

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

JFrom beginning to end, Genesis 34 tells a terrifying story. Dina, Jacob's daughter – the only Jewish daughter mentioned in the entire patriarchal narratives – leaves the safety of home to go out to “look at the daughters of the land.” She is raped and abducted by a local prince, Shechem, son of the king of the town known as Shechem.

Jacob learns of this fact but does nothing until his sons return. Shimon and Levi, Dina's brothers, immediately realise that they must act to rescue her. It is an almost impossible assignment. The hostage-taker is no ordinary individual. As the son of the king, he cannot be confronted directly. The king is unlikely to order his son to release her. The other townspeople, if challenged, will come to the prince's defence. It is Shimon and Levi against the town: two against many. Even were all of Jacob's sons to be enlisted, they would still be outnumbered.

Shimon and Levi therefore decide on a ruse. They agree to let Dina marry the prince but they make one condition. The members of the town must all be circumcised. They, seeing long term advantages to an alliance with this neighbouring tribe, agree. The men of the town are weakened by the operation, and the pain is most acute on the third day. That day, Shimon and Levi enter the town and kill the entire male population. They rescue Dina and bring her home. The other brothers then plunder the town.

Jacob is horrified. “You have made me odious to the people of the land,” he says. What then were we supposed to do, ask the two brothers? “Should we have left our sister to be treated like a prostitute?” With that rhetorical question, the episode ends and the narrative moves elsewhere. But Jacob's horror at the action of his sons does not end there. He returns to it on his deathbed, and in effect curses them:

“Simeon and Levi are brothers—
their swords are weapons of violence.
Let me not enter their council,
let me not join their assembly,
for they have killed men in their anger
and hamstrung oxen as they pleased.
Cursed be their anger, so fierce,
and their fury, so cruel!
I will scatter them in Jacob

and disperse them in Israel. (Gen. 49: 5-7)

This is an extraordinary passage. It seems to lack any kind of moral message. No one comes out of it well. Shechem, the prince, would seem to be the chief villain. It was he who abducted and raped Dina in the first place. Hamor, his father, fails to reprimand him or order Dina's release. Shimon and Levi are guilty of a horrendous act of violence. The other brothers engage in looting the town.¹ Jacob seems passive throughout. He neither acts nor instructs his sons on how to act. Even Dina herself seems at best to have been guilty of carelessness in going out into the town in the first place, in what was clearly a dangerous neighbourhood – recall that both Abraham and Isaac, her grandfather and great grandfather, had feared for their own lives because of the lawlessness of the times.²

Who was in the right and who in the wrong are left conspicuously undecided in the text. Jacob condemns his sons. But his sons reject the criticism.

The debate continued and was taken up by two of the greatest rabbis in the Middle Ages. Maimonides takes the side of Shimon and Levi. They were justified in what they did, he says. The other members of the town saw what Shechem had done, knew that he was guilty of a crime, and yet neither brought him to court nor rescued the girl. They were therefore accomplices in his guilt. What Shechem had done was a capital crime, and by sheltering him the townspeople were implicated.³ This is, incidentally, a fascinating ruling since it suggests that for Maimonides the rule that “all Israel are responsible for one another” is not restricted to Israel. It applies to all societies. As Isaac Arama was to write in the fifteenth century, any crime known about and allowed to continue ceases to be an offence of individuals only and becomes a sin of the community as a whole.⁴

Nahmanides disagrees.⁵ The principle of collective responsibility does not, in his view, apply to non-Jewish societies. The Noahide covenant requires

¹ Disapproved of biblically: see Deut. 13: 13-19, 1 Samuel 15: 13-26, Esther 9: 10, 15-16.

² The Midrash is critical of Dina: see Midrash Aggadah (Buber) to Gen. 34: 1. Midrash Sechel Tov is even critical of her mother Leah for allowing her to go out.

³ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim 9: 14.

⁴ Arama, Akedat Yitzhak, Bereishit, Vayera, Gate 20, s.v. uve-Midrash.

⁵ Nahmanides, Commentary to Genesis 34: 13.

every society to set up courts of law, but it does not imply that a failure to prosecute a wrongdoer involves all members of the society in a capital crime.

The debate continues today among Bible scholars. Two in particular subject the story to close literary analysis: Meir Sternberg in his *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*⁶ and Rabbi Elhanan Samet in his studies on the parsha.⁷ They too arrive at conflicting conclusions. Sternberg argues that the text is critical of Jacob for both his inaction and his criticism of his sons for acting. Samet sees the chief culprits as Shechem and Hamor.

