

Throughout the centuries, countless students have struggled with the question of how Yitzchak, steeped in piety, wisdom, and sanctity, could have volitionally desired to establish Esav, the primitive אִישׁ שָׂדֵה, as the prime custodian of his legacy. Indeed, this question demands our attention. To write it off as sheer aloofness or simple folly is to grossly underestimate a person we believe to be one of the greatest men who ever walked the face of the earth.

Of all the patriarchs, Yitzchak is the least known and the most esoteric. While we get to know Avraham and Yaakov quite well through many Parshiyot of the Torah, Yitzchak is far less revealed, spotlighted in just a single chapter of Parashat Toldot, and otherwise seeming to exist in a different world altogether. As his elusiveness suggests, the essence of Yitzchak was פְּנִימִיּוּת, the inner, concealed world. Like the subterranean wells that he assiduously dug, Yitzchak always looked deeper, at the inner essence of things. And there is no reason to believe that this was not the case when it came to his love for Esav as well.

In Esav the hunter, Yitzchak saw עֶזוּת -- boldness and brazenness. On the surface, this trait is reprehensible and shunned in Jewish thought, which celebrates humility and acceptance. However, Yitzchak looked deeper, knowing, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught, that there is also an עֶזוּת דְּקְדוּשָׁה -- a *brazenness of holiness*. This type of holy Chutzpah coexists with humility and acceptance, but simultaneously empowers a person to challenge limitations and rise up beyond what he or she previously thought was capable. Seemingly, Yitzchak correctly recognized that this עֶזוּת דְּקְדוּשָׁה would be a critical ingredient in the mission and survival of the Jewish people, and thought that Esav's boldness could supply this spiritual blueprint. Although Yitzchak's assessment of Esav's potential ultimately seemed to be proven incorrect, the underlying principle remained true, and was usurped by Yaakov. In donning -- literally and figuratively -- the "hands of Esav" to receive his father's blessings, Yaakov proved himself capable of assuming Esav's brazenness, rising from the docile role of בְּנֵה הַקָּטָן -- the *small child* (27:15), to demonstrating his own עֶזוּת דְּקְדוּשָׁה. This boldness would continue to develop, as he went on to struggle against the trickery of Lavan, the force of Esav's angel, and the moral depravity of Shechem.

Like Yaakov and Esav, the animals of the field also teach us essential spiritual lessons, as the Mishnah (Avot 5:20) relates:

יהודה בן תימא אומר הוי עז כנמר וקל כנשר וריץ כצבי וגיבור כארי לעשות רצון אביך שבשמיים
Yehuda ben Teima says: be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and mighty as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven

The commentators explain that while a lion is “mighty” by virtue of its universally acknowledged physical strength and prowess, a leopard is “bold” -- brazen and assertive in a way that far exceeds its actual physical strength. Each of us has within us a lamb that cowers in fear, and a leopard that emboldens us to overcome our perceived limitations. More often than not, we may find our inner lamb ruling us, as we doubt ourselves, shrink from the disapproval of others, and anticipate the worst. Of course, there is no shame in this fact. To be a (healthy) human means to experience fear and inhibition. And yet, at the same time, a Jew must know how to sometimes summon the internal brazenness of the leopard, willing to go beyond what his or her naturally perceived limits might dictate.

When we observe the ways of the world, we recognize that this world is not for the faint of heart. To make it through the endless spiritual and physical challenges that confront a person on the journey of life, one must possess a measure of inexorable boldness, a healthy disrespect for perceived boundaries and limitations. Without this, there is no way to continue to swim upstream, against the mighty currents we inevitably face. There are simply too many unethical people we do not want to disappoint, who will make requests of us to compromise on our values. There are too many uncomfortable but important conversations we will perpetually delay having in fear of how the other person will respond. There are too many constant temptations and vices that can completely derail us from the path of life. And there are too many mistakes that we are guaranteed to make over the course of our lifetime that will bring us down and extinguish our hope and belief in ourselves.

It is commonly said that human beings use only 10% of their brain power. Setting aside the physiologic validity of this statement, it is unquestionably true that we use far less than 10% of the power of our soul. If we had any idea of the immense Divine power that exists within us, we would fear so much less, and accomplish so much more in our lives. As individuals identifying with the superficial identity of our human ego, we naturally intuit our limitations and fragility. But when we identify as a Divine soul, connected to the Soul of Souls, we are blessed with עזות דקדושה -- the hope and encouragement to overcome the improbable. In my own line of work, it is so easy to give up and accept a relentless and unending mental health challenge that one has faced for a long time. And yet, I have met so many people who have brazenly continued to fight against internal afflictions, whether due to adverse life circumstances or innate biology, that had seemed unbeatable. Through their own עזות דקדושה, they saw blessings, whether in the form of complete healing, or at least an ability to cope with the difficulty in ways they could never have imagined possible.

As we enter the month of Kislev, we are reminded of this truth most acutely. Each year, we commemorate the holy Chutzpah that drove a small band of fighters to take on the most powerful army in the ancient world, defying all odds through direct Divine intervention. May the merit of our ancestors' עזות דקדושה, from Yaakov Avinu to the Chashmonaim to the survivors

and refuseniks of our own times, help us tap into our own infinite spiritual strengths to receive Divine blessing in whatever limitations we may face.