

## Parsha Toldot

The opening section of Parsha Toldot (Genesis 25:19-34) tells the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau and the circumstances surrounding Esau's well-known decision to spurn his birthright for the sake of a meal. Later in the parsha we read how Rebecca tricked her husband Isaac into bestowing the blessing of the firstborn son on her favorite of the twins, Jacob, despite his having been born after his brother.

This parsha raises many questions for me. What was Esau thinking when he relinquished his birthright for a bowl of soup? What kind of a man was Jacob that he would take advantage of his hungry brother, extracting an exorbitant price for something he should have given freely? How could Rebecca play such a trick on her husband, and what does this say about their relationship? But the question that intrigues me the most is, what's so bad about Esau?

It's no surprise that Judaism, a bookish religion after all, should favor Jacob, the mild-mannered, perhaps mama's boyish son, over his robust, hirsute, outdoorsy brother Esau. But why couldn't they both have inherited from their father? Why couldn't both their gifts be appreciated? And what would have happened to us as a people if we did not accept the contributions of Esau and his ilk, never mind how rough their hands, how hairy their arms, how coarse their manners? Surely we would have starved or been devoured by beasts long since.

Every group of people defines itself both by what it is and by what it isn't. Jews are the people of the book, not of the plough or of the sword. There is nothing wrong with this type of self-definition as long as it is honest, flexible, and fair. However, applying these three criteria to the story of Jacob and Esau we see that it fails on each count. First, there is the dishonesty inherent in the deception of Isaac, concocted by Rebecca and colluded in by Jacob. Second, the strong tradition of bestowing special privileges on the first-born son denies parents their rightful prerogative in passing on their legacy to the next generation based on their knowledge of their own children and their family's circumstances. And clearly this arrangement is unfair to Esau who is snookered out of his rightful inheritance. I would also claim that the presumption of superiority on the part of Jacob is also unfair. This makes sense given that the Torah was written by the descendents of Jacob, not Esau. Still, I think it's important for us to challenge the received wisdom regarding this fundamental issue of self-definition.

All of this arises because of the presumed superiority of Jacob's mild-mannered temperament, favored by his mother and by God, over his brother's rougher ways, which are favored by Isaac. It is the divine stamp of approval, more than maternal preference, which elevates Jacob and allows him to usurp his older brother.

We don't have to stretch too far to find a parallel phenomenon within contemporary Judaism (actually it may be too much of a stretch but bear with me). It has always bothered me that the orthodox view is nearly always accepted as the "right" or "authentic" voice of Judaism, just as it feels natural to read that Jacob's gentle ways

were favored by God and to allow that preference to shape our view of Esau. What's more, most liberal Jews, myself included, have tended to cede our ground on this one no matter how strongly we claim to reject the strictures of traditional Judaism. Why is it that instead of holding our ground we all too often buy into the notion that a traditional interpretation of Judaism is the correct one, the standard by which all others are to be judged? And that the beliefs and practices which we and many others have worked so hard to develop and which have become well established somehow need defending? Why not, instead, acknowledge the value of our tradition and at the same time insist that the traditional view not become the default position against which all other expressions of Jewishness are compared, and frequently found wanting. Just as it was unreasonable to reject Esau in favor of his brother, who bears the divine (and paternal) stamp of approval, one variety of Judaism should not be allowed to speak for the entire Jewish community. Our commitment to a more liberal form of Judaism is a choice we should be proud to claim, rather than being apologetic about our lack of adherence to all 613 mitzvot.

I often see this dynamic play out within our own congregation in a variety of ways: grown women and men embarrassed to admit that they don't attend services regularly, as if that were a requirement of being a good Jew, or a member in good standing of Dorshei Tzedek. Or others who feel uncomfortable attending a service because of their lack of knowledge of Hebrew or familiarity with the liturgy. Often these same people who express to me their self-doubt about how "good" a Jew they are have spent huge amounts of time and effort engaged in social justice work or caring for others in a variety of ways. Who's to say which approach – Jacob's or Esau's, if you will – is a more valid way of expressing one's Judaism? Isn't it at least as important to fulfill our obligations to each other and to live out the full range of our values outside the synagogue walls as it is to sit and daven?

We are extremely fortunate, in this time and place in which we are living, to have the freedom to choose for ourselves which paths to follow, without waiting for divine judgment to show us the way. My hope is that we as individuals and as a congregation will continue to find ways to express our Jewish beliefs, values, and practices without rejecting the little bit of Esau in each of us.