

Toldot — Generations  
2 Kislev 5780 — Nov 30, 2019  
Torah: Gen 25:19-28:9  
Haftarah: Micah 1:1-2:7  
Apostolic: Rom 9:6-16

Genesis 25:19 *This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac.* <sup>20</sup> *Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.* <sup>21</sup> *Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.* <sup>22</sup> *But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the LORD,* <sup>23</sup> *and the Lord answered her,*

*"Two nations are in your womb,  
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;  
One people shall be mightier than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger."*

<sup>24</sup> *When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.* <sup>25</sup> *The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau.* <sup>26</sup> *Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.*

<sup>27</sup> *When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp.* <sup>28</sup> *Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob...*

"The story of Isaac, interrupted by the genealogies of chapter 25, now resumes with the main emphasis on the birth of Esau and Jacob and the rivalry between them. These narratives present an ancient belief that the bitter hostility that marked the later relationships between the peoples of Israel and Edom had its origin in the prenatal experience of their founding fathers, who were twins."<sup>1</sup>

Key sibling connections to note:

- Jacob / Israel: the one chosen
- Esau / Edom: the one not chosen

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<sup>1</sup> Sarna, Nahum M. Genesis. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. Print. The JPS Torah Commentary.

## The Other Face of Esau

By Jonathan Sacks<sup>2</sup>

The Torah is an understated text, sparse in its details, elusive (hard to find) and allusive (working by suggestion) about the inner life of its characters. Yet in *Parashat Toledot* we are shown one of the most emotionally affecting scenes in the Torah. Jacob, dressed in Esau's clothes, has taken Esau's blessing. He leaves, and shortly thereafter:

*...his brother Esau came in from hunting. He too had prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, "My father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing."*

*His father Isaac asked him, "Who are you?"*

*"I am your son," he answered, "your firstborn, Esau."*

*Isaac trembled violently and said, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed."*

*When Esau heard his father's words, he cried a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me – me too, my father."*

*But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing."*

*Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob [= heel-grasper], for he has supplanted me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing." Then he asked, "Haven't you kept any blessing for me?"*

*Isaac answered Esau, "I have made him lord over you and have made all his brethren his servants, and I have sustained him with corn and new wine. What then can I do for you, my son?"*

*Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father." Then Esau lifted his voice and wept. (27:30–38)*

What is remarkable is **less what happens than how the Torah describes it**, its use of language and narrative art. In general the Torah is sparing in its details, especially about the emotional state of its characters. Its descriptions are minimalist, leaving the reader to supply what the text omits: what the characters look like, their location, body language and so on. Emmanuel Levinas was surely correct<sup>3</sup> in seeing this as an invitation to midrash, summoning the reader to complete the text in dialogue with the written word – the Torah is more like radio than television, actively **enlisting the imaginative participation of its hearers**. This is, then, a passage unusual in its literary explicitness and psychological depth of drama.

As readers, we **feel with and for Isaac and Esau**. We are drawn into their subjective states. We enter into Isaac's dawning realization that he has been deceived. We identify too with Esau, whose first thought is not betrayal or desire for revenge but simple, sharp and shocking pain ("*Bless me – me too, my father*"). Then comes Isaac's helplessness ("*What then can I do for you, my son?*") and Esau's agonized weeping – all the more poignant given what we know of

<sup>2</sup> Sacks, Jonathan. Genesis: The Book of Beginnings (Covenant & Conversation 1) . Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish tradition," in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 190–210.

him, that he is a man of the fields, rough in some ways, impetuous in others, not a man given (as Joseph will later be) to tears. The scene of the two of them together, father and son, deceived and disappointed, robbed of what should have been a moment of great tenderness and intimacy – son feeding father, father blessing son – is deeply affecting. We can imagine the painting Rembrandt might have made of it.



