

## **One of the Most Dramatic Moments**

**Rabbi Melanie Aron**

**September 4, 2020**

One of the most dramatic moments in the entire Torah is in this week's portion. Esau comes back from the hunt, having prepared the meal his father requested, only to discover that his brother had been there first, and had tricked their father into blessing him as the first born. He cries out and pleads, Bless me too father. He had expected one outcome, and now is being forced to deal with another reality.

Perhaps I heard Esau's cry in a special way this year because we too have had our share of disappointments, of expectations that were not fulfilled. When I left my son's apartment in Washington, DC, at the end of February, I debated leaving some clothes there, as I was scheduled to return for a conference at the end of March. Even as that was cancelled I didn't despair; surely I would get back there for my grandson's birthday in August. But now I am serving on a committee for a national conference in June 2021—and we recently faced the reality that we had better plan on it being virtual.

I know that many of the guests online with us this morning hoped to be in Silicon Valley with us today. And everyone I speak with is experiencing grief for the upcoming Thanksgiving that won't even be the way they had planned with concessions to the situation, not to mention the awareness that Hanukkah will join Passover and the High Holy Days as a virtual experience.

Esau's first reaction to his disappointment was anger. He wanted someone to blame and found him handily in Jacob. Just wait until I have the opportunity, he says; once my father dies, I will kill him. After the anger comes bargaining: Is it my wives, Judith and Basemath the Hittites, that they don't like? No problem, I'll marry Ishmael's daughter Mahalat and keep things in the family. Yet neither of these strategies helps Esau.

We are not actually told what helps Esau get over this major disappointment, but there is a clue in the words Esau speaks in the Torah portion we will read two weeks from now. In that portion, Jacob returns from his 20 years of servitude to Laban, and the brothers meet in what looks like it will be a bloody confrontation. Esau comes with 400 armed men, and Jacob strategically divides his camp, hoping to protect his favorite wife and her son. Instead, the brothers embrace, and Esau returns the tribute his brother was prepared to pay him as restitution for what was taken so many years before. How did that happen? The hint is in Esau's words: I have enough, my brother; I have plenty.

It made me think of our current political situation, of those who feel they don't have what they believe they deserve. They are angry and latch on to scapegoats. But Esau is in a different place, *yesh li rav*. It can mean "I have plenty" or, according to the rabbis, "I have knowledge." What he has now fills him, so he no longer is focused on what he lacks. At long last Esau no longer measures himself by what Jacob has or what he had expected would be his. Instead, appreciating what he does have allows him to feel satisfied.

For Thanksgiving this year to be a festival of gratitude, we will have to let go of our disappointment and anger about what is not to be. Esau didn't get the birthright back but he was able to let go of that and enjoy what he did have. He has come a long way from the young man who sought instant gratification and impulsively sold his birthright for a bowl of porridge. Like Esau, we must let go of our short-term desires and focus on longer-term goals. That was the rabbinic understanding of the Torah's instruction, *v'chai bahem*, live by them (the commandments), and the use of this verse is the derivation of the rule *pikuach nefesh docheh et haShabbat*, you may break a commandment this day, even important ones like those of Shabbat, in order to fulfill many commandments on many Shabbatot in the future.

Perhaps that model can help us get through these upcoming months while remembering to taste the good in each day as it comes.

*Zeh hayom asah Adonai, nagilah venismechah bo*. This is the day, just as it is right now, that God has brought; let us rejoice and celebrate in it.