

תולדות

A WINDOW ON EISAV

After the birth of Yaakov, all humanity existed merely as a background for *Klal Yisrael* (see the Rambam's introduction to his commentary on the *Mishnah* where he explains the statement, "From the time of the destruction of the Holy Temple all that Hashem has left in this world are the four cubits of the *halachah*.") The children of Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov are the purpose of creation; other nations are only spectators in the arena of mankind. In order to understand the relationship of the Jewish people to the rest of the world, it is necessary to understand the role of Eisav, who represents the ideology of the Gentile world. The two sons of Yitzchak, Yaakov and Eisav, personify good versus evil for all eternity.

When Rivkah was pregnant with Yaakov and Eisav, she became concerned because:

ויתרצו הבנים בקרבה

And the children struggled within her (*Bereishis* 25:22).

She therefore went to the prophet, Sheim, to determine what actually was happening (Rashi *ibid.*). Sheim prophesied:

ורב יעבד צעיר

And the elder shall serve the younger (*Bereishis* 25:24).

Readers of the Torah gloss over this passage — taking it literally — thinking that the younger son will demonstrate superiority over the older son. However, we must understand that this was a prophetic formula issued by Hashem for the future success of Yaakov and Eisav. Rivkah was informed that in order for her two sons to be successful, they were to work within an unequal partnership, with the younger son recognized as the leader and the older son accepting the role of assistant. Yaakov was to be the "inside man," — "A plain man dwelling in tents" (*Bereishis* 25:27). Eisav was to be the "outside man," — "A cunning hunter, a man of the field" (*Ibid.*). It was only in this type of arrangement that they would be able to bring the final redemption.

Eisav rejected his assignment. Although Yaakov possessed the innate superiority, Eisav would not accept a position of subservience. He even fooled his father Yitzchak (who was not privy to this prophecy) by being *harishon admoni* — "First born and ruddy" (*Bereishis* 25:25). Yitzchak felt that the first born was probably the superior one, and certainly Eisav's ruddiness indicated an energy level necessary for leadership. The fact that Eisav ultimately relocated to the "mountain land of Seir" (*Bereishis* 36:8) indicated his rejection of any type of partnership with Yaakov.

Rashi presents a difficult concept when he states,

מן המעים הם נפרדים זה לרשעו וזה לתומו

From the womb they were separated, one to his wickedness and the other to his righteousness (*Bereishis 25:23*);

confirming the passage in *Tehillim*,

זרו רשעים מרחם

Sinners are planted from the womb (58:4).

Considering that every human being is guaranteed free will by Hashem, how is it possible to label Eisav as wicked even before he had an opportunity to actually sin or choose a righteous path? This is a very difficult issue which the Rambam raises in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (5:5). It can best be understood with a passage from the Prophet Yeshayah (41:4),

קרא הדורות מראש

“I proclaim the generations in advance” i.e. I proclaim but do not determine.

Hashem’s knowledge of man’s future behavior does not interfere with the individual’s ability to utilize his own free will. Hashem’s knowledge in itself is not the determining factor in man’s choice of behavior. Hence, it would not be problematic for Hashem to label Eisav a sinner before birth, because although absolute future knowledge does indeed exist, the ability to exercise one’s own free will can simultaneously also exist. The Prophet Yirmiyah (1:5) elaborates further:

בטרם אצורך בבטן ידעתיך

Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

(*Maharal, Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 8:21*).

It would, however, be an error to label Eisav an obvious sinner in the conventional sense. A child of the House of Abraham and Yitzchak, no matter how removed from the path of his parents, would probably be considered by contemporary standards as one of current civilization’s outstanding men. It is only relative to his family that Eisav’s desire not to fulfill his potential renders him, in Torah terms, a sinner.

I have heard my Rebbe, *Harav Avigdor Miller*, שליט"א, explain the ‘alleged’ sins of Eisav as possibly no iniquity at all. Eisav, the *Midrash Rabbah* (63:8) informs us, means “*ha shav* (הא שוא) *shebarassi be’olami*” — “Falsehood” — benign on the outside, but internally a pit of wickedness. His sins, however, can be explained rationally. The *Gemara* states:

חמש עבירות עבר אותו רשע באותו היום

Five sins did that sinner (Eisav) commit on that day:

- 1) He violated a betrothed woman.
- 2) He committed murder.
- 3) He denied the existence of Hashem.
- 4) He denied the concept of the resurrection of the dead.
- 5) He despised his birthright. (*Bava Basra 16*:)

Our Sages reveal to us that these were indeed sins, for Yitzchak and the people of that generation may not have necessarily recognized these actions as sins. The following is a rational explanation of the above actions:

1) *Tosafos* (Ibid.) explains that the injunction against violating a *na'arah me'orasah* — betrothed woman — does not apply to *B'nei Noach*. What Eisav actually did was to convince women who contracted to marry other men to break their contract and marry him. The Torah holds Eisav up to a higher standard, and his behavior was considered sinful.

2) Nimrod was the man murdered by Eisav, and he was deserving of death. Nimrod sought to murder our father Abraham, and he attempted to unite mankind against Hashem (Rashi, *Bereishis* 10:8). Since he sought to enslave the mind of humanity, his death was probably applauded by the majority of mankind.

3) and 4) The denial of the existence of Hashem and of the resurrection of the dead, were sins of the heart, and therefore were not apparent to the outside world.

5) Eisav probably expressed the idea, “I am going to die eventually, so why do I need glory?” Eisav would have feigned indignation if anyone had attempted to push honor upon him. Eisav’s sale of the birthright to Yaakov could have been interpreted as a show of rejecting glory, rather than as a rejection of the service of Hashem. In the same sense of false humility, Eisav could have considered himself unworthy of resurrection.

The actions of Eisav are secrets that the Torah reveals to us; the people of his time had no inkling of his wickedness (except for his mother Rivkah, and his cousin Leah in Padan Aram). Among the people who were convinced that Eisav was a great man was Eisav himself. He actually believed that he was of exemplary character. For example, Eisav had a special formal suit for visits to his father, causing Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel to remark:

כל ימי הייתי משמש את אבא ולא שמשתי אותו אחד ממאה ששימש עשו הרשע את אביו
All my days I served my father, but I didn't serve him with even one hundredth
of the effort made by the wicked Eisav (*Bereishis Rabbah* 65:11).

Hashem, however, knows the secrets of every man’s heart, and saw through the outward niceties manifested by Eisav. As with all wicked people, Eisav only fooled himself.¹

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¹. For a continuation of this concept, please read *parshas Vayeishev*.