

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Toldot Part II The Jacob-Esau Interaction Concerning the Birthright

### 1. Background Details

Torah narrative contains few explicit biographical sketches of character. The reader is expected to acquire insight into biblical personages by being attentive to their actions and speech, to the implications of the few descriptive details provided, to nuances in the narrative and through various other literary devices. This method accords well with the Torah's appreciation for the subtleties of personality, the fluctuation of purpose and motivation, and with the recurrent quirks of free will. Standard adjectives and static textual description cannot do justice to the complex mix and interaction of the deep and elusive elemental components driving human behavior. In the case of Jacob and Esau, however, the Torah provides several types of descriptive particulars that serve a clear, basic purpose.

Immediately upon the statement that Rebekah was pregnant we are told, "the sons were crushing each other inside of her" (Gen. 25:22); a fundamental rivalry and incompatibility between the twin brothers was present from the very start. These details are confirmed shortly afterwards by the oracle Rebekah received. When the time arrived for her to give birth, "Behold, there were twins in her," a statement that seems to indicate it was a surprise. Since Rebekah knew, the apparent surprise refers to Isaac. Why didn't he know? Perhaps Rebekah felt that he would not be receptive to hearing the message the oracle contained.

The firstborn emerged *admoni* ("ruddy") and "completely like a hairy mantle," and they called him *Esau*. The plural יִקְרְאוּ ("they called") implies a consensus. Apparently, his appearance was one of being "complete" so he was called "Esau" from the root עָשָׂה, meaning "done." Subsequently, the text links what eventually became the name of the nation

derived from him, *Edom*, to his prominent use of that word in the lentil stew episode (v. 30), but it also is consistent with his *admoni* complexion at birth. His hairiness at birth (*se'ar*) surely appears associated with the name of his land *Se'ir*. The impression given is that to a great extent he was at birth what he will be, his nature is his destiny.

His twin, who at birth was seen as attempting to impede his brother's exit from the womb by grasping his heel, obviously intending to himself be the firstborn, was called Jacob, apparently by his father, as "called" is in the masculine singular. It seems that the name Jacob (יַעֲקֹב-*ya'aqob*) was chosen since it includes within it the elements of the word for heel, יַעֲקֹב-*aqeb*. (The Torah's etymologies for names do not follow standard grammatical rules; similarity of sound is critical. Names often contain a double entendre.)

*Ya'aqob* is a name with a number of connotations. Besides its root meaning of "heel," it is associated with the notion of "thwarting" or "supplanting," denoting strife and struggle, as well as "crooked." In addition, evidence from ancient Near Eastern documents has demonstrated that the יַעֲקֹב stem also had other meanings. It connoted "following" (walking in the "heels" or footsteps of) and, in an expansion, to "protect." When employed for an individual's name it would usually have a god's name attached (such as *ya'aqob-el*), calling upon that god to protect that person or perhaps declaring that person under the protection of that god. Although not attested in Tanakh with the latter meaning, we cannot rule out the possibility that a double entendre or an allusion is here intended. Seeing his son in the circumstances of his birth, Isaac may have invoked a prayer for divine protection. That a name had pagan associations does not preclude it from being "sanitized" and used in a monotheistic context, as we find in other cases. Even the Torah's common word

for G-d is a monotheistic application of the pagan term *elohim*, which signified “gods” in the ancient Near East.

Uncharacteristically, the Torah furnishes descriptions concerning the natural dispositions and personalities of the two brothers, which we will soon discuss. As though to demonstrate the difficulty of typecasting human behavior, however, it immediately follows with an anecdote directly contradicting the indications, confirming that human behavior (particularly with regard to Jacob) may be very different from one’s natural propensity. The Jacob-Esau interaction in the selling of the birthright – which to be appropriately understood must be placed in its familial context of the Abraham-Isaac covenant with G-d – comments on the human condition and reveals complex elements regarding the formative stages of the nation of Israel.

In an omniscient, narrative tone, the Torah states (Gen. 25:27): Esau was a man who knew hunting, a man of the field; Jacob was a simple man, one who dwelled in tents.

As a professional hunter, we presume Esau to be familiar with cunning and deception, one who regularly uses lethal weapons and engages in killing, albeit animals. He would be ever alert to defend himself from pitfalls and dangers. We think of such an individual as particularly dangerous under certain circumstances, one not to be taken for granted, let alone provoke.

In contrast, it would seem, Jacob is far removed from these traits. The word translated as “simple,” *tam*, which in our context indicates a non-devious, placid and peaceful person, also connotes a righteous man, one with integrity. Apparently he was a shepherd, who customarily would “sit in tents,” moving around with his flock. We assume such an individual would not easily be driven to assert his rights in a confrontational situation and surely would not initiate a course of action that might lead to a state of enmity with a man like Esau.

