

TOLEDOT

Jacob or Esau?

From the opening verses of *parashat Toledot* through the end of the Book of Genesis, Jacob is a central figure in the patriarchal narrative. His father, brother, children, uncle, and wives each have their distinct personalities, yet their individual tales are intertwined with Jacob's life story.

In the opening verses of the *parashah*, Rebecca and Isaac are presented with twin boys. Even before their birth, Jacob and Esau commence their rivalry: "But the children struggled in her womb" (Genesis 25:22). The Midrash suggests that the characteristics of these two young children were already present in utero: "When Rebecca stood near synagogues and schools, Jacob struggled to come out; when she passed idolatrous temples, Esau eagerly struggled to come out" (*Genesis Rabbah* 63:6).

As they grew up, Jacob and Esau's lives took on different patterns. The Torah tells us: "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" (Genesis 25:27). Though twins, Jacob and Esau were very different from one another. Esau was known as a hunter, a person of the field, and a violent individual who used his wiles and hunting expertise to bring game home to his father. Jacob was mild-mannered and, unlike his brother, not a man of the outdoors.

In works of Rabbinic exegesis, Jacob and Esau are portrayed as the ancestors of two different peoples. Esau represented Rome: conquerors and warriors who used the clash of arms to gain their victories. Jacob represented Israel. According to Rabbinic understanding, Jacob spent his time in study, living in the tent, and learning the ways of the Lord. Jacob, the ancestor of the Jewish people, set the stage for those who would follow him. He became a role model for those whose lives were filled with Torah study and pious behavior.

But the story does not end there. Jacob, on the advice of Rebecca, is told to take from Isaac the blessing that was rightfully Esau's. In a very dramatic scene, Jacob dresses up like his brother and approaches his blind, aged father. Isaac, sensing that something has gone awry, asks, perhaps in innocence, "Who are you my son?" (Genesis 27:18). Jacob replies, "It is I, Esau your firstborn" (Genesis 27:19). Rashi, not wanting to view Jacob as a cunning liar, interprets this text to mean that Jacob was saying to his father, "Father, it is I, your son Jacob; Esau is your eldest."

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg points out that some commentators understand this statement as suggesting that Jacob has now become Esau. The *Or Ha-Hayim* suggests that since Jacob has bought his birthright from Esau, he has also acquired some essential attributes of his brother. The *Sefat Emet* suggests that when Jacob assumes the costume of Esau, he takes on what has been Esau's role. In assuming the clothes, smell, and character of his brother, Jacob actually becomes Esau.

For centuries, the Jewish people have identified with Jacob, "a mild man, who stayed in camp" (lit. "abiding in tents"). The Torah was our life and our refuge. We were pleased to abide in tents, to be secreted away from the impurities that were part of the society in which we were not welcome. We stayed apart from worldly affairs.

However, history has shown that there have been those who have invaded those tents and refused to allow us to dwell in them safely and securely. The greatest catastrophe that ever befell our people occurred relatively recently. The Shoah was the worst possible nightmare of the Jewish people. No place was safe to hide; no land was secure. We wanted to remain mild-mannered, abiding in tents, but were forced to recognize that we became the hunter's prey.

The year 1948 brought a new situation to the Jewish people. Through the visions of builders, the declaration of the United Nations, and the blood and sweat of soldiers and fighters, a new state was established. The Jewish people returned to our ancient homeland, and once more we were counted among the nations of the world. For 2,000 years, we never had to deal with power, and we were confined to tents, living apart from

society. Then the situation changed, and a new ethos was presented to the Jewish people.

In an essay, "The Ethics of Jewish Power," Rabbi Irving Greenberg suggests that 1948 brought an entirely new scenario to the Jewish people, a scenario filled with challenges and, yet, great hope. We assumed power, and with that power came new responsibilities. Rabbi Greenberg suggests that it is better to assume that power with all of its tremendous challenges and paradoxes than to be powerless once more. He writes, "The creation of the State of Israel places the power in the hands of Jews to shape their own destiny and to affect and even control the lives of others. This is a revolutionary 180-degree turn in the moral situation. The dilemmas of power are far different from the temptations and problems of powerlessness."

The challenges of power have undergone many tests since 1948. A minority people dwells among those who live in the State of Israel. Demands for security are constant, and not a day passes without the possibility of terrorism or all-out war.

Many challenges confront Israel and the Jewish world at this juncture in our history. On the one hand, we cannot afford to be the simple, mild-mannered Jacob, and, on the other hand, we must not become Esau, the hunter. We need to live in the field, using power wisely and prudently, and in the tent, dedicating our lives to Torah values. We need to live in both places at the same time.

We possess the characteristics of both a Jacob and an Esau. We must use each judiciously for the betterment of our people and work toward a time of peace and security for all.