

Embracing the Jacob and Esau within Each of Us

Parashat Toldot 5784

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Shabbat Shalom. I speak in the aftermath of the massive rally on the National Mall, which organizers say was the largest gathering of American Jews in history. Aside from the unnecessary obsession with the blue wristbands, it was an incredible experience. At one point, a Jewish mother standing nearby came over to offer me tissues because I couldn't stop crying. The show of unity. The display of power. The bi-partisan delegation of Congressional leaders saying they won't be swayed by social media because Jewish values, Israeli values are American values. That was emotional.

And it affirmed for me that we will win. It has been noted that more Jews were killed on October 7 than on any single day since the Holocaust. The aftermath of that terrible day sparked a resurgence of the world's oldest hatred. We hear the anti-Jewish tropes and think about Father Coughlin, Charles Lindberg, Henry Ford, and the other antisemites of the 1930s. But we must also appreciate just how different 2023 is from that era. We saw that on Tuesday. We see it in the prowess of the Israel Defense Force methodically achieving its war aims. We do not know what will be after the war, but we can be sure Hamas will not be controlling Gaza. The people of Israel will live, *am Yisrael hai!*

Now, there is a certain irony to the prayers we just recited for Israel. What does it mean to *pray* for the soldiers of the Israel Defense Force? Prayers don't win wars. Tanks, airplanes, artillery, courageous fighters win wars. The very existence of the IDF underscores that point. For centuries, Jews were a people of prayer. We faced Jerusalem and *prayed* for a return to Zion; but we didn't have an army. And the early Zionists sought to change that. Religious Jews initially opposed Zionism for this very reason. They understood that the Zionists wanted to create a "new Jew," to replace the Jew who prays for security with one who fights for it.

With the war raging, we didn't really mark the *yahrtzeit* for Yitzhak Rabin, which took place on October 27, 12 Heshvan, the Hebrew date for November 4, 1995. Yitzhak Rabin was the first Israeli prime minister born in Eretz Yisrael and he epitomized that new-Jew I speak about. I have in my mind a picture of Rabin as a teenager, posing on a field at Kibbutz Hashlosha or the Kadoorie Agricultural High School with a hoe in his hand and muscles flexed. Rabin wasn't one to ask for prayers. He was secular. A farmer. A soldier. A strategist. He would have thought it a contradiction to be showing our solidarity through prayer.

But Zionism is rooted in that contradiction: Judaism is our heritage; and Judaism must change to meet the challenges of history. A favorite poem from Yehudah Amichai, Israel's poet laureate who died in 2000, speaks to the same contradiction. "*Ani Rotzeh L'valbel et HaTanakh*, I want to confuse the Bible." I want to mix things up. I study our people's sacred book, but not the way they studied it. In Amichai's words,

Abel killed Cain.

Moses entered the Promised Land

And the Children of Israel still wander in the desert. ...
Sodom and Gomorroah have been redeveloped
And Lot's wife became a pillar of honey and sugar.
ודוד מלך ישראל חי וקים, And David, King of Israel is alive and well.
אני כל כך רוצה לבלבל את התנ"ך, I so want to confuse the Bible.

That's the contradiction, the innovation of modern Zionism.

And it is in that spirit that I read the opening of Parashat Toldot. Traditional interpretation sees Esau as the evil twin. We saw that in the Haftarah, where God proclaims through Malachi: "ואהב את יעקב, I love Jacob, ואת עשו שנאתי, and I hate Esau." But we don't see that value judgment in the Torah portion. The Torah says Esau is hairy, but there's nothing wrong with that. He loves hunting and Isaac likes meat, but that isn't evil. Rebecca favors Jacob because he is "*ish tam*, a simple man who dwells in tents." The midrashic tradition reads those tents as the study halls of Shem and Ever, but the Torah doesn't mention that.

A comment in *Etz Hayim* suggests that instead of understanding Jacob and Esau as perpetual rivals, we might understand them as two sides of the individual. Jacob represents a person's gentle, cerebral side, while Esau embodies the physical active side. "When the Torah describes them as struggling within Rebecca's womb, it may be telling us that these two sides" are continually struggling within each of us.

