

What's the Matter with Eisav?

Parshat Toldot tells the story of the birth and upbringing of Yaakov and Eisav, and the conflict between them that eventually leads to Yaakov leaving town to escape from Eisav. Throughout their relationship, Yaakov uses guile and subterfuge to gain the advantage over his brother. First he takes advantage of Eisav, who is exhausted and famished after returning from a hunting expedition to buy the firstborn rights from him, in exchange for some lentil soup. Later, when Rivkah overhears that Yitzhak plans to give Eisav his blessing, she convinces Yaakov, who is her favorite, to trick his father into giving the blessing to him instead.

At first read, Yaakov and Rivka's behavior seems highly questionable, and we might well wonder how someone so seemingly ruthless and devious could inherit the spiritual and material blessing of Avraham and Yitzhak, and merit to become the father and namesake of G-d's chosen people. However that is not the question I want to address in this week's drasha. If you are interested in exploring Yaakov's character and his merit, please join my Parshat HaShavua class for Parshat Vayishlach on Thursday December 3 at 11:30am Central Time on Zoom. You can register for the Zoom link on the Bais Abe website.

What I want to focus on in this Drasha is not why Yaakov merited the blessing and the birthright, but why Eisav the eldest son, his father's favorite and the presumptive heir, didn't. The midrash in Bereishit Rabba answers the question of why Eisav didn't deserve to be the heir by accusing him of violating the “big three” cardinal sins of idolatry, murder and adultery (and strongly implies he may have been a rapist to boot). However, this midrashic answer is a bit unsatisfying. If these sins were the reason for Eisav's fall from favor, why are they not mentioned explicitly in the text?

Instead of taking the Midrash's word for it, I want to examine the text of the Torah itself in an attempt to understand what was so wrong with Eisav's character that not only Rivka, but even G-d himself would reject him in favor of the deceptive, ruthless Yaakov.

The two stories in which Yaakov supplants his brother Eisav each highlight a different flaw in Eisav's character, which it is easy to ignore, when we focus solely Yaakov's behavior. In Bereishit Ch. 25, Yaakov “stews a stew,” and when Eisav comes in from the field, exhausted, he says “Give me some of that red red-stuff for I am faint!” When Yaakov demands that Eisav first sell him his firstborn status, Eisav replies “I am going to die, so what good does being firstborn do me?”

Eisav's behavior here is that of someone who is extremely impulsive, someone of strong appetite, literally but also perhaps figuratively. Upon seeing food, he demands to be given some, and is willing to sell his extra share of the inheritance for a bowl. The trade-off at first seems ridiculous, and we might be tempted to assume that Eisav was literally on the point of starving to death, in order to make sense of his willingness to sell the birthright for a bowl of soup. However irrational it might seem to trade one's inheritance for a bowl of soup, people do more irrational things every day. People binge drink and try highly addictive drugs, and commit crimes that could put them behind bars for years if they are caught, and engage in all manner of risky behavior that at first glance doesn't make a lot of sense. One way to make sense of these seemingly irrational choices is people are doing what economists and psychologists call “future discounting.” We all discount the future in our choices, between getting \$1,000 today and \$1,001 a year from now, it makes sense to choose \$1,000 today. However, how much we discount the future varies someone from one person to another, and closer we believe we are to death, the more it makes sense to discount the future. People whose future looks bleak are more likely to engage in risky behavior that wouldn't make sense for a person with a bright future ahead of them. This is one reason crime and drug use go up when economic opportunity declines.

Eisav, it seems, was someone who discounted the future at a very high rate. While his firstborn rights might have been worth much more in the long-term than a simple bowl of stew, those benefits would only come at some indefinite point in the future, when Eisav could not be sure he would even be around to enjoy them.

So far we that Eisav is impulsive and discounts the future to a rather extreme degree ,but

are these in and of themselves moral failings? They may not be, but they are not traits that are desirable in someone who is going to be a founder and leader of a spiritual community. G-d is eternal, His Torah is eternal, and the People of Israel, as G-d's treasured possession, and the possessors of His eternal Torah, must be oriented towards the long term. We could not have survived and kept our tradition alive through 2,000 years of exile if we didn't understand how to focus on the long term.

