "For what purpose am I eating this food?" Perhaps you're eating to maintain your health so you can serve God with vigor, or maybe you're enjoying Shabbat delicacies to enhance the joy of the day. By bringing conscious intention to these everyday moments, we can transform our physical experiences into spiritual opportunities.

Whether we're working to support our families, exercising to maintain our health, or enjoying life's pleasures, each activity carries the potential for spiritual elevation. The key lies in remembering, as Jacob and Esau's story teaches us, that our physical world was always meant to serve something higher.6

May we all be blessed to learn the lessons of Esau and Jacob and use the physicality in our lives to serve our higher spiritual aims!

Shabbat Shalom!

1. Regarding their prenatal struggle, Rashi explains that the unusual word וַיִּתְרֹצֲצוּ, whose root רצ means "to run," indicates they were "running in opposite directions" (the double letter צ suggesting two distinct movements).
2. (Niddah 16B)
3. Likutei Sichos 20 - Parshas Toldos
   This also explains why the blessing he intended for Esau focused on material abundance and political power—the tools necessary for Esau's mission. Let's take a deeper look at the contents of Esau's blessing:
   1. "And may the Lord give you of the dew of the heavens and [of] the fatness of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine."
   2. "Nations shall serve you and kingdoms shall bow down to you; you shall be a master over your brothers, and your mother's sons shall bow down to you."
   3. "Those who curse you shall be cursed, and those who bless you shall be blessed."

   What are the three parts of the blessing? 1: Wealth, 2: Power, 3: Let's call Fame. All of these are the necessary blessings for a king to be successful. What's obviously missing? How about the future generations of the Jewish people and the land of Israel –

the spiritual heritage of Avraham. Who gets that blessing? Later on in the parsha, after the dust settles, sure enough, in 28:3-4, Isaac gives exactly those blessings to Jacob.

4. Throughout Jewish history, this duality of spiritual and physical leadership has manifested repeatedly. Joseph, Jacob's son, became the first to properly fulfill Esau's potential as a world leader, rising to become viceroy of Egypt and using his political power to save countless lives during a devastating famine. At that time, Yehuda assumed the role of the complimentary spiritual leader, establishing houses of Torah study for the Jews when they descended to Egypt. *(Also interesting to note: Jacob waits until the birth of Joseph to ask for Lavan's permission to go back to his homeland. Why? He knew he'd need to confront Esau when he returned. When Joseph was born, he saw (prophetically) that Joseph was destined to be a great political leader. This prophecy gave Jacob complete confidence that the blessing had indeed transferred entirely from Esau's lineage to his own lineage. He was then ready to confront Esau)*Later generations saw this partnership exemplified in pairs such as, Moses, the leader, and Aaron, the priest, as well as David, the king, and Samuel, the prophet. Today, we see this dynamic on a national level in the relationship between philanthropists who engage with the material world in order to support Torah scholars who devote themselves to downloading and disseminating divine wisdom.
5. It's hard to give credit for the content of this essay to one source. I originally heard this idea from one of my Rabbis as I was first becoming reacquainted with Judaism. Then Rabbi Gershenfeld taught it to us during my first year at Machon Yaakov. However, in my research for the essay, I found an excellent video of Rabbi Moishe New summarizing the Lubavitcher Rebbe's idea in a wonderfully clear and digestible presentation. Here's the link if you'd like to see it for yourself

