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בס"ד

On Esav's Character

At certain points in their history, when subjugated and persecuted, the Jewish people had a great need for a folkloristic villain who is ultimately bested, someone whom the masses could identify with their contemporary oppressor. In the downfall of the villain the suffering find solace and gain renewed hope for the future. To serve this purpose, the sages composed many midrashim that have thoroughly vilified Esau, presenting him as a morally debased and evil hater of Jacob and all that Israel stands for.

All who approach Bible study through traditional Jewish sources other than the Bible itself, including many of the popular commentaries composed through the centuries, must be careful to recognize that the Esau of the Bible was nothing like he is portrayed in these sources. There is no indication in the biblical text that he possessed an irreversible hatred for Jacob and surely none that can be relevant to present-day "cultural descendants" of Esau. In addition, the local agenda the sages had many centuries ago, while suitable for them in their circumstances, should not be viewed as applicable to the changed conditions of other times and places.

We were reminded of this by a Judaic Seminar posting (v.6#15) that defended Esau from the denigration of these sources and pointed out some commendable qualities he displays in the Genesis narratives. The posting claims that "Esau's behavior can be seen as a model of self-control and forgiveness," and that he possessed "extreme respect for his father." The present study, while recognizing the need to "redeem" the biblical Esau from calumny and present a more accurate picture, questions whether the JS statements do not overstate the matter in the opposite direction.

The Torah's introductory portrait of Esau (Gen. 25:27-34) is unflattering. Being a hunter he would

deal on a regular basis with traps, bow and arrow, and sword, constantly killing animals and of course often maiming and mutilating, causing great pain to sentient beings. His was a dangerous occupation, from the least consistent with the Bible's emphasis on the value of life. (When Isaac finally granted him a blessing it included the statement, "By your sword shall you live" [27:40].) Esau's speech and actions reveal him to be uncouth and superficial – he crudely requests to gulp down the stew (הִלְעֵיטָנִי נָא), and refers to the lentils by color ("from this red, red stuff").

Esau lives in the "here and now," rationalizing his desire to partake of the stew by exaggerating his plight: "Here I am going to die, for what purpose do I need the birthright?" He is willing to exchange his firstborn rights for the immediate satisfaction of his appetite, without the slightest protest or misgiving. He exhibits no interest in the possible future benefit such rights may confer upon him and shows no concern for his children's future welfare. He lacks any appreciation for what the birthright represents – a leadership role in maintaining and promoting the family heritage, which in this case includes the responsibility to live with and transmit a commitment to G-d's law as established in His covenant with Abraham. We should not read any Torah episode independently of the larger context in which it is embedded, even when not explicitly referred to in the text. Esau was not in harmony with the great legacy of Abraham. He parted with the birthright lightly, confirmed the transaction with an oath and expressed no regret for having done so. Subsequent to the sale he is described as despising it. In addition to the issue of family heritage this act demonstrates a lack of respect for his father.*

Esau had allowed a situation to persist that caused extreme anguish to his father and mother; his first two wives, local women from *benot Het* "were a source of

bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35). This statement – the only comment made about these women besides their ethnicity in the objective, narrative mode and which describes an ongoing condition – is too strong and unequivocal an assertion to be brushed off by assuming Esau did not realize it at the time. The reader is expected to bring to the text his comprehension of such a universal reality, that caring sons are aware of such situations. If in a particular case the standard understanding is inapplicable the text would indicate as much, but there is not any such hint here.

It is extremely significant that the information of Esau’s wives causing bitterness to his parents was placed immediately before the account of Isaac’s decision to grant him the blessings. True, the information was needed for the latter part of this narrative when Rebekah uses the fact of the torment these women caused her as a pretext to request Isaac send Jacob to Laban. But surely coming just before the blessings it places the blessings episode, and Isaac’s perception of Esau’s worthiness of them, in a clearer light.

No matter how much Isaac might have been deceived by Esau (if at all), while suffering from Esau’s unfit wives it is difficult to imagine that he would have directed the full complement of blessings – including *Birkat Abraham*, progeny and land – through children of such women. The importance attached to having a suitable wife for rearing the appropriate lineage was a principle already established in the incipient nation, particularly focused on Isaac himself. G-d made a major issue of Abraham having a son from Sarah through whom the covenant was to continue despite the fact that Ishmael had already been born. And He instructed Abraham to send away Hagar and Ishmael at least partly to create a better environment for Isaac. When it came to finding an appropriate wife for Isaac, Abraham adjured his servant that under no circumstance was he to select a local woman. Again, we see Esau was not in harmony with the new system.