The contrast between Eisav and Yaakov in this trait is hinted at, as so often happens, by a subtle play on words in the Torah. Eisav, we are told, is a hunter, and the word **צָדַד** hunt, appears several times in the story in reference to him. By contrast, Yaakov “stews a stew” **וַיִּזְדֵּן**

All that separates Eisav's hunting from Yaakov's stewing is the difference of one letter, from a **צ** to a **ז**, the difference in between the German pronunciation of the letter z and the English. Eisav, is a successful hunter precisely because of his quick instincts. Yes, a hunter has to have the patience to wait around for the prey to show itself, but once it does, the task is to act quickly before the prey can escape. Yaakov, by contrast stews. Stewing is a matter of slow, steady, deliberate cooking.

Stewing is about understanding, that “good things take time,” an understanding which Eisav lacks. Without any appreciation of the slow steady work that went into making stew, Eisav demands instant satisfaction. “Give me some of that red red stuff.”

If that were not enough to disqualify Eisav from the inheritance, another aspect of his character is revealed he finds out that Yaakov has taken his place and received their father's blessing. Eisav “cries out a great and very bitter cry,” he speaks bitterly of his brother “Is he not rightly named Yaakov (the heel) for he has supplanted me (Yaakveini) two times?!” In the end, he comes to “hate his brother in his heart” and makes up his mind to murder Yaakov. Eisav cried out a “great and very bitter cry.” The Hebrew word for bitter, **מָרָה**, can also mean **בִּילָה**, which is the bodily humor associated with anger. This leads many commentators to suggest that Eisav's problem was an inherently angry, violent nature. The Kli Yakar says that this is due to his being born under the Zodiac sign of Mars, and

says it also explains why Eisav so badly wanted the stew Yaakov made, and why he referred to it not as “stew” or “lentils” but as “that red red stuff.” According to the Kli Yakar, Eisav was giving away his true nature here, which is that he was bloodthirsty and violent and obsessed therefore with all things red. However, I read this story and don't see not a homicidal maniac, but an ordinary person who responds to feeling wronged by following a direct path from anger (that great and bitter cry) to resentment (insulting his brother) to hatred (hating Yaakov in his heart) to violence (resolving to murder Yaakov). Unfortunately, this is a path that is easily trod even by anyone, even those who are not born under the Zodiac sign of Mars.

For this reason, anger has been long understood to be a very dangerous emotion. Rambam, who generally advises moderations in all things, singles out anger as a trait that is too dangerous to be indulged in at all, even in moderation. Of course we all get angry now and then. Even Yaakov responds angrily when he is cheated and wronged by Lavan. The difference is that while Eisav allows his anger to lead him to hatred of the one he feels has wronged him, Yaakov confronts Lavan, and rebukes him for his behavior. These contrasting approaches show up again in the verse in Vayikra 19:17 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; reprove, reprove your kinsman, and do not bear sin on his account.” This verse is telling us how to respond to anger: “Don't be like Eisav, and bottle it up, hating your brother until you do violence or otherwise wrong him; Instead be like Yaakov and have the hard conversation about how he has hurt you, and then you won't hate him.”

Hatred of course is the easy choice. Rebuke is much harder. But if we think about the long term, hatred only does harm to ourselves and to those we hate, while rebuke, though more difficult, can lead in the long term to healing, understanding and the righting of wrongs.

May we all be blessed with Yaakov's long term vision and his faith in the future, and when we experience anger, let us have the courage and the discipline not to let it fuel resentment and hatred as Eisav did, but instead let it provoke us to have frank and difficult conversations with those who have hurt us, or whom we suspect of doing wrong. Hatred and resentment might look

appealing in the short term, but in the long term, our blessing and our birthright depend on being able to speak up against wrongdoing clearly and without hatred. The alternative to hatred is not to stifle our anger and silently acquiesce to evil and wrongdoing. The alternative to hatred is to engage in thoughtful rebuke. May we find within ourselves the strength, the courage and the wisdom to engage in this mitzvah of rebuke, and trust that in the long term, peace and harmony will be the reward of that most difficult of mitzvot.

Shabbat Shalom!