Both point out, however, the remarkable fact that the text deliberately deepens the moral ambiguity by refusing to portray even the apparent villains in an unduly negative light. Consider the chief wrongdoer, the young prince Shechem. The text tells us that “His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father Hamor, ‘Get me this girl as my wife.’” Compare this with the description of Amnon, son of King David, who rapes his half sister Tamar. That story too is a tale of bloody revenge. But the text says about Amnon that after raping Tamar, he “hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, ‘Get up and get out!’” (2 Samuel 13: 15). Shechem is not like that at all. He falls in love with Dina and wants to marry her. The king, Shechem’s father, and the people of the town, readily accede to the Shimon and Levi’s request that they become circumcised.

Not only does the text not demonise the people of Shechem. Neither does it paint any of Jacob’s family in a positive light. It uses the same word “deceit” (34: 13) of Shimon and Levi that it has used previously about Jacob taking Esau’s blessing and Laban substituting Leah for Rachel. Its description of all the characters, from the gadabout Dina to her excessively violent rescuers, to the plundering other brothers and the passive Jacob, the text seems written deliberately to alienate our sympathies.

The overall effect is a story with no irredeemable villains and no stainless heroes. Why then is it told at all? Stories do not appear in the Torah merely because they happened. The Torah is not a history book. It is silent on some of the most important periods of time. We know nothing, for example, about Abraham’s childhood, or about 38 of the forty years spent by the Israelites in the wilderness. Torah means “teaching, instruction, guidance.” What teaching does the Torah want us to draw from this narrative out of which no one emerges well?

⁶ Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 444-81.

⁷ Elhanan Samet, *Iyunim be-Parshat ha-Shevuah*, third series, Israel: Yediot Aharonot, 2012, 149-171.

There is an important thought experiment devised by Andrew Schmookler known as the parable of the tribes.⁸ Imagine a group of tribes living close to one another. All choose the way of peace except one that is willing to use violence to achieve its ends. What happens to the peace-seeking tribes? One is defeated and destroyed. A second is conquered and subjugated. A third flees to some remote and inaccessible place. If the fourth seeks to defend itself it too will have to have recourse to violence. “The irony is that successful defence against a power-maximising aggressor requires a society to become more like the society that threatens it. Power can be stopped only by power.”⁹

There are, in other words, four possible outcomes: [1] destruction, [2] subjugation, [3] withdrawal, and [4] imitation. “In every one of these outcomes the ways of power are spread throughout the system. This is the parable of the tribes.” Recall that all but one of the tribes seeks peace and has no desire to exercise power over its neighbours. However, if you introduce a single violent tribe into the region, violence will eventually prevail, however the other tribes choose to respond. That is the tragedy of the human condition.

As I was writing this essay in the summer of 2014, Israel was engaged in a bitter struggle with Hamas in Gaza in which more than 1,000 people died. The state of Israel had no more desire to be engaged in this kind of warfare than did our ancestor Jacob. Throughout the campaign I found myself recalling the words earlier in our parsha about Jacob’s feelings prior to his meeting with Esau: “Jacob was very afraid and distressed” (Gen. 32: 8), about which the sages said, “Afraid, lest he be killed, distressed lest he be forced to kill.”¹⁰ What the episode of Dina tells us is not that Jacob, or Shimon and Levi, were right, but rather that there can be situations in which there is no right course of action; where whatever you do is wrong; where every option involves the abandonment of some moral principle.

That is Schmookler’s point, that “power is like a contaminant, a disease, which once introduced will gradually but inexorably become universal in the system of competing societies.”¹¹ Shechem’s single act of violence against Dina forced two of Jacob’s sons into violent reprisal and in the end everyone was either contaminated or dead. It is indicative of the moral depth of the Torah that it does not hide this terrible truth from us by depicting one side as guilty, the other as innocent.

Violence defiles us all. It did then. It does now.

© 2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

⁸ Andrew Bard Schmookler, *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*. Berkeley: U of California, 1984.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ Quoted by Rashi ad loc.

¹¹ Schmookler, *ibid.*, 22.

