



The Conflict of Yaakov and Esav

By Rabbi Shaul Judelman

The narrative of Yaakov (Jacob) and Esav (Esau) is an epic that contains within it a conflict that is very alive; and which all of us can probably feel, once we translate it from Torah language into our own words and concepts.

Kabalistic interpretations teach that Esav’s soul came from the world of Tohu (chaotic, energetic, and wild).¹ This phrase refers back to the story of creation (Genesis 1:2) and the status of the world before light and the beginning of order. Tohu is a spiritual state that has very recognizable manifestations in this world. In environmental language it would be deemed as unsustainable, though it is far more than this. Tohu is often dominated by urge over thought, the moment over the future. Esav represents this world in many of his actions.

As the verses in Toldot describe the growth of the two children, “Esav was a cunning hunter, a man of the field- while Jacob was a simple (up front) man who sat in tents.”² We can interpret this as saying Esav lives his life in the field, a place of open uncertainty, while Jacob is of the tent and the home, a place of stability and conviction. Esav and Jacob are destined for conflict, as prophetically related to Rebecca when she went to inquire of the unrest she felt in her womb. She was told that she played host to two destinies, and rather vaguely that the greater will serve the younger. The dichotomy here is between the driving force of Esav’s unbridled desire, and Jacob’s tikkun of this urge. This is the tension pervades their interactions.

As Esav returns from a day of hunting (and perhaps much more abrasive activities, suggests the Gemara: murder, rape and more), Jacob has been cooking soup.³ In these verses we are seemingly told incidentally that Esav is called Edom because of his desire for the red, red soup to be poured down his throat upon his coming home tired. What is phenomenal in the story of Esav selling his birthright to Jacob is his reasoning why the soup is more important. “Behold I will die, and for what is this birthright for me?”⁴ The Torah’s description of this story has deep repercussions for a society that bases itself on Esav’s values, priorities, and thus destiny.

The culture that wants things NOW has given us fast food, fast cars, and quickly melting polar ice caps. This culture is out of balance. What does balance mean? Balance means that my own physical needs are accorded to out of a nexus of relationships. These might include other people’s needs, my future

¹ Etz Chaim, Heichal HaNikudim (Shaar 8, ff.)

² Breishit 25:27

³ Baba Batra 16:

⁴ Breishit 25, 32-4

needs, or the availability of resources. There is a strong critique within environmental discourse against the nature of the society that developed modern technology. However, this is not a diatribe against technology or modernity, but it is a strong statement about the manner in which we pour things down our throat. This analysis occurs both on the personal level, our private consumption habits, as well as on the societal level, regarding our willingness to manufacture and pursue ways of living that have not yet proven their balance. Esav and the energies of Tohu have a tendency towards destruction. The kings of Esav that ruled and died at the end of parshat Va'Yetze are referred to in Kabbala as the elements of the creation process that couldn't last or sustain themselves.⁵ They are referred to as the worlds that were destroyed. The lights broke the vessels. The desires and abilities of the lights shattered the physical world's capacity to contain them.

The Kings of Esav are still alive (though maybe not for long!) in our day. Consider the following popular statistic: if the whole world lived with the same consumption pattern as the average American, it would take 5.3 earths to support everyone.⁶ Esav is living today as if he's going to die tomorrow. That is not without a kernel of truth. He will. The question is really will we leave an earth for our children to inherit? Will there be fresh drinking water, fish in seas, and monkeys in the trees? Will our children be able to run around and inhale fresh air? In some places we are already seeing sad answers to these questions.

In his commentary on parsha Vayeshev, which directly follows the Torah's listing of the 7 kings of Esau that ruled and fell, the Mei haShiloach (a Chassidic commentary) makes a dramatic statement. He says that the process of refinement within Israel begins in this parsha.

Many years after Jacob flees in the face of Esav's anger, he returns. This time he returns not alone, but with his wives, children and flocks. Esav also does not greet him alone, but is accompanied by a gang of 400 men and their horses. Towards the end of their meeting, where a relative peace is made, Esav offers to Jacob that they should travel together. Jacob replies with an environmental imperative strongly akin to that of the Native Americans pledge to the Seventh Generation:⁷ "My master must pass before his servant. And I will lead to the slower pace of my work that is before me, and the pace of the children until I reach you in Seir...And Esav returned on his way to Seir. And Jacob traveled to Sukot, where he built dwellings for the animals..."⁸

And thus the paths of our two ways split. Esav/ Edom/ Western Civilization continued at its own rapid pace and with its own volatile philosophies. And as the Jacobean/Israel ideal, we have traveled our own unique path. We are destined for the same place- As the Torah says- "Yitzchak (Isaac) loved Esav." We are not to totally disengage Esav, as tradition holds that Yitzchak saw the morsels of good that Esav beheld.⁹ The fruits of technology and Western thought are indeed many.

⁵ Arizal- Likutei Torah on parshat Vayetze

⁶ <http://ecofoot.org/>

⁷ The Seventh Generation Fund was founded to, among other objectives, "revise the decline in traditional, family-scale farming among the community by developing educational programs that demonstrate sustainable agriculture. <http://www.7genfund.org/aff-tra-nat-ame.html>

⁸ Breishit 33:13-14

⁹ Arizal Etz Chaim sha'ar 208, 3

As environmentalists, we must learn the lesson that Yaakov tries to give to Esav: that the considerations for our children and animals must also determine the pace of our travel. We must find sustainable vessels for our tremendous abilities of creation. When we relate to the moment at hand, our attention must focus on our shared futures on this earth, and we must always try and remember to make responsible decisions that are in accordance with this reality.