

Esau the Transformer

By Tali Loewenthal

Our sacred Torah is often highly ambiguous. An example is the account of Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac in our parshah.¹ Jacob is described as “a pure man, dwelling in tents,” and Esau is “a man who knew how to hunt, a man of the field.”² This is understood³ as meaning that Jacob represents goodness, simplicity and purity, dwelling in the tents of Torah study, while Esau represents evil. He is a hunter, a man of battle and of conquest. Yet the Torah adds also a note of ambiguity, which has challenged scholars for thousands of years: their father Isaac openly preferred Esau to Jacob.

If Jacob represents good and Esau represents evil, how could the great patriarch Isaac possibly prefer Esau?

The same ambiguity is found in the teachings of the sages. They tell us that while Esau was a fetus in the womb, he struggled to come out whenever his mother went near an idolatrous temple. Further, they say, even before the twin babies were born they were struggling over the two worlds: the world to come, which was Jacob’s choice, and this world, which was the focus for Esau.⁴ Yet, conversely, the Zohar explains that when the Torah says “and the boys grew up,”⁵ it means this in spiritual terms: their spiritual inheritance from their grandfather Abraham began to be seen in them, and in fact Abraham himself, who was still alive, was active in educating them.⁶

Was Esau evil from his earliest embryonic months of life? How could that be? Surely, each person has free will. And if he really was evil, what about his spiritual growth, his education from his grandfather Abraham, and the fact that his father Isaac preferred him to his brother?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, who seeks the positive perspective in everything, explains as follows:

The real difference between Jacob and Esau was Jacob’s concern to develop goodness further, versus Esau’s goal of transforming bad into good. Esau was the kind of man who struggles with evil in all its forms and—ideally—conquers it. He had this transformative quality from before birth: while still in womb he struggled to emerge when his mother passed an idolatrous temple, because he wanted to change it from bad to good. Similarly, before birth, he struggled to make this world reveal goodness, while Jacob felt that true good would be revealed primarily in the world to come. Hence, the unborn babies fought inside their mother’s womb.

Then, as two youths, while Jacob stayed in a tent studying Torah, Esau became a hunter, a man of the field, because he wanted to conquer the negativity of the “outside” and transform it into good.

This is a highly commendable path, and his father Isaac saw it as ultimately reaching higher than the path of Jacob. However, unfortunately, although Esau began in a positive way, eventually he succumbed to evil: instead of transforming it into good, it overcame him and he became evil himself. Consequently, his ultimate transformation to good has to come through his brother Jacob. At the same time, Jacob himself later incorporated the path of transformation, as we see in next week’s parshah.

The original paths of both Jacob and Esau are part of the sacred Torah, and both are significant for us today. In our personal service of G-d, and in our involvement with society, we each have to be a person who dwells in the “tents of Torah,” climbing higher and higher spiritually; and also a “man of the field,” seeking out the apparently negative and revealing its positive potential. Through combining both approaches we can reveal the ultimate goodness, higher than the spiritual world to come: a real world, down here, of absolute good.⁷

FOOTNOTES

1. Genesis 25:19–28:9.
2. *Ibid.* 25:27.
3. See Rashi on this verse.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Genesis, *ibid.*
6. Zohar I:138b.
7. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 20, pp. 108–115.

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