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The biblical kashrut laws for Jews have always been a powerful tool in keeping us a "nation set apart." We left Jacob last week leaving Laban and Laban-land behind, heaven-bent on returning to the land of Abraham and to the house of Isaac. Jacob understands that his inner self has been overtaken by the deceitful and aggressive hands of Esau, that he must return to his ancestral home in order to recapture the Abrahamic birthright. But what exactly are the building blocks of this birthright? Is it possible that Esau is now even more deserving, or at least as deserving of it as is Jacob? What is the real content - and significance - of our Jewish birthright? The very first prerequisite for the carrier of the birthright is a very strong Hebrew identity, a powerful familial connection which contributes - and defines - the link to a specific and unique heritage and ancestry.

Abraham established his commitment to the Hebrew identity when he insisted upon purchasing a separate gravesite for his wife Sarah, when he was willing to spend a small fortune in establishing a Hebrew cemetery beyond the various sites of the Hittites. He defines himself as an alien resident, sees himself as living amongst the Hittites but certainly not as being existentially a Hittite, and therefore refuses an "of right" burial for Sarah in any Hittite plot of land (Gen. 23:3-20).

Esau certainly is biblically described as having a strong sense of familial identity. He demonstrates strong feelings of filial respect and devotion; the Bible even records that Isaac loved Esau because he made certain to provide his father with the venison he dearly loved (Gen. 25:28). He even has strong sibling ties to his brother, despite Jacob's underhanded deception surrounding the blessings. In the Torah portion this week, the Bible tells us how Esau first seemed to have set up a greeting brigade of 400 potential warriors to "welcome" the return of the prodigal brother (32:7); but once Esau actually sees his younger brother and his family, his heart apparently melts with brotherly love: "Esau ran to meet him; he hugged him, fell upon his

neck and kissed him." (33:4). Esau even wishes for the two of them to travel together and to settle down together. "Let us travel together and move on; I will go alongside of you" (33:12). It is Jacob who politely refuses: "You know that my children are weak and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. Please go ahead of me I shall eventually come to you in Seir" (33:13-14).

Yes, Esau has strong familial identity. However, Abraham had two other crucial characteristics which Esau lacks: continuity and destiny. Continuity is most meaningfully expressed in marrying a suitable mate: from our modern perspective, taking a Jewish spouse (so that the children will remain Jewish), and from the biblical perspective, not marrying an immoral Canaanite. Esau takes Hittite wives (26:34), "Judith the daughter of Beerli and Basemath the daughter of Elon." Perhaps he comforted himself with the fact that his first wife had a Jewish name (Judith) and the second had a name which means sweet-smelling perfume. Esau's mentality is apparently as superficial as the name "Edom" he acquired from his exterior red complexion as well as the red colors of the lentil soup he exchanged for his birthright and the venison he gave his father. Moreover, when he realizes how upset his parents are with his marital choice, he still doesn't look to his mother's family in Aram Naharayim for a mate, but rather chooses a daughter of Ishmael, the "wild ass of a man whose hand is over everything." And he takes this wife not instead of but in addition to his Hittite wives (28:9).

Another test for continuity is a unique daily lifestyle, the ability to delay gratification and act with discipline, especially in the sexual and gustatory realms. The biblical kashrut laws for Jews have always been a powerful tool in keeping us a "nation set apart" which didn't fall prey to assimilation. Esau sells his birthright for a portion of lentil soup - a thick, juicy filet mignon steak in our contemporary language. He even expresses his desire to have the broth "poured into his mouth" as one would feed a camel (25:30, see B.T. Shabbat, P.155 b, Rashi ad loc). To have one's eyes on a historic mission, to realize the goal of having "all the families of the earth blessed by us" (Gen. 12:3) through our vision of a G-d of compassionate justice, morality and peace (Gen. 18:19), requires a lifestyle of commitment to an ideal and delayed gratification which is foreign to - and even impossible for - the character displayed by Esau. When Jacob tells Esau that he will meet up with him in Seir, our Midrash connects this rapprochement to the messianic period when "the saviors will go up to Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esau" (Gen. 33:14, Obadiah 1:21, Bereshit Raba 78, 14).

