

Toldot 5781

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Few scenes captivate the excitement of young and old students alike as Yaakov Avinu's usurpation of the blessing intended for Esav. The Torah relates that when Yitzchak Avinu notes the discrepancy between Yaakov's hyde-covered hands and his undisguised voice, he comments:

“הקול קול יעקב והידיים ידי עשו”

*The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav (27:22)*

In this Divinely inspired utterance, we find the elemental difference between these two brothers. Hands are corporeal and external, representing a false sense of individual glory and accomplishment, independent of G-d: "כוחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה" -- *My might and the strength of my hand accomplished this wealth* (Devarim 8:17). Voice, on the other hand, is immaterial and emanates from the innermost recesses of our being, representing our inner essence: "מאן דנפח מתוכיה נפח" -- *One who exhales exhales from his inside* (see Tanya 1:2). Indeed, it is interesting to note that we recite the blessing of "לשמוע קול שופר" -- *to hear the voice of the Shofar* -- upon a Mitzvah that represents the sincerest of prayers stemming from our innermost selves.

The world of Esav lies in the "hands," the חיצוניות -- the external physicality of gladiators, beauty contests, and public glory. He is the quintessential איש שדה -- *man of the field*, outside and exposed to all. His value comes exclusively from the value that others place upon him. The world of Yaakov, however, lies in the "voice," the פנימיות -- the peaceful inner self. It is pure, simple, and spiritual, and connects to G-d Himself. The world of Yaakov does not exist in plain sight in the outdoor fields, but rather exists privately concealed as the יושב אהלים -- *dweller in tents*.

The Torah teaches that when Rivka was pregnant with the twins, "ויתרוצצו הבנים" -- *And the boys agitated inside of her* (25:22). The conflict between Yaakov and Esav is not just a historical event, but also an internal struggle that every person experiences constantly. Each of us possesses an external ego that is preoccupied with acquisition, honor, and status, as well as an inner soul, which is gentle, compassionate, and independently worthy by virtue of its G-dly status. As humans, we face the tug-of-war between Yaakov and Esav, whether to live a life identified with the hands or the voice, or what our Sages call the קליפה -- the external rind or the פרי -- the inner fruit.

To choose to identify with a false self that perceives itself as distinct from G-d, claims our accomplishments as our own, and aspires primarily to look good in the eyes of others; or to identify with the voice of Yaakov which directs us to live in accordance with our inner Divine essence, irrespective of external considerations. The more that we pay close attention to the direction of this inner self, the more we find peace, freeing ourselves from the insatiable hustle to keep up and measure ourselves against others.

The challenge to live true to our inner self is great. Life can feel so rushed, distracted, and overstimulated; the societal emphasis on appearance and status can be so great; and we can spend so much time reading everyone else's posts, tweets, and ideas, that we completely lose connection with our own holy inner voice. In losing contact with this self, we become increasingly confused and conflicted. We lose the ability to identify what we really want, and find ourselves living lives and making decisions that feel vaguely dissonant with our being, for reasons we cannot seem to put our finger on. It is thus of critical spiritual importance to find times and spaces of quiet to disengage from all of the distractions that we face. In particular, it would seem that times of daily prayer and weekly Shabbat celebration afford us a most valuable opportunity to notice and nourish our פנימיות.

As Yaakov Avinu is identified with the attribute of אמת -- *truth*, may we all follow the quiet path of the יושב אהלים to live a life of ultimate truth to our G-d and ourselves.