## 2. Parental Differences

Isaac loved Esau, “for game was in his mouth” (v. 28). Commentators have suggested various

interpretations for this statement: Esau provided food for the family; he was personally self-sufficient; Isaac had a taste for game. Regardless of the explanation, we should assume that Esau possessed basic positive qualities that his father appreciated; in the fuller context, the “game was in his mouth” factor tilted his father’s love toward him. We would seriously misread the passage if we interpret it in isolation of the larger context of the family heritage in which it is embedded. Although the purposes for which G-d selected Abraham are not often mentioned in the text, neither here nor subsequently in Genesis, surely they loom large in the inner lives of the patriarchs. They live in the human sphere with all its attendant demands and they must surmount all sorts of pressures, but surely they maintain their focus on the covenantal considerations.

Rebekah loved Jacob. In contrast to the case of Isaac’s love for Esau, no reason is provided for her love. This seems to indicate a truer motivation, a love of Jacob for himself, as defined in the Mishnah (*Abot* 5:16) “a love not dependent on something,” that is, not contingent on something material. Isaac’s love for Esau was dependent on something material and may last only as long as the item upon which it is based endures. Perhaps the oracle that informed Rebekah that the younger son was destined to become ascendant and thus be the child who will carry on the family heritage had influenced her; perhaps she simply responded to her recognition, as the mother, that Jacob was the more committed to the family values. We know Rebekah was committed to those values from her extraordinary behavior at the well, matching Abraham’s sensitivity to strangers.

Does Isaac also love Jacob? Does he know that Jacob is more committed to the family mission? The answers to these questions appear to be yes. As we explained in our previous study, when Isaac dispensed the blessings, it appears that he had Jacob in mind for the primary continuation of the covenant with G-d and that Esau was to be in some sort of brotherly relationship with him.

Some assume that the explanation “for game was in his mouth” means that Isaac had a basis to “also” love Esau, not that he did not love Jacob. However, besides this being a strained interpretation, we cannot follow through by saying that Rebekah had no basis

to love Esau and only loved Jacob. Nothing in the text indicates that she had such a negative relationship with Esau.

A possible translation takes “loved” in this context, as in some others, as signifying “preferred.”

In any event, the introductory descriptions and the differences in parental outlook regarding the twins signal that the promises of progeny, nationhood and blessing that G-d had made to Abraham do not constitute an absolute guarantee. The potential exists for immense errors to be made by great people as human free will remains operative within their lives.

### 3. The Birthright Sale Episode

Jacob cooked a stew while Esau returned from the field *חַיֵּץ* (“weary” or “faint”). As we shall soon see, it is important to note that the latter is stated in the objective, narrative mode (Gen. 25:29) as well as in Esau’s opening statement to Jacob, “Please allow me to gulp down some of this red, red (stuff) for I am ‘*ayef*’” (v. 30). Jacob promptly responds with a condition – Esau must sell him that day his firstborn rights. In the ancient Near East, an heir had the right to sell such rights.

Jacob’s act seems to have been something he had been thinking about, awaiting the opportunity. Indeed, the words *וַיִּזְדַּק יַעֲקֹב נֶזֶד* (“Jacob cooked stew” [25:29]), hint at aforethought. The verb *vayazed* (“to cook”), here clearly a play on the noun *nazid* (“stew”), in one verbal form or another (of *זָדָה*) is often employed in Scripture, but never with the meaning of cooking food except here. Rather, it always refers to concocting a malicious plan or intentionally violating a stricture, derived from the word *זָדוֹן* (“intentional evil”), for example, *וְכִי יִזְדֶּ אִישׁ עַל רֵעֵהוּ לְהַרְגוֹ בְּעֵרְמָה* (“And when a man schemes against his fellow-man to kill him by cunning” Exod. 21:14). Jacob was anticipating the possibility of Esau coming in from the field vulnerable.\*

In addition, the opening clause of this story – “Jacob cooked stew” – is somewhat abrupt and lacks a narrative introduction (such as “On a day that...” or “Once when...”). This gives the impression that it may have been Jacob’s practice to cook stew (see *Or Hahayim*’s comments).

The reader’s sympathies are certainly with Esau. An individual who denies his hungry brother a meal – especially a readily available one – unless he agrees to cede some right for it, thus exploiting his brother’s vulnerability, violates standards of elementary human decency. What would his parents say? What does G-d say? What would Jacob do if Esau were to refuse? How could he take such a risk? But Esau agrees. Pressing his advantage, Jacob insists on an oath and Esau promptly complies.