The binding of Isaac by Rembrandt

The question is why this level of detail is necessary. In Torah, **form follows function**.<sup>4</sup> **Nothing is accidental**. If there is a marked stylistic feature to a given section, it is there for a reason. Here, the Torah wants our sympathies to be drawn, throughout the chapter, to Esau rather than to Jacob. It is not that we feel that Esau was the rightful heir of the covenant; that history had taken a wrong turn; that things should have been otherwise. Manifestly this is not so. Rebecca favors Jacob, and in Genesis, **mothers know their children better than their fathers do**. Esau – the hunter, the man who “*despised his birthright*” (25:34) once he had sold it – was clearly not destined to be the faithful follower of an invisible, transcendent God. The Abrahamic covenant must surely pass through Jacob, the child described as “*a quiet man, staying among the tents*” (25:27). Yet nonetheless, **the Torah goes out of its way, using unusual devices of style, to enlist our sympathies with Esau, to make us enter his world and see things from his perspective**. Why?

Before we can answer this, we must first take a wider look at what we know of Esau and his descendants from the rest of the Torah.

The first is that **Esau does receive a blessing from Isaac**:

*The fat places of the earth will be your dwelling. [You can still have] the dew of heaven. But you shall live by your sword. You may have to serve your brother, but when your complaints mount up, you will throw his yoke off your neck. (27:39–40)*

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<sup>4</sup> The idea that the shape of an object should primarily relate to its intended function or purpose. Strict adherence to this idea suggests that “decorative” elements are unnecessary or more than what is called for in order to achieve the goal.

The “*fat places of the earth*” and the “*dew of heaven*” are not so circumscribed, implies Isaac, that there will not be enough for both of you. This is a blessing **both sons can enjoy without the one diminishing the other**. As for Jacob’s supremacy, it will last **only as long as he does not misuse it**. If he acts with unwarranted high-handedness, Esau will simply “*throw his yoke off*” his neck. **There is a basis here for coexistence**.

In game theory and economic theory, a **zero-sum game** is a mathematical representation of a situation in which each participant's gain or loss of utility is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the utility of the other participants. If the total gains of the participants are added up and the total losses are subtracted, they will sum to zero. Thus, cutting a cake, where taking a larger piece reduces the amount of cake available for others, is a zero-sum game **if all participants value each unit of cake equally**.

Humans have a cognitive bias towards seeing situations as zero-sum, known as zero-sum bias.<sup>5</sup>

The second insight comes when **Esau “marries out,” taking two Hittite girls as wives**. This is “*a source of bitterness*” (26:35) to Isaac and Rebecca, and provides Rebecca with the necessary pretext to reconcile Isaac with Jacob, as well as giving Jacob a legitimate excuse to leave home (“*I am disgusted with life because of those Hittite women,*” she tells Isaac, “*If Jacob marries such a Hittite girl from the daughters of this land, why should I go on living?*” [27:46]). Esau’s reaction is interesting. He “*understood that the Canaanite girls were displeasing to his father Isaac*” (28:8) and tries to ameliorate the situation by taking a third wife – Mahlat, daughter of Ishmael. The gesture fails for two obvious reasons: he does not divorce the other wives, and he has not internalized the fact that **Ishmael too has been rejected** as an heir to the Abrahamic covenant. Esau is not overly endowed with intelligence, but he cares for his father and does not wish to cause him distress.

The third glimpse into Esau’s character is offered when **the brothers finally meet again twenty-two years later**. This is one of the great passages of the Torah, full of depths and resonances. But the surface narrative is clear, and there is a rabbinic principle: “**Scripture does not depart from its plain meaning**.”<sup>6</sup> Jacob is full of fear in advance of the encounter – fear that leads him to make elaborate preparations involving “prayer, diplomacy and war.”<sup>7</sup> The night before the fateful meeting he wrestles alone with an unnamed adversary. Yet when the brothers finally meet, Esau runs to meet Jacob, embraces him, weeps, and shows none of the hostility he had once harbored. The internal drama is played out entirely within the soul of Jacob. **Esau, it seems, is swift to anger, equally swift to forget**. When Jacob, pleading with him to accept a gift of cattle and flocks, uses the deeply significant phrase, “*please accept my blessing*” (33:11) – an implicit reference to that event twenty-two years earlier – Esau shows no sign of understanding at what he is hinting. **Esau does not harbor a grudge, not because he forgives but because he forgets**.

