

A New Look at Esau: Invisible No More
Parashat Toldot
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When Zack Purdy was two years old, he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. (I understand that today he would be simply diagnosed with autism, but at the time, Asperger's was identified separately.)

When he was growing up, Zack used to have violent tantrums. He had a one-to-one aide in school, which led other kids to think he was “weird.”

His teachers tried to treat him like “everybody else,” but he didn’t respond like everybody else. He had frequent run-ins with his teachers, and in college people used to call him “weird” behind his back -- and he lost friends over it.

Only when he became an adult did he begin to have a greater understanding of his diagnosis, and of what he needs to do in order to interact comfortably with other people. Now he asks the people around him to listen to him, and to give him a chance to prove that he is different from what they first assume.



Zach's story can be found on the website for the **Invisible Disability Project**.¹ It is a project of the Invisible Disabilities Association.

What is an "invisible disability"? Well, according to the association's website,

An "invisible," "non-visible," "hidden," "non-apparent," or "unseen" disability is any physical, mental, or emotional impairment that goes largely unnoticed. [It] can include, but is not limited to: **cognitive impairment** and **brain injury**; **the autism spectrum**; **chronic illnesses** like **multiple sclerosis**, chronic fatigue, chronic pain, and **fibromyalgia**; d/Deaf and/or hard of hearing; **blindness and/or low vision**; **anxiety**, **depression**, **PTSD**, **and many more**.

The Invisible Disability Association has created a video archive of people like Zack Purdy who share how their lives have been impacted by conditions that other people don't see when they look at them. I encourage you to check out their website.

In today's Torah portion, we are introduced to a character who struggled his entire life. He struggled in the womb of his mother, and he struggled as he was being born. We're told that his twin brother held onto his heel for dear life as they both emerged from the womb.

¹ <https://www.invisibledisabilityproject.org/this-is-me>

True, as he was growing up, his father appreciated him -- but not his mother: she favored his younger brother.

He was impulsive, and foolhardy: after all, he was willing to sell his birthright, his legal privilege for a double portion of his father's estate, for a mere bowl of stew! And that same brother who held onto his heel as they were coming out of the womb was more than happy enough to take advantage of his weaknesses. As he grew, things didn't get easier. Years later, his mother and brother colluded in tricking him out of the blessing that his father intended to give to him, compounding undoubtedly his sense of being unappreciated and unloved.

I'm speaking, of course, of Esau, who generations of Jewish Biblical interpreters saw as the embodiment of a "*pe-re adam*," a wild, uncivilized man (a term the Bible uses to describe his uncle, Ishmael; see Gen.16:12).

Esau, the child who was dis-favored by God, by his mother, and eventually even by his father as well, is seen by the rabbis as disobedient and violent, and possessing the wrong priorities. After all, in this week's portion, years after he grows up, he marries two Hittite women, a "source of bitterness to both his father and his mother" (Gen. 26:34-35) -- even though it had already been the custom in his family, going back at least to his grandfather, Abraham, to find a member of

the clan, based in Haran, to marry. And after he discovered that his brother, Jacob, had tricked their father and purloined his blessing, he actually threatened to kill Jacob, which brought pain and anxiety to both of his parents.

The Bible understands Esau and his descendents to be the progenitors of Israel's enemies, the Edomites, and the Rabbis of the Talmud understand them to be the progenitors of the hated Romans, who with their superior arms and cruelty, persecuted the Jews mercilessly.

But is that the only way *we* might look upon him?

Dr. Ora Horn Prouser is a Bible scholar and the CEO and Academic Dean at the **Academy for Jewish Religion**, a rabbinical school in New York. (She also happens to be a former teacher of mine at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.) In her book, *Esau's Blessing*, she suggests that many of the characters in today's Torah portion -- and many of us -- might benefit by re-framing the way we look at Esau.

What do we know about Esau from the biblical story? We know that he is impulsive and a poor long-term planner. He prefers to be physically active. Not

only that, but we also know that he loves to hunt and is presumably pretty good at it.

What skills do you need to have to be a good hunter? Well, on the one hand you need to be able to **focus** intently. But you also need to be, well, **distractible**. You need to be able to see things on the periphery. You need to be able to realize, for example, that something -- maybe something very, very small, like a blade of grass -- is moving. We can guess that like many other good hunters, Esau may have had the combined traits of being able to focus intently, and yet also to be distractible. Though Dr Horn Prouser is not a mental health professional, she points out that this combination of traits sounds to her very much like a classic description of individuals with ADHD.

Leaving that particular speculation aside, if we imagine that Esau had special needs of one kind or another, a different narrative emerges about what happened at the beginning of this week's reading. One could say that Esau found a vocation, hunting, that played to his strengths. Because he wasn't a planner, because he tended to be very focused on the moment, he returned hungry from a hunting expedition. Seeing and smelling that stew that his brother was cooking, he said whatever his brother needed him to say in order to get some of it. At that moment,

his birthright seemed abstract and far away, and a lot less significant than the physical need he had in the moment. Esau tended to act on impulse -- which, later in life, led him to threaten his brother when Jacob steals his blessing.

On the other hand, he was able to let go of disappointment and anger easily too. After all, during his reconciliation with Jacob (which we'll read about in two weeks), Prouser points out that Esau seems honestly surprised that Jacob might think there would still be enmity between the two brothers. It's not a surprise, I would think, to most of us -- but to Esau it was.

There are some signs that, when the people around Esau recognize how he thinks and responds to stimuli, they are able to set him up for success. Esau does well when given step-by-step instructions, as his father did when sending him off to hunt before giving him a blessing. His father knew that about him, and therefore gave him what he needed in this case. Esau does less well when he is expected to pick up on hints. For example, the Biblical text doesn't tell us that Esau's parents ever actually told him not to marry a Hittite. Perhaps they simply expected him to understand that that is what their family does, or perhaps they only hinted at what they wanted him to do. That had no impact on Esau. But at the end of today's parashah, Esau eventually comes to realize that he has disappointed his parents

with his choice, and so he goes ahead and marries a relative, one of Ishmael's daughters, to be his third wife. But a daughter of Ishmael?? That's not the side of the family that lives in Haran, the side that's considered part of the clan! Poor Esau, he doesn't seem to realize that he would have been better off marrying a relative on his mother's side. From this perspective, we see a figure who, when he keeps trying to get it right, just can't manage to quite understand the expectations and hopes that his parents have for him!

We all know people like Esau, and my guess is that many of us have been in his shoes as well. Many of us know what it's like to be misunderstood because the way we might think is just different from that of the people around us. We might do well in a particular situation, but only if we are given the right accommodations or the right setup.

Of course, it's not easy when what makes us different is invisible.

As we read the story of Esau, let's try to give him the benefit of the doubt; and let's try to do that with others we encounter who may look just fine on the outside, but who may have challenges we don't know about. It may take extra effort for us to figure out what the people around us need in order to put their best foot forward,

but Esau's story is a call to try to make that effort. Let's work towards a world where we can all be helped to be our best selves. The connections we may make to those around us will be worth it.

Shabbat shalom.