While one’s sympathies may be with Esau, this episode also reveals several unappealing traits he possessed. To speak of food as “this red, red (stuff),” calling the lentils by their color, speaking of things by external characteristics, is indicative of a superficial person. The verb *הִלְעִיטָנִי* (allow me to gulp down) – a word not found again in the Bible but attested in the Mishnah for the feeding of animals – is seemingly a crudity. Although exhausted, it does not take any greater effort to speak in a more cultivated manner if such is the person’s wont. Most important, upon Jacob’s request that he sell him his firstborn rights, Esau comments, “Behold I am going to die, so of what use to me is the firstborn right.”

If the phrase “I am going to die” refers to imminent death, on the spot, as both the old and new JPS translations would have it, it appears Esau is engaging in gross overstatement in expressing himself to others or, more likely, to rationalize a point to himself. The Torah informed us earlier, in its narrative mode, that Esau was *חַיֵּץ*, “faint” or “weary,” which may very well include hunger and thirst (cf. Judg. 8:5; Ps. 143:6). But it does not connote one on the verge of death. Some exaggeration is acceptable, but here Esau uses it to justify selling his firstborn rights. Obviously, he does not much care for those rights.

Even if “going to die” refers to Esau’s precarious occupation, meaning that he does not expect to live long enough to enjoy firstborn rights, he is still expressing disdain for what those rights represent. He lacks the discipline of self-sacrifice for a significant future benefit that those rights may provide for his children. He is focused on his present personal gratification, unconcerned for family loyalty, lacking respect for tradition and inconsiderate of the welfare of his progeny.

In the passage's final verse Esau's actions are described as follows: "He ate and he drank and he rose and he went off," a cluster of back-to-back verbs indicating that he had no second thoughts but moved continuously forward, business as usual. This is followed by "and Esau despised the *bekhora*." It appears clear that he did not despise the birthright until pressed to sell, previously only expressing doubt as to its utility; his final statement was apparently a manifestation of cognitive dissonance, rationalizing a choice that he made. Nevertheless, the implications regarding his lackadaisical attitude (at best) to family and progeny are now intensified.

Firstborn rights, in addition to providing the privilege of an extra portion of inheritance, carry with them responsibility to ensure the continuation and enhancement of the family's values. In general, the firstborn was devoted to the family deity. In this case, Esau would be expected to promote the relationship G-d had recently established between Himself and Abraham and his descendants, with its new way of thinking and living, promoting righteousness and justice in the land (see Gen. 18:19). Although Esau was not a "bad" person by usual standards, he surely is not very interested in the Abrahamic tradition. (See our study *Regarding Esau's Character*.)

On the other hand, Jacob is very interested and committed to the newly established heritage. His machinations to acquire the birthright are undoubtedly motivated by his personal knowledge that Esau is not truly committed to the special covenant with G-d, and that he himself, although second-born, is a more appropriate heir to the family legacy. Esau's explicit statements to him confirmed the correctness of his view.

The fact that his father favors Esau must also have played an important role in motivating Jacob to carry out his opportunistic ploy; he feels that he cannot rely on the patriarch to properly address the situation. He fears that so much will be lost if Esau assumes the

recognized leadership of the nation-in-formation, while he himself would be forced into a position of subservience. Considerations such as these must have prompted him to act contrary to his natural disposition of being a simple man and to assume great risk to start up with his hunter brother through unbrotherly behavior.

Jacob's act of exploiting Esau to attain the birthright – the *bekhora* – foreshadows his elaborate deception later in life when, at the urging of his mother, he succeeds in purloining the blessing – the *berakha* – that his father prepared for Esau. However, the Torah teaches that people must be honest and fair in dealing with their fellowman and a person must have respect for his father. The ends do not justify the means and rationalizations must be overcome. As we shall see, Jacob's acquisitions of both *bekhora* and *berakha* do not stand because they were not divinely sanctioned. Jacob cannot succeed in his life's mission without a major correction.

N. Sarna points out that it is significant that the Torah mentions Esau's sale of the birthright but not Jacob's purchase of it. This is contrary to the usual biblical style that highlights the purchase, e.g., Abraham of a parcel of land near Shechem (33:19), and David of a field from Araunah (2 Sam. 24:24). Omitting such mention here "is another way of dissociating Jacob's eventual ascendancy from the means he adopted" (JPS Commentary on Genesis, p. 182).

In coming studies we will examine the divine judgment on Jacob's tactics as directly pointed to in the Torah's depictions of future events in his life.

### Endnote

\* See Shmuel Klitsner in *Wrestling Jacob*, p. 61, who has elaborated on this point.

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