The fourth passage, Genesis 36, is **the list of Esau’s descendants**. At first glance it is no different from the many other genealogies in Genesis, but it contains two significant pieces of information, one explicit, the other implicit. The first is the statement, “*These are the kings who*

<sup>5</sup> Ken Binmore (2007). *Playing for real: a text on game theory*. Oxford University Press US. ISBN 978-0-19-530057-4., chapters 1 & 7

<sup>6</sup> Shabbat 63a.

<sup>7</sup> Pesikta deRav Kahana 19.

*ruled in the Land of Edom before any king reigned in Israel*” (36:31). The second is the contrast between the closing verse of chapter 36 and the opening verse of chapter 37: “*These are the tribes of Esau, each with its own settlements in its hereditary lands [eretz aḥuzatam] ... Meanwhile, Jacob lived in the land where his father had lived as an alien [be’eretz megurei aviv].*” The implication could not be clearer. **Esau’s descendants establish themselves geographically and politically long before Jacob’s.** Not for them the twists and turns of covenantal history – exile, slavery, redemption and the wilderness years. **While both twins may eventually inherit the fat places of the earth and the dew of heaven, for one the route is straightforward, for the other, anything but.**

The fifth element that must be taken into account is **the shape of the relationship between the Israelites and Edomites.** God instructs the Israelites:

*You are passing by the borders of your brothers, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. Although they fear you, be very careful not to provoke them. I will not give you even one foot of their land, since I have given Mount Seir as Esau’s inheritance.*  
(Deuteronomy 2:4–5)

No less emphatic is the command:

*Do not abhor an Edomite, since he is your brother.* (Deuteronomy, 23:7)

There is nothing in these commands to remind us of the eternal strife between the two nations predicted before their birth (“*Two nations are in your womb...one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger*” [25:22–23]). During the biblical era there were **periodic tensions and shifting fortunes in the relationship between Edom and Israel, but normatively, the Israelites were commanded to respect both the Edomites and their land.**<sup>8</sup>

Combining all these elements, we can make several inferences. At the simplest level, there is a humanity here that defies all stereotypes and conventional categorizations. **Esau is a child loved by his father and loving him in return.** This is so striking that, despite the generally negative evaluation of Esau in the midrashic literature, this fact shines through:

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: no man ever honored his father as I did mine, yet I found that Esau honored his father even more than I did.<sup>9</sup>

There is at times a tendency on the part of the midrash to separate biblical characters into the wholly good and wholly bad, and for this there are good pedagogic reasons, as Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes points out.<sup>10</sup> To serve effectively as role models, biblical heroes must be seen as consistently heroic, non-heroes as systematic villains.

Yet beneath this overlay of midrash, the Torah teaches a different and equally important message, albeit one that demands a certain maturity to appreciate: **even heroes have their faults and non-heroes their virtues, and these virtues are important to God.** “The Holy One, blessed be He, does not withhold the reward of any creature” said the sages.<sup>11</sup> The Esau

<sup>8</sup> See for example, ii Samuel 8:14; ii Melakhim 8:20.

<sup>9</sup> Devarim Raba 1:15.

<sup>10</sup> In Mavo HaAggadot, printed at the beginning of standard editions of Ein Yaacov.

<sup>11</sup> Pesafim 118a.

who emerges from the Torah has none of Abraham's faith, Isaac's steadfastness or Jacob's persistence. He is carved of an altogether coarser grain. But he is not without his humanity, his filial loyalty and a decent if quick-tempered disposition.

This too is part of the Torah's message. **Just as we cannot predict God's actions in advance** ("I will be who I will be," "I will have mercy and show kindness to whomever I desire"),<sup>12</sup> **so we cannot predict in advance where God's image will shine in the affairs of mankind.** It was the sectarians of Qumran, not the rabbis, who divided mankind into the "children of light" and the "children of darkness." Such anthropological dualism is as alien to Judaism as is theological dualism.

The idea of "dualism" in any context is binary; meaning that it is either on or off, it is one way or the other, it is either good or bad with no space or room in between for any variations.