Jacob then continues to travel to Succoth, which implies the tabernacle and the Holy Temple, the place in Jerusalem from where our message to the

world will eventually emanate (Isaiah 2, Micah 4). But before Jacob can affirm his covenantal continuity and begin to achieve his destiny, he must first disgorge the grasping hands of Esau which have overtaken his personality and substituted the Jacob (Yaakov) of "he shall emerge triumphant at the end" with "heel-sneak"; he must restore his "image of G-d" which was the source of that "wholehearted individual who was a studious dweller in tents." This is the purpose of that mysteriously eerie nocturnal struggle with an anonymous assailant, a wrestling match which must precede the Esau-Jacob face-to-face confrontation. Jacob is all alone (32:25); his struggle is an inner battle, to rid himself of the heel-sneak Esau in his soul. And he wins, both over divine forces and human powers (32:29); he has seen G-d (Elohim) face-to-face, and succeeded in restoring his own divine image by exorcising Esau the heel-sneak. He now proudly stands Israel, the righteous representative of G-d and the fitting recipient of the Abrahamic birthright. ©2014 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

One of the basic questions raised by the commentators to the Torah as well as by all of Jewish history is determining the true relationship of Jacob and Esau. Is Esau the implacable enemy of Jacob and so has he remained throughout human history? Or, is he only the wayward brother of Jacob who is capable of reconciliation and cooperation in building a better and more just society?

This question has been debated in Jewish sources for millennia. The Talmud itself records for us varying and even contradictory opinions regarding the matter. Over the long years of Jewish dispersion as history itself shows, especially in the countries of Europe, Jacob has suffered mightily at the hands of Esau. This fact alone naturally colors the mood and attitude of the Jewish people towards the non-Jewish and especially the Christian world.

In the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century, Jewish Europe sought to join Esau in all ways and endeavors. Hundreds of thousands of Jews converted to Christianity and millions more adopted the philosophy, worldview and behavior pattern of Esau while still officially remaining Jacob. This trend was rudely interrupted by the events of World War II and of the Holocaust.

To a great extent European Jewry was no longer the driving force behind Jewish life generally the world over. However, much of American Jewry, substantial in numbers, influence and wealth, continued to pursue the ways of Esau and his less than wise lifestyle. American Jewry, across its entire spectrum, views Esau as our brother, and to a great extent as our friendly and benevolent brother. We have to pray and

hope that this assessment is a correct one.

However, it is undeniable that Esau in many respects remains our enemy. The non-Moslem world of Esau loses no opportunity to criticize, demonize and oppose Jacob at every turn. The Catholic Church constantly supports the Muslim narrative of the events in the Middle East, even though it is Christianity and Christians that are being persecuted and killed regularly by Muslim extremists.

It seems that the only thing that matters is that somehow Israel and the Jews should be deprived of legitimacy and security. So in that sense, it is certainly clear that Esau is not a benevolent brother but rather a most formidable foe. Over the long history of Jews in the Exile, neither assimilation nor acculturation has helped dissuade Esau from persecuting Jacob.

In the Bible itself, Jacob attempts to buy his way out of trouble by temporarily appeasing Esau with wealth and money. But in the long run, this tactic also fails to solve the "Esau Problem" as far as Jews are concerned. After the creation of the State of Israel, Jews the world over hoped that Esau would finally reconcile himself with Jacob - and with Jacob's new found resilience and accomplishments. Apparently that was too much to hope for.

So, the "Esau Problem" still looms large in Jewish private and public life. Apparently, the solution and removal of the problem is destined to occur only in messianic times. Meanwhile, we still continue to wrestle with Esau, whether he as foe or brother. ©2014 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Is public protest an effective means of bringing about change? While many insist on its value, some have argued that demonstrations on behalf of Jewish causes precipitate anti-Semitic backlash. This week's Torah portion offers an insight into this debate.

After 22 years of separation, Yaakov (Jacob), preparing to meet his brother Esav (Esau), is told that Esav is geared up to do battle. (Genesis 32:7) When they meet however, the opposite occurs. Esav embraces Yaakov. (Genesis 33:4) What prompted the change?

Commentators point to a pivotal incident that took place between Yaakov receiving the report of Esav's war preparations and the actual encounter. This is the episode of the struggle between Yaakov and a mysterious being in the middle of the night. Yaakov wins the struggle but in the process is wounded. He leaves the battle limping. (Genesis 32:25-33)

Benno Yaakov, the German Jewish

commentator, feels that Yaakov's limping precipitated Esav's change of heart. According to his comments, when Esav saw Yaakov struggling to walk, he felt compassion for him. In Esav's mind Yaakov had been defeated. From Benno Yaakov's perspective, the heart of the adversary is won by bending and ingratiating ourselves by walking wounded. This approach makes sense as Benno Yaakov lived in Germany in the early 20th century--a time in which the Jews were seeking good relations with the German government.

Rashbam sees it differently. He is bewildered by Yaakov's desire to be alone just before the struggle with the mysterious being? (Genesis 32:25) If Yaakov was intent on protecting his family why did he abandon them at that crucial time?

