

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Toledot

The narratives of Ya'akov and Esav (Jacob and Esau) are engaging and provocative. In the Torah's characteristic economical style, we learn about destiny and subterfuge, sibling rivalry and honoring parents. Destiny is central – which of the twins will become the heir of his father and grandfather? The surrounding moral questions have inspired great debates.

Serious questions about the central characters arise. Initially, Ya'akov exploits Esav's hunger to exact the birthright – is this proper? Esav is willing to trade his birthright for some food – what does it say about him? Years later, as Yitzchak is near death, Rivkah encourages Ya'akov to trick her husband and his father and obtain the *berachah* (blessing) -- is this deceit legitimate, especially as it promotes a child deceiving his father? Yet since Rivkah had heard God's instruction that the younger would supplant the elder, does this justify her deception? These are great narratives to read, study, and discuss in depth.

Rashi, our great commentator, passes down earlier rabbinic commentary that describes Esav as a "*rasha*" -- "evil" or "wicked." When, during the turmoil of her pregnancy, God says to Rivkah, "Two nations from you shall separate," Rashi comments: "one to his *rish'o* (wickedness) the other to his *tum'o* (innocence)." On the birth itself, "Here were twins," Rashi teaches, "one was righteous and the other was a *rasha*." When Esav is born and vividly described as "red," Rashi adds that red was a symbol that "he shed blood." Finally, on the verse, "And the boys grew up," Rashi comments "At 13, whereas Ya'akov went to study, Esav went to idolatry." The Rabbinic portrait is of an evil, blood-shedding, idolator.

Indeed, the Torah's purpose in contrasting Ya'akov and Esav is to highlight their differences in terms of their worthiness and legitimacy to carry on Avraham's covenant with God and pass on that way of life to their descendents. Ya'akov, the Torah teaches, is by contrast the more deserving. But the rabbinic reading, however useful, seems especially hard and excessive.

In his **Hilchot Teshuvah** 4:5d, RaMBaM alerts us to the sin of enhancing ourselves at the expense of others. In **Hilchot De'ot** 6:3, he adds that such a person does not have a share

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in the World-to-Come. Must we, to explain Ya'akov's worthiness, trash Esav? Does the evidence in the Torah support the conclusion that he was a *rasha*?

As I read Torah, Esav does not appear to have done anything worthy of the title "*rasha*," and he is a devoted son. His worst act comes later – expressing the intent to kill Ya'akov, after Ya'akov has "stolen" his *berachah*. Despite Esav's outrage, two decades later (as we will read in two *parashiyot* from now) he greets Ya'akov amicably and even invites him to travel with him. Esav may be weak, materially oriented, impulsive, and too average to merit the great *berachah*, but he does not appear to me as evil. We need to consider RaMBaM's moral instruction not to enhance ourselves at the expense of others.

Furthermore, if we are to be just and retain moral clarity, distinguishing weak and sick from evil is a necessary human burden. The weak need strength, teaching, and guidance; the sick need healing; the wicked need to be punished. Wisdom is discerning the difference; blind ideology – whether unfairly labeling someone as wicked when he or she is sick or weak, or when denying evil and misapplying the word "sick" – serves us badly. The Ya'akov-Esav narratives serve as a Rorschach test. If through the faithful and loving yet constructively open study of Torah and our rabbinic commentaries we become wiser and more just, then once again Torah is restored to its rightful place of honor, God and the Jewish people are sanctified, and the world will be more just.

Shabbat Shalom!

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