A close reading of the blessings formulations indicates that to a great extent Isaac was aware of the larger picture and was not intending to grant the primary blessings to Esau, as we point out in our *Parashat Toldot Part I* study.

Esau’s reaction upon discovering that Jacob had “stolen” his blessing was a sincere cry, which exhibits a degree of caring to stay connected. It stirs our sympathies on his behalf. However, his response to his victimization is not a sign of self-control or true respect for his father. He resolved: “Let the mourning days for my father draw near and I will kill Jacob my brother” (27:41). Although we appreciate the depth of anger and bitter feelings that one who was deceived by his brother may have and empathize with him, homicide is never an appropriate response.

That Esau would await his father’s death before murdering his brother may perhaps reveal a degree of superficial filial respect but it also is eminently explainable on other grounds. One who murders his brother while his father is alive is often, at the least, disinherited and banned from family and estate. And with the bereaved father around there is a greater possibility of judicial retribution than when he is no longer alive.

Esau’s declaration indicates his intention that immediately upon his father’s death he would kill his brother, perhaps even during the days of mourning. This would dishonor his father’s bier as well as his obvious wishes. Rebekah’s statement to Jacob upon informing him of Esau’s intention, “Why should I lose you both on the same day?” (27:45), although possibly referring to her two sons (the killer would also be considered “lost” to her), more probably means that she takes Esau at his word, that he plans to kill Jacob on the very day that Isaac expires. This reveals a lack of discipline and self-sacrifice for his father’s honor.

Esau’s murderous intention is articulated in a poetic doublet, employing several literary techniques: allusion (יְקַרְבוּ מִי אֶבְלָא אָבִי); superfluity (נֶעְזָב אָחִי); rhyme (אָבִי-אָחִי); consonance (אָבִי אֶבְלָא) and line equivalence. Although at first he expressed his intentions “in his heart,” Rebekah soon heard of them. Perhaps the poetic formulation indicates that the thought expressed was not a passing fancy but a long-held position, often repeated in Esau’s circle of friends until it became almost epigrammatic.

Eventually, Esau took a wife from Ishmael’s family that he thought would be pleasing to his father,

manifesting a degree of respect for him (28:9). However, that was only upon noting that his father sent Jacob to Paddan-aram, linked with his blessing him, and commanding him not to take a wife from Canaan (28:6). The latter verse is formulated in a most unusual but informative manner: Esau “saw that Isaac blessed Jacob, sent him to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, as he blessed him, charging him saying, ‘do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.’” This clearly indicates that Esau had just come to the realization that the blessing was inextricably linked with an appropriate wife and that he now also realized why his father further blessed Jacob with the second blessing that focused on progeny. Only with the right wife – or at least without the wrong wife – could the full measure of blessing take effect.

Two verses after the first “And Esau saw” statement there is another such “realization” statement that informs us “And Esau saw” that the daughters of Canaan were utterly displeasing to his father so he added a wife from Ishmael to his wives. Of course this does not mean that until then he was unaware that his wives were causing his parents ongoing aggravation; rather it means that he now more fully internalized the point. So although the blessings were already given, there only was benefit to be gained by his having a more suitable wife, for he does not know what the future holds. It is at this point that the pericope of the blessings episode ends and Jacob departs for Haran.

Although Esau did come to some degree of understanding concerning his father’s position regarding the blessings, the basic facts remain: regardless of any misgivings Isaac had concerning Esau’s wives, it was his intention to grant him a choice blessing that Jacob purloined. There is no hint of any change of heart in Esau’s plans to kill Jacob.

That Rebekah never sent for her beloved Jacob during the many years that he was with Laban as she had expected to do (27:45) indicates that she continually thought Esau remained hostile and might kill Jacob. And we must assume she was alive all the years that Jacob was with Laban, for since she had told Jacob she would send for him when Esau’s anger had subsided, her death would have been a relevant matter for the Torah to report. Although the Torah does not report the detail of her death (as is the case with almost all women) we must assume it was after Jacob

left Laban. We have no grounds to assume that Esau had a forgiving attitude toward Jacob or that he had relented from his murderous plans, but that his mother misunderstood him.