Rashbam suggests that up to this point, when faced with a challenge, Yaakov always ran. He ran after he took the blessings from Esav. He said nothing when he found Leah and not Rachel the morning after his wedding night, and he fled from his dishonest father-in-law Lavan's (Laban) house in the dead of the night. Just hours before confronting Esav it seemed that Yaakov finally had no choice but to stand strong. At the last moment, however, Rashbam insists that he was alone because once again he was seeking to flee. As much as Yaakov had carefully prepared for the inevitable confrontation with Esav, his nature took over - once again he saw fleeing as the only solution.

For Rashbam, the mysterious being was an emissary of G-d sent to Yaakov. In the end, the emissary wounds Yaakov, making it difficult for him to walk. This was G-d's way of telling Yaakov that he no longer could run. When facing an adversary, it's important to stand fast.

Thus, when Esav sees Yaakov standing with pride, unwilling to run, he gains respect for him and embraces him. Sometimes, the only way to gain respect from others is if one first has self respect. Witnessing a preparedness to stand tall, Esav gained new respect for Yaakov. He was no longer a brother who could be pushed around. It was that new resolve on the part of Yaakov that earned Esav's respect and caused him to decide to embrace Yaakov rather than fight him. Rashbam, living during the Crusades, may have been offering advice to his own generation of persecuted Jews, letting them know that if you cave in to anti-Semitism you arouse more anti-Semitism.

Interestingly, after struggling with the mysterious man, Yaakov is given another name, Yisrael. No longer was he only Yaakov which comes from the word *akev* (heel), one who, even as he negotiates, runs on his heels. Now he is also Yisrael, which means the fighter who has the strength to prevail.

We are told that Yaakov retains both names. This is unlike other characters in the Torah, such as Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah whose old names,

Avram and Sarai were never used again after the Divine giving of their new identity. The message of the dual name is clear; both the Yaakov approach of behind the scenes discussion with authority and a willingness to negotiate and compromise and the Yisrael component of and outspoken advocacy are crucial. They work in sync, each complementing the other to achieve the goal of justice and *tikkun olam*.
© 2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

No News is Jews News

Yaakov's family faced a tremendous crisis. While passing through the city of Shechem, Dena, their sister was attacked and was violated by Shechem, the son of King Chamor, who bore the same name as the city. Shechem later claimed that he desperately wanted to marry her! No one in the entire city brought the prince to justice and Yaakov's sons were not going to ignore that behavior.

They were not ready for open warfare either, and so they developed a ruse. They claimed that they were ready to form a harmonious relationship with the entire population of the city of Shechem. "We will give our daughters to you, and take your daughters to ourselves; we will dwell with you, and become a single people" (Braishis 34:16). However, there was one condition. Every male of Shechem had to circumcise. Yaakov's children insisted that it would be a disgrace for the daughters of Abraham to marry uncircumcised men. Upon direction from King Chamor and Prince Shechem the entire town agreed, and three days later, when the people of Shechem were in painful recuperation from their surgery, Yaakov's children avenged Dina's honor. Despite Yaakov's consternation, they attacked the male population and wiped them out.

The question is simple: Why ask the people of Shechem to circumcise? If Yaakov's children wanted to attack them, why go through a process of converting them? They should have asked them to fast for three days. That would have made them even weaker. They could have asked them to hand over all their weapons. Why ask them to do an act is so blatantly Jewish?

On September 30, 2000, the word *intafada* was almost unknown to the average American. And then the riots began. On one of the first days of what has now been over three years of unceasing violence, against innocent Israelis, The New York Times, Associated Press and other major media outlets published a photo of a young man who looked terrified, bloodied and battered. There was an Israeli soldier in the background brandishing a billy-club. The caption in everyone of the papers that carried the photo identified the teen as an innocent Palestinian victim of the riots -- with the clear

implication that the Israeli soldier was the one who beat him. The world was in shock and outrage at the sight of the poor teen, blood oozing from his temple crouching beneath the club-wielding Israeli policeman. Letters of protest and sympathy poured in from the genteel readers of the gentile world.

The victim's true identity was soon revealed. Dr. Aaron Grossman wrote the NY Times that the picture of the Israeli soldier and the Palestinian on the Temple Mount was indeed not a Palestinian. The battered boy was actually his son, Tuvia Grossman, a Yeshiva student from Chicago. He, and two of his friends, were pulled from their taxicab by a mob of Palestinian Arabs, and were severely beaten and stabbed. The Israeli soldier wielding the club was actually attempting to protect Tuvia from the vicious mob.

