

## Unlocking Esav's Cell Phone

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The Jewish Center

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I bumped into a friend at the Thanksgiving Day Parade. And he said to me, “So are you ready for Shabbat Shuvah?”

I said, “I think Shabbat Shuvah was like two months ago.”

He said, “But this is the real Shabbat Shuvah.”

I said, “Why’s that?”

He said, “Because the day after Black Friday is when you really regret all the things you’ve done the day before.”

This morning, I’d like to return with you to the first impulse buy recorded in the Torah.

It was a doozy.

Esav comes home from the field. He’s ravenously hungry. And Yaakov convinces his brother to part with his birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup.

Long before anyone said, “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die,” Esav captured the sentiment with his immortal words:

הנה אנוכי הולך למות, ולמה זה לי בכורה.

If I’m destined to ultimately leave this world, what need have I for the birthright?

The Torah paints an image of a man with game constantly in his mouth: כי ציד בפיו.

Esav is a brute with no impulse control whatsoever; the man who squanders tomorrow for today.

And the Torah sets it ups as a stark contrast. Yaakov is always plotting and scheming; always thinking about the future. Esav is wedded to the present.

And yet at the end of our parsha, we find something extraordinary. After he’s been swindled out of his bracha – taken advantage of now for the second time – Esav is filled with homicidal rage. He wants nothing less than to kill his brother.

And yet the man portrayed as the most impulsive character in the Torah, restrains himself.

ויאמר עשו בלבו, תקרבו ימי אבלי אבי, ואתה רגה, את-יעקב אחי

“As long as my father is alive,” he says, “I won’t lay a hand on Yaakov.” He’s angry, but he stops himself from acting on that anger.

And years later, Esav is even more restrained. Yaakov thinks that the moment Esav sees him, all those old feelings will come rushing back. He thinks his life and the lives of his entire family are in mortal danger.

But it's just the opposite. Esav couldn't be more magnanimous. His first reaction upon seeing his brother is to hug him and kiss him. And they reconcile!

So what happened?

When we first meet Esav his life is defined by the notion of instant gratification. But in all these subsequent episodes, he's a model of restraint and self-discipline. How does he undergo such a radical transformation?

To answer that question, let me ask a different question. Avraham is chesed. Yaakov is emet. What's the trait of Yitzchak? Our sages tell us that Yitzchak is Gevurah.

The problem is: Yitzchak always seems so passive. Is the quality of strength really the right term to describe the second of our three forefathers? All the drama and the excitement in the lives of the avot are the drama and excitement of Avraham and Yaakov. Wars and debates; intrigues and conflicts.

Yitzchak's life appears on the surface to be little more than a shadow of his father's.

- He retraces the life journeys of Avraham.
- He re-digs the same wells.
- He even re-names them and restores the names they had in the life of his father.

Where's the gevurah? Where's the ingenuity? Where's the creativity? Where's the towering presence of a patriarch?

What I'd like to suggest is that we misunderstand this notion of gevurah.

בן זומא אומר ...  
איזה הוא גיבור--הכובש את יצרו

Gevurah is about inner strength; restraint; self-discipline.

With the genes of Avraham and Sarah, we can rest assured that Yitzchak was possessed of the capacity to innovate and lead. The fact that chose not to, was in fact a choice. He made a decision to sublimate those capacities; to consolidate the legacy of his father; to preserve what Avraham and Sarah had created and transmit it to the next generation.

The world didn't need another revolutionary. It needed a paragon of self-restraint. And that was Yitzchak.

And this, I believe, is the answer to our riddle.

How did Esav undergo such a fundamental transformation? How did he move from spurning his birthright for a bowl of soup to a man capable of such self-discipline?

Esav absorbed the life lesson that his father had modelled.

When we first met Esav, he was little more than a child – an adolescent who made adolescent decisions. As a matter of nature, I think it's clear that he inclined toward impulsivity.

But as a matter of nurture, he was able to develop himself into another kind of person.

Esav worshipped his father. They shared a bond. And with time, he was able to assimilate the inner strength that was the defining quality of his father's life. When push came to shove, it was Esav's restraint that carried the day.

So on this Shabbat between Black Friday and Cyber Monday, perhaps it's worth reflecting for a moment on this ancient Jewish value.

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, David Leonhardt, has been writing about his battle against a different kind of impulsivity. And he wrote this week that he and his family recently began observing tech Shabbat.

One day a week, they refrain from using technology – not because the Torah says so – but because they've come to appreciate everything that can be gained from taking a respite from our phones.

The experience has been so transformative, he said, that now he's expanding. He suggested that his readers use Thanksgiving to take a day off from their phones and just appreciate the time with their friends and family without distraction.

Sometimes it takes the world a few thousand years to catch up with the wisdom of the Torah. When it does, it's always a worthy occasion to look back on our tradition and more fully appreciate what it is that we have.

So allow me to make two observations.

First, when it comes to our own Shabbat, it's important to remember that its centrality and primacy isn't founded on absence alone. זכור ושמור. There are two components. One is framed in the negative: the activities we don't engage in. But one is framed in the positive. The moment we reduce Shabbat to a series of restrictions is the moment we risk losing its essence and its magic. As Ahad ha-Am famously put it, "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews."

These 25 hours are a gift. What an opportunity to fill our time with deeds and words that elevate and ennoble us. As we disconnect from the world of distraction, what an opportunity to reconnect with the world of meaning. Through Torah, Tefillah and Chesed, it really is possible to transform earthly time into sanctified time.

And second, we have to import everything we've gained from Shabbat into the rest of our lives. It would be naïve to think we can put the genie back in the bottle. Our world of distraction is here to stay. Grappling with the impulse to check our phones every 11 seconds – is a phenomenon that's not going away.

But we have Yitzchak; and we have Esav; and we have Shabbat: Models for how to live lives of gevurah: how to combat impulsivity with discipline and restraint; how to live lives guided by deep inner strength.

Today we're blessed to be celebrating Gabo's bar mitzvah. And Gabo is blessed to have parents who have modelled for him everything we're talking about this morning. It's our great hope that he'll continue to develop his many talents in the service of Hashem and the Jewish people.

On this second Shabbat Shuvah, may all of us feel inspired by all that's possible in the year ahead: The possibility of transforming every Shabbat into a day filled with higher meaning; and transforming the other six days of the week into days governed by gevurah.

Left to our own devices, I'm not sure we'd succeed.

Left to the wisdom of the Torah, there's no question that we will.