

Esau and Jacob

The boys grew up. Esau became a man skilled in hunting, an outdoorsman, while Jacob became a quiet man who stayed in the tents. Isaac loved Esau because he provided food for his mouth, while Rebecca loved Jacob. Jacob was stewing up a stew when Esau came in from outdoors, exhausted. Esau said to Jacob, “Hey, let me gulp down some of that red, red stuff, ‘cause I’m starving!” (That’s why they call his name, Edom [which means “red”]). Jacob replied, “Sell me your birthright right away.” Esau said, “Look, I’m about to die! What’s this birthright to me, anyway?!” Jacob said, “Swear to me, right away.” So he swore to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew.

He ate.

He drank.

He got up.

And he left.

Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.¹

I have been thinking about these two brothers and their relationship. This particular part of the story has always bothered me. It’s not simply because I can imagine Benji and Micah having the same conversation, engaging in the same casual cruelty that

¹ Genesis 25:27-34, Parashat Toldot

happens between siblings. No, I want to better understand why these two men are acting the way they are, and why our tradition is so comfortable with a man like Jacob, as our forefather. Because if I'm really being honest here, if I saw this conversation happen between my sons, at first blush Jacob would be grounded for taking advantage of his brother.

My compassionate instincts come from a lot of places, but scarcity theory looms large as I pondered Esau's choices. When we are hungry, stressed or tired, or a combination of all three, we wind up with tunnel vision, unable to see any prospect of a future beyond what we're experiencing. Like Esau, I can relate, as my family knows when I am Hangry, I'm unable to have a conversation, I just need to eat something. In those moments, we are only able to see what is urgent, and not always what is important.² That mindset could be at play here in Esau's conversation with Jacob, as we consider the quick actions that end our segment: ate, drank, got up and left. It's possible Esau's mental bandwidth couldn't handle anything else.

But as with everything in Torah: it's more complicated. This is one pericope among many, and throughout our portion we will see Esau's impulsive behavior causing him heartache over and over again, even when he's not distracted by the world around him and consumed by the feeling of scarcity. If we follow Esau's story

² <https://harvardmagazine.com/2015/05/the-science-of-scarcity>

throughout the biblical narrative, you're left with the impression that his impulsivity, anger, and the belief that the solution to every problem is a physical response is characterological. As the story continues we see how Jacob, every step of the way, uses his mind to try to solve a problem, and Esau his might.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson argues that it is that final comparison between mind and might, that causes the Jewish people to coalesce around Jacob, and to disparage Esau. As he wrote: "For the Torah, every aspect of being human - heart, mind, and soul - needs constant training, direction and restraint. The story of Esau and Jacob is exactly the story of these two conflicting approaches to being human...Jacob...lives with one foot in the future. Less physically powerful than his burly brother, Jacob compensates by using his mind and by weighing consequences. He prefers to skip a meal if that means he will acquire the birthright of the covenant."³

This perspective, of focusing on our minds first and might second, has dramatically shaped Jewish history. With the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, and the failed revolution by Bar Kokhba in 132 CE, the Jewish people saw the impact of being like Esau, and focusing on violence to solve problems. For millennia, we have invested in being like Jacob, in education, and fact based decision making. Indeed we prize education above so many things,

³ (the bedside torah, page 42 Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson)

and that careful work has caused us to flourish when other societies have faltered. A favorite factoid celebrating this commitment to learning is around Nobel prizes: .2% of the world are Jews, and Jews are 20% of the Nobel Prize winners.

We have also been a people that constantly has one foot in the future: imagining a better world in the realm of the messianic age, something that we are constantly building towards, as we look at the world we live in and recognize its imperfections. In Rabbi Artson's reading, I see the appeal of Jacob, and the reason for generations of disparagement of Esau. Esau is a character who believes that might makes right, and like so many strongman leaders around the world, people like Esau will take what they want, and ignore the consequences. Facts and an appeal for truth are immaterial, he acts based on his gut, and not knowledge.

Pirkei avot asks the question: who is mighty? The person who subdues their primal urges. as it is said: "The person that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and the person that rules their spirit than the person that subdues a city" (Proverbs 16:3).⁴

Even in the face of scarcity, the stronger person is able to overcome that tunnel vision, and focus on what's really important, focus on a potential future that is better than the past. That lesson has never been more true than it is now: we are all striving for a

⁴ Pirkei Avot 4:1

post pandemic future, and we need to sacrifice so much today in order to achieve that future we all desire, we need to show our strength through restraint. Benji and Micah have bemoaned the fact that we haven't seen any of their grandparents in person for 8 months, and I have no doubt we won't see them for many months more. That the thanksgiving we were all dreaming of: a meal in person with our loved ones, is a hard choice to make according to the CDC and all scientific experts. In fact right before we began services, I got a news alert saying that 4 in 5 epidemiologists are staying home this thanksgiving, and those that are traveling are taking extraordinary precautions. Giving that big meal with family up to ensure more people will live, is a painfully prescient example of sacrifices so many of us are making in order to achieve a better future.

It is those factors: a willingness to focus on the mind and not might, and the focus on a better future for ourselves and our descendants that make Jacob, who is flawed in his own way, truly one of our patriarchs. May we all strive to live up to the best of Jacob, and to hold a better future in our hands, with the wisdom and strength to make the best possible choices in challenging situations.