There is, however, something far more fundamental at stake in the story of Esau. It has to do with the very concept of chosenness itself. **The book of Genesis is, among other things, a profound meditation on what it is to be chosen and what it is not to be chosen.** There can be no doubt that chosenness has deep psychological consequences on both sides of the equation. **To be chosen means – as Jacob discovers – a life of high demands and great hardship** – "Few and evil have been the days of my life" (47:9), he says to Pharaoh. **But not to be chosen is also deeply disturbing.** We see this time and again – on the two occasions in which Hagar is sent away, in the relations between Joseph and his brothers, but most explicitly in the case of Leah and Rachel:

*[Jacob] also married Rachel, and he loved Rachel more than Leah...[God] saw that Leah was hated [senua]...(29:30)*

I have translated this last phrase literally to give it its full, shocking force in the Hebrew. **Leah, of course, was not hated – she was loved, Rachel was only loved more.**<sup>13</sup> Yet **the sense of rejection cuts deep**, so deep that the Torah does not hesitate to compare it to the feeling of being hated. And **one who feels rejected may hate in return.** That is why the brothers "hate" Joseph (the verb is used three times – a significant repetition – in chapter 37).

**Love chooses. But choice creates estrangement**, which leads to tension, which can sometimes erupt into conflict and violence – potential or actual. This is a theme signaled almost at the beginning of the biblical narrative, where God's choice of Abel's offering and not Cain's leads to fratricide.

Something of the deepest possible consequence is being intimidated in the story of Esau. **The choice of one does not mean the rejection of another.** Esau is not chosen, but he is also not rejected. He too will have his blessing, his heritage, his land. He too will have children who become kings, who will rule and not be ruled. He too will have his virtues recognized, above all his love and respect for his father. **Not accidentally are our sympathies drawn to him.** The Torah is saying for all time to all humanity – **not all are chosen for the rigors, spiritual and existential, of the Abrahamic covenant, but all are precious to God**, each has his or her place in the scheme of things, each has his or her virtues, talents, gifts, and each is precious in

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 3:14; 33:19.

<sup>13</sup> Both Ramban and Radak point out that the verb s-n-, which usually means "to hate," has a different meaning in biblical Hebrew when contrasted with the verb "to love." This too is its meaning in Devarim 25:15, "If a man has two wives, one loved, the other hated [senua]..." Here again, the meaning is not "hated" but "less loved." See also essay "Hearing the Torah," p. 203.

the eyes of God.<sup>14</sup> In the words God will later say to Jonah: “*You are concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow... Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?*” (Jonah 4:10). Or as Psalms puts it: “*The LORD is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made*” (145:9).

To be chosen does not mean that others are unchosen. **To be secure in one’s relationship with God does not depend on negating the possibility that others too may have a (different) relationship with Him.** Jacob was loved by his mother, Esau by his father; but what of God who is neither father nor mother but both and more than both?

In truth, **we can only know our own relationship with our parents. We can never know another’s.** Am I loved more than my brothers or sisters? Less? Once asked, the question cannot but lead to sibling rivalry – which is one of the central themes of Genesis. But the question is not a valid question. It should not be asked. A good parent loves all his or her children and never thinks of more or less. **Love is not quantifiable. It rejects comparisons.** Jacob is Jacob, heir to the covenant. Esau is Esau, doing what he does, being what he is, enjoying his own heritage and blessing. What a simple truth and how beautifully, subtly, it is conveyed. It is one of the Torah’s most profound messages to humanity – and how deeply, in an age of “the clash of civilizations,” the world needs to hear it today.

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<sup>14</sup> To be sure, there is the seemingly contrary view in Malachi: “I have loved you,” says the Lord. “But you ask, ‘How have You loved us?’” The Lord says “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated...” (Malachi 1:2–3). However, there is the remarkable comment by the Vilna Gaon that the phrase, “Esau I have hated” refers only to “the peripheral part of Esau” not his essence.

