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Including Esau's Family

On my mind of late, and, I confess, for a long time, have been questions of inclusion and exclusion. I remember times as a kid in elementary being excluded, and being included, and remembering how much better it felt to be included. Of course, just because I remember how it feels to be excluded doesn't mean that I'm going to be inclusive.

Rather, we tend to perpetuate and reenact the ways that we ourselves have suffered. But as I've gotten older, my inclusion muscles have strengthened, I think, I hope.

As a congregation, we've been looking at a change in our bylaws that would remove the requirement that one must be Jewish to be a member of Kol Rinah. I support this change, but this is not the time to explain or argue.

Rather, I want to look for a few minutes at a different question of inclusion, which may be a way to help us think about our questions about inclusion.

If you were paying attention to the Torah reading today, chances are you stopped paying attention when we got to chapter 36 of Genesis, the last chapter of the parasha. It's basically all genealogies of Esau and his descendants and fairly superficial information about them.

If we think about people who deserve a chapter in the Torah devoted to their offspring, Esau is not an obvious candidate. He's the unfavored first son of Isaac and Rebeca, who gets his father's the second-best blessing and his mother's disinterest.

Major stories in Genesis tend to end with genealogies, points out Bible translator and literary critic Robert Alter;¹ the story of Abraham ends with Abraham and Ishmael's genealogies in Genesis 25, before in chapter 26 launching into the story of Isaac. Here we've finished our focus on Jacob and will be shifting our attention to the next generation—to Joseph, Judah, and Reuben, and back to Joseph. So, a genealogy is a way of signaling that transition.

This literary approach doesn't really answer the question of why this material is included though.

Another approach, that Nahum Sarna, one of the great critical scholars of Bible in the second half of the twentieth century, teaching for decades at Brandeis, is to notice the theological purpose in this material: "Esau is the subject of a divine oracle and the recipient of a patriarchal blessing—data now given show how these were fulfilled in history."²

This completes the story of Esau, and the prophecy about him Isaac makes when he blesses him, as well God's words about him before he is born (although how precisely they demonstrate fulfillment of the prophecies is obscure). The lesson is simply that these divine oracles and patriarchal blessings are not just words, but came true.

¹ See Alter's comment on Genesis 36 in his translation and commentary on Genesis.

² Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p.246, on Gen. 36.

Much of the rabbinic tradition sees Esau, known also as Edom, as the progenitor and embodiment of Rome, which persecuted the rabbis of the land of Israel. Esau therefore must be wicked. The rabbis snidely comment on a concubine, on women mentioned, and explain various anomalies and repetitive names (a phenomenon common to biblical genealogies) by imagining various inappropriate and incestuous relationships.

Thus, this material about Esau's descendants is intended as contrast with the holy tribe of Jacob, of Israel. Aviva Zornberg, a superb British/Israeli psycholiterary expositor of Torah, sees the relatively uneventful lives of civilization of Esau's descendants as a contrast with the much more rich, complicated challenging, lives of Jacob and his children.³

The midrash in Genesis Rabbah,⁴ the classic collection of midrash on Genesis, has a truly horrible midrash on this topic. It compares Esau's genealogies to the, straw, and stubble and chaff of a wheat stalk that each claimed, "For my sake was the field sown." The wheat said to them, "Wait until you come to the threshing floor, and then we will know for whose sake the field was sown."

When they came to the threshing floor, the owner came to winnow the crops. The chaff was thrown to the wind, the straw thrown on the ground, and the stubble was burned. The wheat kernels the owner formed into a pile and whoever saw it kissed it.

In this parable, Esau and the nations of the world are the chaff, the straw, the stubble, and Israel is the wheat. So we have this genealogy to show how little they matter, how uninteresting and irrelevant they truly are. I love midrash, but I really dislike this midrash.

A very different approach is offered by Harvard professor Jon Levenson in his brief commentary to Genesis in the Jewish Study Bible. He observes, "The attention given to Esau's family here suggests considerable fraternal feeling for him (cf. Dt. 23:8), which clashes with later biblical and postbiblical attitudes toward him."⁵

There is a kind of affection for Esau displayed by the unnecessary lavishing of detail on him and his family. Levenson also reminds us of a striking verse in Deuteronomy, 23:8: "לֹא-אָבִי־אֶת-אֶדְוִיָּהוּא You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman."

Esau and the Edomites are included because they are our brothers. But apparently we need to be reminded of this because it may not be obvious; we may forget.

We could choose to understand the inclusion of Esau's family in the Torah as a reminder that they are family, *our* family, to remind us how closely related to them we are, perhaps to hold out hope for reconnection and reconciliation, as our father Jacob had with their father Esau. It can be a reminder that even those who we have viewed as our enemies are in our sacred texts, and in our families.

In 2016, in speaking to a local newspaper about his small rural United Methodist Church's decision to begin offering same-sex weddings, Reverend Eston Williams said, "At the end of the day, I'd rather be excluded for who I include than included for who I exclude."

To this, I say, "me too."

Shabbat shalom.

³ Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, pp. 247-252.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 83:5

⁵ *Jewish Study Bible* on Gen. 36:1-43.