All of a sudden the outrage ceased, the brutal attack was almost ignored and a correction buried somewhere deep amongst "all the news that is fit to print" re-identified Tuvia Grossman as "an American student in Israel." It hardly mentioned that he was an innocent Jew who was nearly lynched by Arabs. This blatant hypocrisy in news coverage incidentally help launch a media watchdog named Honest Reporting.com.

Rav Yonasan Eibeschutz, zt"l, explains that Yaakov's children knew something that was as relevant in Biblical times as it is in today's "New York" times. Yaakov's sons knew the secret of society. Have them circumcised. Make them Jews. Then you can do whatever you want with them and no one will say a word. You can wipe out an entire city -- as long as it is not a gentile city. If Shechem had remained a gentile city had the people not circumcised according to the laws of Avraham then Yaakov's children would have been condemned by the entire world. But Yaakov's children knew better. They made sure that the Shechemites, went through a Jewish circumcision. Shechem now was a Jewish city; and when a Jewish city is destroyed, the story becomes as irrelevant as an American student attacked by a Palestinian mob in Yerushalayim! Unfortunately it is that simple and that old. ©2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Before returning to Canaan, Yaakov sent a massive gift to his brother Eisav, hoping to make amends for having "stolen" Yitzchok's blessing decades earlier (B'reishis 32:14-21). Initially, Eisav declined (33:9), but Yaakov persisted, asking Eisav to "take my present from my hand" (33:10) followed by asking him to "take now my blessing that was brought to you" or to "please take my blessing that was brought to you" (33:11) -- depending on how the word "na" is used. Since the point of the gift was to undo the damage their

relationship had suffered when Yitzchok blessed Yaakov instead of Eisav (see 27:41), the choice of wording seems to be a poor one. Why use the word "blessing" to describe his gift if it was because of a blessing that there was such tension in the first place?

Rashi is among the commentators who explain that the word "blessing," in the right context, can refer to a gift. Although this helps us understand how the word can be used in this context, it doesn't explain why Yaakov would use it if its primary meaning would remind Eisav of what he had done. It is particularly perplexing since Yaakov had been using the word "mincha" until now, including in the same statement (in the previous verse). The very fact that Yaakov repeated a similar thought ("take my present" and "take my blessing") indicates a deeper message than just asking Eisav twice more in rapid succession to accept his gift.

Last year (<http://tinyurl.com/kqaoaby>), I addressed this issue (among others), suggesting that Yaakov was offering to return their father's blessing to Eisav, an offer that Eisav turned down. As I have explained on numerous occasions (e.g. <http://tinyurl.com/mqph6x6>), the blessing Yitzchok wanted to give Eisav was not "the blessing of Avraham," as that one was given to Yaakov before he fled to Charan (28:4). Rather, it was a blessing for material prosperity. Yitzchok thought (was hoping?) that Eisav and Yaakov could work together, with Eisav providing the physical needs for both of them, and Yaakov focusing on the family's spiritual mission. Rivka knew that Eisav would not share his material wealth with Yaakov, so instructed Yaakov to "steal" the blessing so that the spiritual mission could be supported. Eisav was upset that he lost the blessing, not because he was now excluded from the family's holy mission, but because he wanted the material success the blessing would bring.

Eisav had agreed to give his birthright to Yaakov in exchange for the food he was cooking, but Eisav never agreed to let Yaakov take their father's blessing, nor had he ever agreed to no longer be part of the family's mission. Yaakov therefore offered Eisav to "take my blessing," i.e. reclaim the role that Yitzchok had wanted him to have. Aside from now giving Eisav the choice to either be part of the mission or to exclude himself from it, seeing that Yaakov had more than enough for himself (as evidenced by the size of the gift he was able to offer Eisav while still retaining vast wealth for himself) might convince Eisav that his physical wants and needs wouldn't suffer even if he took back the blessing and took on the responsibility of supporting Yaakov. On the other hand, Eisav was also able to see that he didn't need the blessing Yaakov had taken in order to be fabulously wealthy (see 33:9), so could decide whether or not to partner with Yaakov based on the value he placed on the mission rather than on what he stands to gain from it.