The verse in Malachi refers to particular historical circumstances. During the First Temple period there were conflicts and wars between the Israelites and Edomites. The prophet Amos attributes particular cruelty to Edom: “He pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked” (Amos 1:11). Malachi is speaking about a specific historical era, not eternity.

The issue has larger significance because, for the rabbis, Esau/Edom symbolized the Roman Empire, and then (after the conversion of Constantine), Christianity. Ishmael was the Arab world and later, Islam. On the basis of the Vilna Gaon’s comments, Rav Kook wrote this about the relationship between Judaism and these two other faiths:

Noteworthy in this respect is the statement of Rabbi Eliahu Gaon on the verse, “But Esau I hated” – “this refers to the peripheral part of Esau, but the essential part of him, his head, was interred with the patriarchs.” It is for this reason that the man of truth and integrity, Jacob, said [on his reunion with Esau], “I have seen you, and it is like seeing the face of God” (33:10). His word shall not go down as a vain utterance. The brotherly love of Esau and Jacob, Isaac and Ishmael, will assert itself above all the confusion that the evil brought on by our bodily nature has engendered. It will overcome them and transform them into eternal light and compassion. (Letters, 1, 112)

Rav Kook believed that just as in the Torah, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, were eventually reconciled, so will Judaism, Christianity and Islam be in future. They will not cease to be different, but they will learn to respect one another.

We believe as a matter of principle that “the righteous of the nations have a share in the world to come” (Hullin 92a). When Jacob was chosen, Esau was not rejected. God does not reject. “Though my mother and father might abandon me, the Lord will take me in” (Psalms 27:10). Chosenness means two things: intimacy and responsibility. God holds us close and makes special demands on us. Beyond that, God is the God of all mankind – the Author of all, who cares for all.

## Apostolic Writings

Matthew 9:10 *And as Yeshua reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Yeshua and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>12</sup> But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means: **'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.** (Hosea 6:6)' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Matthew 23:23 *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. **These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.** <sup>24</sup> You **blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!***

1 Corinthians 12:14 *For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, **God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.** <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, **there are many parts, yet one body.***

<sup>21</sup> *The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, <sup>24</sup> which our more presentable parts do not require. But **God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.** <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together...<sup>31</sup> And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

13:1 *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

<sup>4</sup> *Love is **patient and kind**; love **does not envy or boast**; it is **not arrogant** <sup>5</sup> **or rude**. It **does not insist on its own way**; it is **not irritable or resentful**; <sup>6</sup> it **does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.** <sup>7</sup> **Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.***

<sup>8</sup> ***Love never ends.** As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup> **When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.** <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

<sup>13</sup> ***So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.***

### **The Four Types of Children and Their Questions — Seder Table**

- The heedless child asks: What is the meaning of this service? — unconcerned
- The foolish child: What happened? — uninterested
- The dull child: Does not ask any questions — unaware
- The wise child: Asks lots of questions to learn the meaning of everything — discerning

### **The Four Species of the Lulav Represent Four Different Types of Jews**

- The Esrog has a good taste and a good fragrance. It represents a person with both wisdom (Torah learning) and good deeds.
- The Hadas (myrtle) has a good fragrance, but is inedible. It represents a person who has good deeds, but lacks wisdom.
- The Lulav (date palm) is edible, but has no smell. This represents the person with wisdom, but without good deeds.
- The Aravah (willow) has neither taste nor smell. It represents a person with neither good deeds nor Torah learning

On Sukkot, we gather these four species, bind them, and wave them all together. The Lulav is only kosher if all four species are taken together. If one of the species is missing, the entire Lulav is invalid.

A similar principle is taught by the composition of the incense brought in the Holy Temple. There were 11 ingredients, of which one, the chelbanah spice, smelled terrible. Yet, the incense was only valid if all the ingredients were included together. This teaches that we must look at all the Jewish people as a unit, working together.

There may be people we don't like, but we still have to deal with. We cannot simply say that certain people are not part of our world, or that they do not belong to us. On the contrary, humanity is one indivisible unit. This recognition is basic to happiness because when we realize that we are all interconnected, we can be more patient and tolerant of others.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.aish.com/h/su/wt4s/48970641.html>