

Parshat Toldot**Esav and Yakkov: It Didn't Have to Be This Way
Rabba Yaffa Epstein - Advanced Kollel Class of 2015**

One of the most heartbreaking moments in the Torah is in this week's Parsha. No, it's not the moment when Esav cries out with a bitter cry, nor when Isaac shakes in fear... it comes much earlier in the story.

The Torah states:

”וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת-עֵשָׂו כִּי-צִיד בְּכִיּוֹ וּרְבֵקָה אֲהָבָת אֶת-יַעֲקֹב:”

“And Yitzchak loved Esav... And Rivka loved Yaakov” (Genesis 25:28)

The love of their parents is divided here, and in many ways, the fate of these two beautiful children, who have yet to have any strife between them, has been sealed as oppositional.

How does this come to happen? What are we to learn from these parent's favoritism of a particular child?

Let's start with Rivka. First, it is important to note that earlier in this same chapter, Rivka had already received a prophecy from God that these two children were to be separate nations, and that the younger would rule over his brother. It is understandable that she would be pre-disposed toward her youngest child as a result. Add to this that Rivka had left home at such an early age, and that she must have been quite lonely and scared in her new home. She then becomes barren, and subsequently experiences an exceedingly difficult pregnancy. What trauma this young woman has already experienced! It would make sense that she would latch on to the younger child who was to be the powerful and strong nation, and to do all in her power to help him.

Yitzchak too is no stranger to trauma, after his experience with the Akedah, and losing his mother. The pain must have been enormous. And of course, let's not forget how traumatizing it must have been for a young boy to lose his only brother, banished by his father. What must it have felt like to try to assume parenthood after what he had witnessed?

Add to this, that Yitzchak has an additional weight on his shoulders, that of knowing he had received the birthright from his father, although he was not the oldest child! One could imagine that when he himself became a father, he would do all in his power not to repeat the mistakes his own father had made, and to certainly be sure to pass on the birthright to his oldest child.¹

Yet, while we could say that Yaakov and Esav were doomed to be enemies from the start, Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch does not believe so. In his commentary to the Torah, Genesis 25:27, he states:

Had Isaac and Rebecca studied Esau's nature and character early enough, and asked themselves, how can even an Esau, how can all the strength and energy, agility and courage that lies slumbering in this child be won over to be used in the

¹ See the Mei-HaShiloach Vol. II Genesis, Toldot, 3, who comments that Yitzchak was unsure about which of his sons was actually deserving of the Birthright, and so he doubles down on the Halachic certainty of giving it his oldest son.

service of God ... then Jacob and Esau, with their totally different natures could still have remained twin brothers in spirit and life; quite early in life Esau's "sword" and Jacob's "spirit" could have worked hand in hand, and who can say what a different aspect the whole history of the ages might have presented?"²

Interestingly here, Rav Hirsch does claim that Esav and Yaakov have different natures. They are not two blank slates that were molded by their parents. Rather – they were born, as we all are, with personality traits, strengths, weaknesses, interests, inclinations, likes and dislikes. This is not a value judgment. Esav was gifted with the potential to channel his nature into a relationship with God. What turned these two children into opponents (although later there does remain the hope of reconciliation) is that they were not seen for who they were. Their parents were not capable of allowing them to flourish and develop.

Perhaps Yitzchak and Rivka's own stories, about themselves, their pasts, the traumas they had experienced, caused them to miss who their children really were. Perhaps it prevented them from being able to help their children utilize their individual natures and strengths, and channel them into Divine service.

This is of course a critical message for those who are educators and parents. Each child is unique and deserving of the dignity of being seen in their fullness and given the tools to develop themselves.

Yet, there is a beautiful message for the rest of us as well. We are living in a time when cynicism is rampant, and polarization seems inevitable. Every newspaper, politician, and political poll have pointed out how divided our cities and towns are, how extreme our views have become. The rifts between us can feel unbreachable.

By telling us the story of Rivka and Yitzchak's parental mistakes, the Torah offers us all an important lesson. Do not get stuck in the stories we tell about ourselves, nor in the stories we tell about others. We have to see the people in front of us for who they are, and not allow our limited perceptions to define what we could build together.

If Esav and Yaakov could have been allowed to develop into their true selves, we too can overcome our differences. We must not give in to cynicism, or the stories we tell about the other. We must return to those who are different from us, as twin brothers "in spirit and life."



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² Translation taken from Rabbi Dr. Yosef Kalinsky from YU.org.