

Bringing meaning to life

Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BERESHIT

NOACH

LECH LECHA

VAYERA

CHAYEI SARA

TOLDOT

VAYETZEI

VAYISHLACH

VAYESHEV

MIKETZ

VAYIGASH

VAYECHI

VAYISHLACH

ISRAEL: BIRTH OF A NAME,
SEEDS OF A NATION

08

One of the only ways to achieve a level of immortality in this world is by bestowing one's legacy upon the next generation. As Isaac's days draw to an end, he realises the importance of entrusting the mantle of Jewish leadership, and he knows that this is destined for one of his sons. Esau, the firstborn, seems the likely contender, as opposed to Jacob, and therefore, 'when Isaac became old... he summoned Esau, his oldest son' to bless him before he died.¹

This decision seems the most logical. Firstly, the Torah itself explains that even if a younger son is preferred, the firstborn acquires a greater inheritance.² Secondly, a basic character comparison renders Esau a more fitting leader. Jacob and Esau are introduced within the same verse as two very different personas: 'Esau was a man familiar with hunting, a man of the field; and Jacob was a naive man that

sits in tents.'³ Rashi points out that Jacob is contrasted with Esau in order to highlight his lack of expertise in 'Esau's world'; portraying him as a studious scholar, but inexperienced in the 'outside world'.⁴ Without wives or children and with his parents' tender patronage, Jacob seems to live a very sheltered life, fourteen years of which he studied in the academy of Shem and Ever.⁵ Esau on the other hand is a man of means and tremendous strength, and he knows how to handle the complex, nuanced world in which he lives. It is specifically his ability to hunt and prepare delicacies that Isaac loves and stipulates as a condition in the giving of his blessing.⁶

Leadership requires action and an appreciation for reality that goes beyond naive academic knowledge alone.

This, coupled with Esau's firstborn rights, lead Esau to appear as the more appropriate candidate for leader.

One of the greatest and most iconic encounters in the Torah occurs when Jacob comes to Isaac, attempting to acquire the firstborn blessing. Expecting Esau, Isaac realises that it is not his firstborn and challenges the intruder. Unseasoned in the art of deceit, Jacob nonetheless does well in bringing the appropriate dish and dressing up (with his mother's help), and yet is unable to successfully mask his voice.

Isaac is suddenly aware of this palpable crossroads in Jacob's life, a juncture between his black-and-white, idealistic past where he lacked the ability to lie, and a more complex future, where he understands the more nuanced 'grey' realities of life.

Jacob seems to have learned some of Esau's ways and thus Isaac declares, "The voice is the voice of Jacob; and the hands are the hands of Esau." And he did not recognise [Jacob's naivety], because his hands were like Esau's hands...⁷

While Isaac is confused by Jacob's sudden appearance, he perceives a tremendous development in Jacob's leadership ability – maintaining his idealistic 'voice', but finally displaying his ability to act in a time of need with the 'the hands of Esau'. It seems Jacob has finally learned how to practically compartmentalise that which he learned as a secluded 'yeshiva student' in the 'perfect' theoretical world of truth, and apply it in the far-from-perfect complex world in which he lives. On this basis, Jacob becomes the bearer of Isaac's legacy as the final forefather of the Jewish nation.

In a relatively short amount of time, Jacob leaves his sheltered comfort zone, marries four wives, fathers many children, works for a living and learns to deal with his devious father-in-law, Lavan. This abrupt life change, however, seems to be almost too jarring an experience. At times, it seems that Jacob becomes too much like Esau in some ways. At the point when Jacob becomes extremely successful in the world that was once alien to him, the Torah refers to him not as Jacob but as 'the man',⁸ suggesting perhaps that he is not himself.

While in the past, Jacob dreamed of angels ascending and descending in the most spiritual site in the world,⁹ when in the house of Lavan he dreams of sheep – his worldly profession and new source of income.¹⁰

His dreams devolve from the mystical to the material, until an angel appears to him in his new dream and reminds him of his loftier past.¹¹

Immediately before his name is changed, Jacob takes his family across the Yabbok river and then returns, alone and vulnerable, to reclaim some small jars that he had left behind.¹² Jacob literally risks his life for a materialistic pleasure,¹³ at which point, yet again, an angel interrupts him, and reminds him of what is important. It then transpires that this mysterious angel visitor changes Jacob's name to Israel.

The Talmud states that even as embryos in the womb, Jacob and Esau fight for two worlds,¹⁴ showing that both brothers struggle with the reality of both elements of the world. But it is the ability to draw out the best from the contrasting worlds represented by Jacob and Esau and the capacity for balancing the two that gave birth to the legendary name and nation of Israel. Following his idealistic past and worldly present, Jacob finally receives the name Israel, for he 'wrestled with God and with man and prevailed'.¹⁵ Perhaps this title encapsulates Jacob's evolution from naive to sophisticated, reflecting his ability to both wrestle with the Divine in the ideal world, as he learnt in the academy of Shem and Ever, and to wrestle with man in the real world, which was traditionally Esau's domain. As descendants of Israel and bearers of this name, we are called upon to embrace the challenge of achieving the necessary nuanced balance between the two worlds.

Notes

¹Genesis 27:14

²Deuteronomy 21:17

³Genesis 25:27

⁴Rashi ad loc.

⁵Rashi on Genesis 25:17

⁶Genesis 25:28; 27:4

⁷Genesis 27:22-23

⁸Genesis 30:43

⁹Genesis 28:12

¹⁰Genesis 31:10

¹¹Genesis 31:11

¹²Babylonian Talmud,

Tractate Chullin 91a

¹³Kli Yakar on

Genesis 32:25

¹⁴Babylonian Talmud,

Tractate Avoda Zara 11a

¹⁵Genesis 32:29



Parasha Fact:

According to a Midrash, when Esau went to kiss Jacob, he actually attempted to bite him – looks can be deceiving.

Next Week in Vayeshev

Joseph bursts into our scene in a perplexing manner. Is he immature or is he wise, a shepherd or is a youth? The colourful and sometimes contradictory manner in which the Torah introduces Joseph alludes to the unique skill set that he has for doing just that – connecting with everyone, each at their own level, and drawing out the best in them.

שבת שלום