

Parsha Toldot

When Bruce asked for dates that I could give a dvar torah, I looked for one that was after some big stuff at work and picked the date rather than the parsha. When I realized which parsha I chose, my heart sank. This parsha has always caused me much angst. I always had the sense that Esau was getting a bad rap and really wasn't such a bad guy. And at the same time, Jacob and Rebecca clearly engage in deception but they come off looking ok. Let's take a look.

If you look at just the text and not the midrash, Esau doesn't look too bad.

The description of Rebecca's pregnancy 25-22 says that "the children agitated within her." This seems like a typical explanation of pregnancy but Rashi explains that when Rebecca passed the Torah Academy Jacob figuratively sought to leave the womb and hurry to the academy and when she passed a temple of idol worship, Esau struggled to break out.

The Talmud teaches that while in the womb the unborn fetus is taught the entire Torah by an angel. Why would Jacob want to run out from that situation? The Chasam Sofer explains: the negative effect of studying in the company of Esau is so powerful that one must flee, even if it means losing the opportunity to study under the tutelage of an angel.

Jacob was unable to escape and go to the study hall because Esau was blocking his exit. So, why didn't Esau leave and go to the temples of idol worship? R'Yechezkel of Kuzmir answers that Esau is willing to forgo his own idol worship in order to insure that Jacob does not enter the academy.

Ok, all that from a description of twins agitating in the womb.

Next a description of Esau when he is born.

25. And the first one emerged ruddy; he was completely like a coat of hair, and they named him Esau.

ה וַיֵּצֵא הָרֵאשׁוֹן אֲדָמוֹנִי, כֵּלּוֹ כְּאֶדְרֵת שֵׁעָר; וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ, עֵשָׂו.

Rashi sees (admoni) as red not ruddy – a sign that he would always be shedding blood.

They named him Esau or complete. That doesn't sound so bad. Note that Esau was not the only child in Scripture born with a red/ruddy appearance. Another was David who became king of Israel.

27. And the youths grew up, and Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.

וַיִּגְדְּלוּ, הַנְּעָרִים, וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדַע צִיד, אִישׁ שֹׁדֵה; וַיַּעַק אִישׁ
בְּתָם,

וַיֵּשֶׁב אֶהְרָלִים

Rashi reads this as “a cunning hunter” –that he knew how to entrap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him “father how should salt and straw be tithed”? (although he knew that these were not subject to tithing).

28. And Isaac loved Esau because [his] game was in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

28 וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת-עֵשָׂו, כִּי-צִיד וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת-עֵשָׂו, כִּי-צִיד
eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved
Jacob. **בְּפִיו; וְרֵבֶקָה, אֶהְבֶּת אֶת-יַעֲקֹב.**

Rashi reads this as “there was hunting in his mouth.” Midrashic interpretation that Esau used his mouth to entrap and deceive Isaac with his words. But maybe Isaac just enjoyed good food.

Then we come to the selling of the birthright.

30 וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל-יַעֲקֹב, הֲלֹעֵיטֵנִי לֵב וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל-יַעֲקֹב, הֲלֹעֵיטֵנִי
swallow, I pray thee, some of this red, red
pottage; for I am faint.' Therefore was his
name called Edom.
נָא מִן-הָאֲדָם הָאֲדָם הַזֶּה--כִּי עֵינִי, אֲנֹכִי; עַל-כֵּן קָרָא-שְׁמוֹ, אֲדָוִם.

32 וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו, הֲיֵנָה אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לִמּוֹת; וְלָמָּה-זֶּה לִי, בְּכַרְהָ.
לֵב וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו, הֲיֵנָה אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לִמּוֹת; וְלָמָּה-זֶּה לִי, בְּכַרְהָ.

Rashi asks What does he mean by going to die? Jacob had explained to Esau the requirements and punishments for not meeting the requirements of the holder of the birthright. Esau said, “If I am going to die through it, why should I desire it?” The midrash puts it as “After exerting myself all my life in the Divine service, I will die just like all other people who did not sacrifice. Therefore, why should I trouble myself with his service?”

Avivah Zornberg (The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis, 1995) offers an existential interpretation of Esau selling the birthright. “Esau, who is “going” toward death, whose mortality obsesses him, is the true object of compassion. The midrash isolates the word, *holeck*-going-in Esau’s cry: his life is filled with the imminence of death, and all cultural forms and privileges lose substance under that shadow. For Esau, Abraham has been the test case for meaning in absurdity. If he too is subject to the finality of death, then Esau abandons all belief in an ultimately intelligible reality. In the narrative of the midrash, Esau seems to fall instant prey to existential ennui; but this is clearly the clinching moment of a long process. The question underlying the scene is the question of *anokhi*–“I am”: If the self-the sense of “I am”-is going to die, then of what use are all the myths of religion and civilization? Early in his career, Esau has abandoned an essential quest, surrendered an essential energy of being. He begs to “gulp down that red stuff, for I am tired”. Literally, the *anokhi*-the sense of “I am”-is weary.”

לד וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו, לֶחֶם וּנְזִיד
 עֲדָשִׁים, וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה, וַיִּקָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ;
 וַיִּבֶז עֵשָׂו, אֶת-הַבְּכֹרָה. {פ}

34 And Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. So Esau despised his birthright. {P}

Did he forfeit the spiritual in exchange for transitory physical gratification?

Ramban comments “After eating and drinking he returned to his hunt which was the cause of him despising the birthright. Thus acts the fool; he eats and drinks to fulfill his passing desire, not giving a care for the future.

Then we don’t hear much about Esau until:

לד וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו, בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה,
 וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה אֶת-יְהוּדִית, בַּת-בְּאֵרִי
 הַחִתִּי--וְאֶת-בְּשֵׁמַת, בַּת-אֵילֹן
 הַחִתִּי.

34 And when Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite.

לה וַתְּהִיֵּינּוּ, מִרַת רוּחַ, לְיִצְחָק,
 וּלְרִבְקָה. {ס}

35 And they were a bitterness of spirit unto Isaac and to Rebekah. {S}

Rashi translates מִרַת רוּחַ

As spiritual rebellion and not bitterness of spirit suggesting that they intentionally provoked Isaac and Rebecca.

When Esau marries two wives, both Hittite women, that is, locals, in violation of Abraham's (and God's) injunction not to take wives from among the Canaanite population. This action alone forever rules out Esau as the bearer of patriarchal continuity. Esau could have overcome the sale of his birthright; but acquiring foreign wives meant the detachment of his children from the Abrahamic line. Assuming that Esau was aware of the prohibition, it looks like a bad decision on his part.

I had mentioned two issues with this Parsha. One was Esau getting a bad rap and other was Jacob and Rebecca getting away with deception and looking ok. So, skipping ahead to the “deception”.

Usually think about Rivka and Jakob deceiving Isaac but ...

David Zucker (The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27 in the Jewish Bible Quarterly vol 39, No. 1, 2011) has a different read on the scene where Isaac gives the blessing to Jacob. He suggests that the deception was not Isaac who was deceived but rather Jacob. Isaac and Rebecca together planned the event. Both parents work in concert to mislead Jacob so that he thinks he is “stealing” the blessing. They are aware that in their society primogeniture is the norm. They have read the previous clues that indicate Jacob would be the designated heir. They don’t want to exile Esau but they need him to be gone for a while so they can carry out their plan. Isaac puts the ruse into play by sending Esau away on an errand, to hunt game in the wilderness. Even though they know they are correct in their decision, Isaac and Rebecca cannot bring themselves to tell Esau that he is not the right one to pass on the family traditions. They don’t want to deal with him directly so they resort to deception. There had to be an external excuse why Isaac gave the blessing away.

Jacob is a homebody. He hasn’t done much. His parents have confidence in him but he is untested. Is he really strong enough and resourceful enough to be the next in line to pass on the patriarchal tradition? An additional purpose of the ruse is to have Jacob think he is “stealing” the blessing, that he is capable of worldly behavior and its consequences.

He is a homeboy “a mild man who stayed in camp.” He is lacking a clear future direction for life. What will motivate this apparently mild, simple, retiring man to leave his parents’ home? The answer is that he will leave *only if he feels he has no choice: if to remain, would put his life in immediate danger*. So Rebecca and Jacob set up that situation. In light of their demonstrated affection, it is unlikely that Rivka would act in a disloyal manner to deceive her beloved husband.

When Rebecca reveals the plot to Jacob, he is skeptical and reluctant to participate. Does he have reservations about tricking his father or is he fearful of getting caught. Genesis 27:18-27 indicate that Isaac is a co-author of the ruse. Among the evidence is that six times Isaac challenges who is *really* in front of him, Isaac insists on feeling his son to see who he is, Isaac states, “the voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau” yet he continues, Isaac insists that his son kiss him. Isaac was putting Jacob through an ordeal.

Zucker continues, Had Jacob remained a sedentary man, living among the tents, he would never have become the third patriarch. Jacob had to grow within and as a leader. He needed an extra push; he had to go through a painful rite of passage in order to make his way in the world. Jacob’s growth necessitated a betrayal of faith, and the pain both of deception and exile. Isaac and Rebecca made difficult decisions, but their choices guarantee the continuation of the covenant.

There are other arguments that seem to support the idea that Isaac may not have been duped. Even if Isaac was blind, did he really not know Jacob’s voice? If he was aware that Jacob fooled him, wouldn’t he have been furious at Jacob and withdrawn the blessing?

Other than leading to obtaining the blessing, what else did Jacob gain from impersonating Esau? When Jacob answers “*anokhi eisav bekborekha*” בְּכֹרְךָ there are a number of interpretations. Or

ha-haim suggests that since Jacob has bought the birthright from Esau, he has acquired some essential virtue of Esau. "He has become Esau, in the birthright dimension."

Sefat Emet looks at impersonation as expressing the desire to expand the range of self. No longer simple, Jacob now carries explosive energies, symbolized by hair, by strong limbs. He has gained a sense of power. Pretending to have the hands of Esau foretells his experience of taking the stone from the well when he visits Laban.

Maybe Jacob acquired some of the good qualities of Esau when he impersonated him.

HaRav Kook wrote, Even negative character traits have their place in the world. Ultimately, they too will serve the greater good. In order to perfect righteous traits and straight paths, these bad traits and convoluted ways must be uplifted. This occurs when the righteous are able to utilize them for their true purpose. When Jacob announced to his father, "*I am Esau your first-born,*" he did not truly lie. Jacob had truly acquired his brother's traits. He had become Esau, only in a better fashion. Most certainly, his father had spoken to him in the past about the need to acquire these negative traits for the sake of serving God. Jacob could now proudly report to his father, "*I have done as you have requested,*"

Maybe instead of looking for who was good or evil, laying blame on one or the other—we can look at Esau and Jacob as complements to each other. Both have traits that they can benefit from the other. Each has their own merit.

As we get ready to go into the Kiddush to celebrate the twins in our midst, maybe they each have traits that complement the other and can build on those strengths to make each a better whole.