

Dear Community,

Parents often disagree about the virtues and faults of their children. During the tense moments of report card analysis, family trees are brought out and dissected, fault is attributed, and discipline administered. Parents see their children through the lens of their own experiences; objectivity is but a pretense, relegated to their commenting on others' parenting success or lack thereof. Yet in this week's parsha, the divide between Yitzchak and Rivka on the virtue and villainy of Eisav is striking. What is even more puzzling is Yitzchak's apparent blindness to Eisav's nature. Wasn't he informed by Rivka of the struggles in the womb prompting her visit to the prophet? Didn't he know of Eisav's passion for idols while in utero (Midrash)? Was Yitzchak so ignorant of the nature of his children?

This question is not mere Monday morning quarterbacking Yitzchak's parenting; there is a deeper thread that runs through the story. Can we believe in damnation from the womb? Can we accept Eisav as a villain, a man with no chance of redemption? A baby born evil, a devil in nappies? This runs counter to the notion of free will, one of the basic tenants of Judaism. We can't understand the Yaakov vs. Eisav struggle through the lens of our childhood Hebrew school education, for if we do, we overlook the true meaning of this conflict that is essential to the formation of Yaakov and central to the mission of the Jewish people.

In our minds, the ideal Jew is the scholar: the soft-spoken, polite, and ethical individual, a person who supports Israel and donates to the causes we think are important. The shrewd, violent, cunning Jew who is attracted to the material world is a source of embarrassment for our community. Even when violence is called for, and we do what is necessary, we apologize for it or spend an inordinate amount of time justifying it to others, and to ourselves.

However, if we examine Eisav's character, we are introduced to an important part of the Jewish experience that we would like to sweep under the rug. The Abarbanel (this is not only his idea - it is found in the Orach Chayim, among many others) describes Eisav and Yaakov as the ideal partnership. Eisav was the man of this world. His job was to support Yaakov's spiritual growth, while Yaakov shared the spiritual benefits with his brother. In the ideal, the invisible hand notion is important in Judaism as well, epitomized by the eventual pact between Yissachar and Zevulun. Zevulun was the provider, the supporter, while Yissachar was the teacher and conduit of spiritual growth for both brothers. This model of specialization with collaboration was the ideal model.

For this reason, Eisav was given the qualities necessary to succeed in this world. He was aggressive, shrewd, ambitious. He was an earthy, passionate person, a man of base desires and needs, who was supposed to perfect himself in channeling these skills for the proper purposes and taming his drives to achieve the appropriate synthesis of spirituality and physicality under Yaakov's influence and guidance. Yaakov was not cut out for dealing with this world; he was pure (some may say naïve) and wholly spiritual. Materialism was not his arena. Yitzchak understood that Eisav needed his aggressive nature to succeed and was thus able to love him despite the contrasts in their characters. Rivka, however, saw that in contrast to sculpting his nature towards service of G-d, Eisav was slowly being overtaken by his essence as he rejected Yaakov's attempts to temper him and help him grow.

Eisav failed; he allowed his base nature to dominate, driving him to the point at which he became the grandfather of pure evil, anthropomorphized by Amalek, his grandson. The episode of the pottage occurs at the time that At that time, Yaakov realizes that the brotherly partnership was dead and he was alone. Yaakov now needs to develop those qualities that were foreign to him - the cunning and duplicity that is sometimes needed in this world. Thus, he manipulates Eisav to sell his birthright, steals the blessings, and prepares himself for his confrontation with the master of deceit, Lavan.

As Jews, we are drawn to the beauty and moral simplicity of the traits of the young Yaakov. We strive to be seen as and to become paragons of virtue, mercy, and altruism. Yet the real world rarely allows us to live this way for long. There comes a time when we need to fight, fool, and deal with a world that eats the naive. Israel must strike preemptively, using surprise to confound their enemy. Jews historically had to bribe, connive, just to be able to live in peace. Jews had to rely on their wits and cunning just to survive for a large part of our history. Our real challenge comes at those moments, where we need to balance the imperative of morality and ethics with the pragmatic necessities of life.

We need to deal with this balance in our modern world. This balance needs to be appreciated by the groups of Jews who come out of the woodwork whenever Israel does what it needs to do to survive. They gather and sip herbal

tea in cozy living rooms far from the fields of war, pontificating and fretting over the 'moral stain' that fighting for our survival inflicts on us. Conversely, this too is a lesson for the militaristic and violent amongst us, who lose themselves to hate, glorify violence, and forget the distaste inherent in taking up arms. We must guide ourselves by the moral compass of the Torah, rejecting banal platitudes and embracing the delicate balancing of living in a complex world.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein