

Parshas Toldos - 5781

The *parshah* this week introduces Yaakov and Esav and the rivalry between them. Rashi, in fact, informs us that this rivalry began when they were yet in their mother's womb. As she would pass a *bais midrash*, Yaakov would stir to leave the womb and then when she passed a house of idolatry, Esav would stir to exit the womb. The Torah then relates that Esav was a man of the field, whereas Yaakov preferred to reside in tents. Rashi explains that Esav preferred being out in the fields, hunting and that is what endeared him to his father Yitzchok. In contrast, Yaakov sat in the *batei midrash* of Shem and Ever and studies Torah and that is what endeared him to Rivkah.

Once the scene is set, the Torah relates that as Yaakov was cooking lentil soup, Esav returned from the field and he was exhausted. Esav asked Yaakov **הלעיטני נא מן האדום** – Pour into me, now, some of that very red stuff. At this point, the Torah interrupts the story of Esav selling his first-born rights to Yaakov with the fact that as a result of Esav's impatience and his demand for the lentil soup to be poured into his throat, he earned the nickname Edom, meaning red.

The assignment of the nickname Edom makes sense because it was demonstrative of Esav's impatience. However, if you think about it in terms of Chazal's perspective, it is truly amazing. Chazal (Bava Basra 16b) relate that on the day of this exchange, Esav committed five serious transgressions. He 1) violated a young girl, 2) committed murder, 3) denied Hashem's existence, 4) denied the principle of resurrection and 5) despised the status of the firstborn. Now we can certainly debate how severe some of these transgressions were but there can be no dispute about the severity of murder and violating a young girl. So if we are considering a nickname for Esav which incident stands out more? Murder or his gluttonous impatience? It is certainly not refined behavior to show up in someone's kitchen and demand that the cook should pour down your throat what he is cooking. However, that unrefined behavior pales in significance when compared to murder. Rather than calling Esav "Edom", he should be called "Murderer." Seemingly, that would be a better name to capture the essence of who he is. "Red" could be a description of his physical appearance but "Murderer" would more clearly describe his behavior and the essence of who was as a person. It is more revealing to know that Esav is a murderer than it is to know how he behaves when he is staaaaaarving. Obviously, there is something significant going on here; what is the Torah teaching us?

Chazal instruct us to be **דן לכף זכות** – to judge others favorably. I think that very often people misunderstand this principle. People equate judging others favorably with an optimistic outlook and not judging favorably with a pessimistic attitude. I think,

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however, that this principle goes deeper than just adopting an optimistic perspective. When we observe someone else's behavior, our minds automatically assign intent to the behavior. For example, when someone does something that bothers us, very often our first thought is, "Why is she doing this to me?" or something similar. We become very self-centered and assume that the intent behind the behavior was directed towards me. There are many reasons why the person behaved as they did and there is no reason to assume that you are the star of their life and their decisions and behaviors revolve around you. But that is what we do.

Judging other favorably involves learning to separate intent from the act. It forces us to realize that although we may have witnessed someone else's action or behavior, it doesn't mean that we know their intent or why the person behaved in that manner. We have to get past our tendency to assume that we know the other person's intent and realize that observing someone's behavior doesn't mean that we can assume knowledge of their intent. Intent cannot always be easily discerned from a person's behavior. That is the essence of the *mitzvah* to judge others favorably. It does not involve adopting an optimistic attitude, it revolves around the realization that one does not know another's intent and thus one should judge them favorably and assume that their intent was pure and sincere.

Why wasn't Esav called, "Murderer?" Murder and even his transgression of violating a young girl involve impatience. When a person becomes angry and their flight or fight mode kicks in, they react without thinking. Everyone has had the experience of becoming angry and doing or saying things in anger that you subsequently regret. When the anger intensifies, there is a surge of adrenaline and that can express itself physically. It may involve, punching a wall, kicking a door or in severe cases, hitting another person and in the most extreme expression, murder. The punching or even murder are the expression of the emotion that is boiling inside of the person but is not the root of that person's thinking. It stems from the inability to control oneself. This is what Esav was about. By calling him "Edom" they were capturing the essence of who he was and his personality. Esav was a person without any patience, whatsoever. He grabbed what he wanted; he did the first thing that came to mind without any consideration of the consequences of his actions. In this incident with Yaakov, he was starving and all he cared about was obtaining food. When Yaakov asked him to sell his firstborn rights, he immediately agreed without considering the long-term ramifications of making that sale. In fact, as soon as he was done, he regretted his decision and that regret finds expression in the fact that the Torah relates that Esav subsequently, hated the firstborn status. Rather than reflect on his impetuosity, he projected his anger

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outwards. It was Esav's impatience and nature to act without thinking that best captures the essence of who he was as a person. The sin of murder was ultimately an expression of his impetuosity, the essential part of his personality, but calling him "Murderer" would not capture the essence of who he was.

Esav happens to be an extreme example of this trait but everyone must be mindful that behavior is an expression of something deeper. In most instances it is inaccurate to judge a person solely based on their actions and behaviors. Those actions and behaviors are expressions of the essence of who the person is and judging favorably reminds us that it is likely that the behavior that we observed came from a good place because at our core, we are good and holy people who yearn to follow the Torah and be helpful to others.

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