Giving Eisav a chance to consider "taking the blessing," i.e. partner with Yaakov by supporting him, may have been appropriate and praiseworthy, but it also put Eisav on the spot. How could he say "no" to Yaakov's offer even if he really didn't want to? By asking Eisav to accept his gift twice, in rapid succession, using the word "blessing" the second time, Yaakov was couching his offer in a way that allowed Eisav to save face, as turning it down would not be an explicit rejection of the family's mission (since the word "blessing" could also refer to the gift). For this reason, only the first part, where Yaakov calls it a "mincha" (which only refers to the gift), includes the expression "from my hand," since the physical gift would be transferred from Yaakov's possession to Eisav's, and only the first part includes the gift being compared to a vassal king paying tribute to the king he is subservient to. [From this perspective, the second part would read "take now my blessing," since it was a one time offer; Eisav wouldn't be able to change his mind later.]

Yaakov may have had more than two concurrent messages in mind when he asked Eisav to "take his blessing." Not only was he offering a physical gift, with no spiritual strings attached (which Eisav finally accepted) and the opportunity to become his spiritual partner, by accepting the role their father had envisioned for him (which Eisav did not accept), but Yaakov also referred to the physical gift as a "blessing" to make a point.

Often, Eisav saying "he has much" (33:9) is contrasted with Yaakov saying "he has everything" (33:11) to indicate that despite how much Eisav had, he was never satisfied and always wanted more, while Yaakov was satisfied with whatever he had, considering it as if he had "everything." However, Rashi (33:11) says that Eisav was saying that he had more than he needed (so had no need for Yaakov's gift). After hearing that Eisav was no longer concerned that not getting Yitzchok's blessing meant not being fabulously wealthy, Yaakov referred to his wealth as his "blessing" and added that he "has whatever he needs," as the blessing was only meant to provide what was needed, not overabundant wealth. [This is why Yaakov went back for the "small vessels" (see Rashi on 32:25), as whatever G-d blessed him with must have a spiritual purpose.] By telling Eisav that his material possessions came from the blessing designed to support the spiritual mission, as opposed to what Eisav had, he was pointing out that, from a purely material standpoint, Eisav's blessing was better. Rather than making things worse, by referring to it as "his blessing" Yaakov was telling Eisav that he (Eisav) was better off (from his perspective) without it.

This would also explain why Yaakov waited until the second part, where he referred to it as "his blessing," before responding to Eisav's "I have a lot" with "I have everything." It would also mean that

Yaakov was asking him to "please take my blessing," since he has no use for it (as opposed to "take my blessing now"). However, we would need to understand how Yaakov could have so much extra to give to Eisav if the blessing only provided what was needed. [Rabbeinu Efrayim, who explains Yaakov's use of the word "blessing" as referring to the wealth he accumulated because of Yitzchok's blessing, wonders whether Yaakov was punished for giving some of it away.] One possibility is that it really wasn't "extra," as Yaakov really needed it for himself, and therefore stopped in Succos for a year and a half before returning home (33:17) in order to rebuild the lost flocks that he gave to Eisav. Another possibility is that until Eisav turned down Yaakov's offer to become his partner, the blessing provided enough for both (with Yaakov therefore offering Eisav whatever he didn't need, since that would have been his share); it was only after Eisav officially turned down Yaakov's offer that the blessing only brought exactly what Yaakov needed.

It is also possible that the massive gift Yaakov gave Eisav wasn't really extra at all; it was needed to help Yaakov patch up his relationship with his brother. Which gives us another reason why Yaakov would refer to it as "his blessing." If the gift for Eisav, meant to help them reconcile, was included in what G-d gave Yaakov for his spiritual needs, then getting along with his brother must be something G-d really wanted. ©2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals to us the true nature of Edom, descendants of Eisav, and displays her two-sided character. It teaches us to recognize Edom's perpetual hatred for the Jewish people and never to trust her friendship. Although there may be moments when Edom displays true brotherhood we must always be wary of these situations and never establish any close association with her.

The haftorah opens with a moving description of a plot acted out against Edom, descendants of Eisav. The prophet Ovadiah says, "How was Eisav pillaged, his hidden treasures sought out? To the borders they sent you (Eisav), all of your allies enticed you: then they were able to overtake you." (1:6) These particular passages refer to an historic moment when the surrounding allies of Edom pretended to rush to her assistance in her war against a powerful neighbor. The allies accompanied Edom all the way to the end of her borders and then abandoned her, leaving her entire country unprotected. They returned inside her country and invaded the entire Edom, now in a most vulnerable state. The prophet draws our attention to this specific episode to demonstrate the unique character of Edom's "brotherhood." Historically speaking, although Edom always appeared politically as a true ally this

relationship was only superficial and when the opportunity arose she would typically turn against her loyal "friends" and leave them stranded. This time, her allies gave her a taste of her own medicine and, after luring Edom into war they turned on her and pillaged her entire country.