Amichai didn't write about Jacob and Esau, but this is where his instinct to "confuse the Bible" comes in. Jacob represents the traditional Jewish activities of study and prayer, while Esau represents the instincts of the new-Jew. Zionism's embrace of the Esau instinct is at once contradictory and messianic. Sometimes you have to pick up arms. This is what drives the antisemites crazy. The world is very comfortable with the bookish Jew, the underdog Jew, the weak Jew; as Dara Horn put it in her book, "People Love Dead Jews." But the new-Jews says, "Enough!" We cannot wait for God to reshape history; we must take destiny into our own hands. The modern Jew needs Esau because history proved Jacob's instincts to be insufficient.

An old joke has two Jews sitting on a park bench in Nazi Germany. One is reading the Jewish newspaper, while the other enjoys the virulently antisemitic "*Der Stürmer*." When asked to explain himself, the Jew reading the antisemitic paper says, "When I read the Jewish paper, I just see how terrible things are and how the world is coming to defeat us. But when I read '*Der Stürmer*,' I see that Jews control the banks and the media and international governments."

This is the meaning of the modern state of Israel. Jews can't just read the newspaper; we can't just dream big. No longer the victims of history, we must become agents of history. We must confuse the Bible, reinterpret our place in the world. We must even come to appreciate Esau.

But not to *become* Esau. The Torah goes on to describe how Esau comes home famished one day, while Jacob is preparing a lentil stew. When Esau asks for a bowl of soup, Jacob demands that Esau first give up his birthright, and Esau responds, "הנה אנכי הולך למות ולמה זה לי הבכורה, If I am about to die, what need do I have for my birthright?" In a moment of crisis, Esau goes into survival mode. The future won't matter if I don't emerge from the present alive.

It sounds familiar. This moment of crisis for Israel and the Jewish people demands a certain survival mode, the Esau instinct. It is understandable; it is necessary; and to suggest otherwise is to deny the legitimacy of our people's right to live freely in our own land. But we would be wise to maintain focus as well on Jacob's instinct to prepare, to worry, to hope, to dream for the future.

I mentioned Yitzhak Rabin. For me, the evening of November 4, 1995, was pivotal to my Jewish and Zionist identity. I was in college and watching my Michigan Wolverines lose to Michigan State when the news came as a game break. Yitzhak Rabin, the heroic warrior turned soldier for peace had been participating in a massive rally at Tel Aviv's Kings of Israel Square. The peace process he championed had been threatened by a series of terrorist bombings, and Rabin refused to give up. A crowd of more than 100,000 joined together in "*Shir La-Shalom*, the Song for Peace." The blood-stained song sheet was later removed from Rabin's breast pocket, its lyrics underscoring the inherent contradiction of the new Jew:

Do not say the day will come,
Bring that day about. ...
Sing the song for peace,
Don't bother whispering your prayers.
It is better to sing the song of peace
In an elevated shout.

אל תגידו יום יבוא
הביאו את היום. ...
רק שירו שיר לשלום
אל תלחשו תפלה
מוטב תשירו שיר לשלום
בצעקה גדולה

Today, that dream seems naïve. A cease fire now would be a victory for Hamas. We can talk about surgical strikes, we can lament the loss of innocent life, but we know that wars are not won with scalpels. Israel did not start this war and its aims are just. It feels inappropriate to obsess now with how the war might end.

But we *can* ask now how we might maintain the hope, *ha-tikvah*, in the midst of such unhopeful times. Even as we support this military campaign, we must still dream that someday the conditions will be ripe for a new approach, a negotiated approach that allows two peoples, two sovereign states to live together with peace and security. We must maintain Jacob's faith in the future while accepting and even embracing Esau's courage and strength in battle. If we will it, it might no longer be a dream.

Ken yehi ratzon. I pray that this might be God's will. Shabbat shalom.