When Jacob was returning home after an absence of more than twenty years, Esau traveled a significant distance to meet him with four hundred men (32:6). Although not explicitly stated, such an entourage (a full-fledged militia in those times) traveling so far cannot be thought of as a friendly gesture. The messengers Jacob sent to Esau also apparently received the impression that he had hostile intentions.

Obviously, Esau intended to confront Jacob but preferred to do so away from his parents. Although in the many intervening years Esau had become a successful chieftain with rank and riches, commanding many men, and despite the fact that he never cared much about the family spiritual heritage, he could not as yet find it within himself to forgive his deceitful brother. He was eager to settle the account and could no longer await his father’s death. In the prominent position he was then in, he no longer feared repercussions from his father. As soon as he heard that Jacob had entered the land he went into action.

To requite by violent means decades-old maltreatment committed even by one’s unrepentant brother is inconsistent with the intentions of one who possesses “self-control and forgiveness” as well as “respect for his father,” especially while his father is still alive. Choosing to kill his brother away from his father is too minimal a gesture to be considered genuine respect.

It is not a contraindication to our reading of Esau’s intentions that he did not harm the messengers; they may never have even spoken with him but had garnered their information from members of his entourage. It was Jacob he was interested in. Perhaps out of respect for Esau’s impending reconciliation with Jacob the Torah leaves his intentions textually ambiguous.

Jacob’s series of immense gifts, which were transmitted with humility and respect, incorporated amicable numbers, and were sent individually for maximum impact, surely had a great effect on Esau. That Jacob followed this with a self-effacing

demonstration of referring to himself as secondary vis-à-vis his elder brother and expressed his determination to cede the material and honorific components of the blessings to their rightful owner, could not but have made a deep impression. All this accompanied by a palpably changed attitude toward Esau accomplished wonders. An enemy – who was at this point arguably at his worst, not concerned even for his parents’ feelings – was transformed into a friend (Gen. 32-33).

Esau was magnanimous and gracious to Jacob, apparently sincerely rejecting the gift until Jacob insisted on his accepting it. He offered to accompany Jacob’s entourage or at least assign several men to do so in order to provide security, all apparently in full earnestness, trying to establish some relationship, but Jacob refused (perhaps fearing a change of heart). Jacob indicated that he would visit Esau in Se’ir but there is no record that such ever came about.

Critical to the reconciliation is that Jacob himself had recently been truly transformed with regards to Esau and to his understanding of the inappropriate and regrettable manner in which he had treated him. His new disposition came across. The account of Jacob’s contending with the mysterious “man” – very likely the cosmic representation of Esau – provides the key. In symbolic form this episode refers to Jacob’s prodigious internal struggle to face up to and overcome his character flaws, manifest in his deceptive tactics in obtaining the blessings, so that he might now be worthy of being the spiritual heir of Abraham and Isaac. That the combatant struck Jacob in the thigh, affecting his gait, may indicate a subduing of his materialistic dimension, a necessary condition of the new status that was insisted upon by the representative of Esau’s rights. The name change to Israel confirms his newly achieved worthiness.

The Torah here presents the transformation of Jacob in what may be termed a mystical happening, the essence of which finds its way, somehow, of getting across to the relevant party. The change in Jacob is in the reality of things which therefore reaches Esau, and he changes also. It is reasonable to assume that had Jacob not changed Esau would also not have changed.

When Isaac passes away (35:29), Esau and Jacob – in that order – buried him, indicating that the reconciliation held. When the region could not contain both brothers because of their affluence, Esau moved all his possessions to Seir (36:6-7) – a move apparently partly begun earlier (32:3) – with no strife or contention recorded. Jacob’s patrimony is officially recognized. The two brothers were not destined to be one nation (a matter Isaac had mightily tried to deny), but they could and should be brotherly, as G-d refers to them when citing Esau’s patrimony (Deut. 2:4) and as the Torah’s legal code recognizes (23:8).

Endnote

* That Esau was a spiritual hindrance to Isaac is indicated in number symbolism. When Esau married – indicating his separating from his parents, in accordance with the statement made at the creation of woman, “therefore shall a man leave father and mother and cleave to his wife and become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) – he was forty years of age (26:34), making Isaac one hundred years of age at that time. Subsequently, Isaac lives eighty years (35:28), indicating his achieving the full measure of covenantal status after Esau separated from him (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*).

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