This two faced nature of Eisav was, in fact, the undertone of our Jewish nation's sad experiences throughout the Roman Empire, largely composed of the descendents of Eisav. To demonstrate this, the prophet Ovadiah focuses on a specific aspect of the Roman era, the role the Edomites played in the destruction of the second Temple. Ovadiah says, "On the day the nations took the Jewish people captive, and entered the Jewish gates casting lots over Yerushalayim, you were also amongst them." (1:11) In truth, the war against Yerushalayim belonged to the Romans but Edom could not stand idly by and therefore gladly participated in the destruction of the walls of the Bais Hamikdash. The Malbim (ad loc.) reminds us that these descendents of Edom were actually alleged Jewish converts who were accepted during the reign of Herod. Initially these Edomites gave the impression of sincerity and were warmly welcomed by the Jewish people. But, as could have been predicted, Edom could not be trusted and when the Jews were down, these "converts" rallied against their own Jewish "brethren" and readily assisted in destroying them.

This two faced nature expressed itself even in the earlier Babylonian exile when Eisav's descendents offered their assistance in driving the final nails into the Jewish coffin. The Prophet Ovadiah says, "And don't stand by the crossroads to finish off refugees." (1:14) The Yalkut Shimoni (549) explains that this passage refers to the cunning strategy of the Edomites during our first exile. They would station themselves a short distance behind the Babylonian army and wait in ambush for the Jewish refugees. They reasoned, "If the Jews win we'll say we're here to help them and if the Babylonians win we'll help them kill the remaining Jews." Again we are reminded of the unique "brotherhood" of Edom. Due to their two-faced character, they could easily pass for true brothers awaiting to help the Jews in their time of distress. But, in truth, this disguise only provided them a perfect opportunity to eradicate any trace of the Jewish people, should the situation arise.

Edom's pattern of "brotherhood" traces itself all the way back to Edom's predecessor, Eisav. In this week's sedra, (Torah portion) we read that Eisav ran towards his brother Yaakov to embrace him. Although Eisav had been Yaakov's arch enemy from birth, it seems that he had undergone a sincere change of attitude. Yaakov had sent an elaborate present to Eisav as a gesture of true friendship and, for the first time in their lives, a sense of friendship and brotherhood developed. The Torah relates that in response to this

gift, "Eisav ran to his brother, embraced him, and "kissed" him. (Bereishis 32:4) However, Chazal note the mysterious dots which appear in the Torah above the word "kissed" and reveal that Eisav did not truly intend to kiss his brother. In actuality, he attempted to bite him, but was unsuccessful in his endeavor. His perpetual hatred was so deep that even in this true moment of friendship he could not subdue his innermost feelings and found himself compelled to express them. In explanation of this, Rashi (ad loc) quotes the classic statement of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai, "It is a set principle that Eisav hates Yaakov." This warns us never to lose sight of Eisav's inner hatred and even when true gestures of "friendship" are displayed never to overlook what lies beneath the surface.

Edom, the present day Eisav will never be our true friend and we must always be wary of her association with us. We should never become too closely related to her and must always remember her true character. This deep seeded hatred remains throughout the generations until the final day when, as Ovadiah says, "The saviors will rise from Mount Zion to judge the (inhabitants of Eisav's) mountain and then the perfect reign will belong to Hashem." (1:21) ©2012 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Before encountering his evil brother, Esav, Jacob divided all that he had into two camps. The Torah states: "And (Jacob) said 'If Esau will come to one camp and smite it, the remaining camp will be saved' " (Genesis 32:9). What lesson do we learn from Jacob's action?

Rashi, the great commentator, tells us that Jacob had three strategies to deal with the threat from his brother: 1) he sent gifts to appease him 2) he prayed for Divine assistance 3) he prepared for war.

Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz points out that Jacob did not rely on his righteousness; he made every humanly effort possible. The forefathers kept to natural laws in dealing with life situations. After all, the laws of nature are the Almighty's laws (He did set up the universe!). This is our goal -- to do all that is in our power, but to realize that our success ultimately depends upon the Almighty. Based on *Growth Through Torah* by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2014 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com

