

Kehos Chumash

Chassidic Insights: Toldos, Chap. 25, Verse 22

When she passed by a temple of idol worship, Esau would try to get out:

How could the child of two entirely righteous individuals possibly possess a propensity for evil, even in utero?

The answer is, paradoxically, that it is precisely because the patriarchs and matriarchs were paragons of spiritual perfection that some of their children were born with seemingly problematic propensities. Perfection implies completeness, so the patriarchs and matriarchs' spiritual perfection had to comprise all possible paths of spiritual self-refinement.

These diverse paths in spiritual self-refinement can be grouped into two general categories: that of the innately pious, who are not tempted by evil, and that of those who behave righteously despite their attraction to materiality.¹⁷ Thus, all three patriarchal couples bore both types of children: Abraham and Sarah bore Isaac and Ishmael, Isaac and Rebecca bore Jacob and Esau, and Jacob and Leah bore Issachar and Zebulun (the difference being, of course, that Zebulun channeled his attraction to materiality for holy purposes, whereas Ishmael and Esau did not). In our case, Jacob personified the naturally-pious type and Esau personified the type challenged by an inborn evil inclination.

Thus, Esau's God-given mission in life was to demonstrate that a person with a strong propensity for evil is capable of overcoming temptation and remaining righteous. God intentionally created him with an inborn penchant for idolatry in order that he overcome it. And in fact, until he turned thirteen,¹⁸ Esau's propensity toward wickedness did not lead him astray. He channeled his innate cunning toward outsmarting his evil inclination, co-opting the material and sensual aspects of life for holy purposes. It was only when he turned thirteen that he rejected the ideals of his father and grandfather. He became a "man of the field" and an expert in ensnaring in the negative sense.

The patriarchs themselves seemingly personified only the first type of spiritual self-refinement, that of the innately pious. Upon closer examination, however, we see that they also personified something of the second type. They, too, had to

overcome many challenges, albeit from without—hostility toward them and persecution by others.

As we have seen, the lives and experiences of the patriarchs presage our own, endowing us with the strength to overcome our challenges. Their success in overcoming their own challenges is what gives us the strength to overcome our challenges, both external and internal.

In addition, Esau's intended existence—and as he indeed lived until age thirteen—serves as a model for how we should interact with the "field" of life, i.e., our mundane pursuits, the challenging arena outside the protective cocoon of the synagogue and of studying the Torah. Our task is not only to emulate Jacob by being "dwellers of tents," but to also emulate Esau by becoming "hunters" in the jungle of mundaneness and transforming even that untamed domain into a home for God. Nonetheless, we must first be "dwellers of tents," immersed in the study of the Torah and the fulfillment of God's commandments, in order to garner the necessary strength with which to engage in "hunting" and, in turn, transforming the "field."¹⁹

According to Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz,²⁰ Rebecca understood on her own that she was carrying twins, and assumed that one of them was wicked since it kept trying to escape her womb whenever she would pass by a temple of idol worship. As such, she felt she would have no advantage over Hagar, who had borne the wicked Ishmael. (As for the righteous child in her womb, she attributed that merit to Isaac.) She approached the sages of the academy of Shem and Ever to ask if her prayers had been at all effective beyond simply enabling her to conceive.

The prophet consoled her by telling her that although one of the twins would indeed be wicked, he would have noble descendants, many of whom would even convert to Judaism and become prophets and sages. She would thus be superior to Hagar, since Ishmael would have no such descendants. And indeed, throughout history, most converts to Judaism have been descendants of Esau; almost none have been descendants of Ishmael.²¹

Which one would inherit the blessings of the physical world and which one the blessings of the World to Come: This is a further indication that Esau was

not innately evil, for had he been so, he would not have been interested in the World to Come. True, his focus was on this world, but he saw the World to Come as a source of inspiration and guidance in accomplishing his goal of refining the world. Jacob's focus, in contrast, was mainly the World to Come, the goal of the constant ascent in Divine consciousness. But he wanted this world also, since he knew that answering the challenges of this world enables us to attain higher levels in the World to Come.²³

17. Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot*, chapter 6.

18. See below, verse 27.

19. *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 20, pp. 108-114.

20. *Kli Yekar* on this passage.

21. *Midbar Kedeimot*, s.v. *geirim*; *Sefer HaMa'amarim 5562*, vol. 2, p. 505.

23. *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 20, pp.108 ff.

Chassidic Insights: Toldos, Chap. 27, Verse 4

4 So that I may grant you my soul's blessing: Isaac wanted to bless Esau—thus naming him his successor—rather than Jacob, for he envisioned him as a fearless, Godly warrior, dedicated to combating evil. Although he saw how Esau had succumbed to the very forces he originally battled and had now totally sided with evil, he felt that if he would only bless him, he would again take up the cause of good and righteousness. With his superior power, sophistication, and skill, he would then be able to accomplish God's purposes on earth far better than Jacob would.⁹⁵

Rebecca realized Isaac's error. It was true that Jacob was not the cunning, wild warrior that Esau was. But his prowess in Torah study could well provide him with the cunning necessary to wrest the sparks of holiness from the clutches of evil when confronted with the challenge. On the contrary: Jacob's devotedness to the Torah would imbue him with a much stronger drive to make the world into God's home—and the knowledge and skill to do it—than Esau could possess.⁹⁶

95. *Torah Or* 20c ff.

96. *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 20, p. 114.