

Dear Community,

While I was studying in Israel, I spent a Shabbos at the home of an elderly mystic living in Tzfat. After dinner we were sitting and discussing the various mystical properties of traditional Shabbos foods. The conversation bounced back and forth between a tongue-in-cheek description of potato kugel as a harbinger of the Final Redemption and a sincere discussion about challah.

At one point I began to wax poetic about cholent. This was a prominent staple in the yeshiva boy's diet as it could be made for Shabbos and reheated throughout the week for a quick, hot dinner. When I asked our host about the deep, esoteric meaning of this hot, greasy delicacy he grimaced and stated "Eisav liked cholent so much that he sold his World-to-Come for it." Our host was, in fact, referring to this week's parsha in which Eisav sells his Birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils. (This man had a very charitable eye as to what could be called cholent.) Eisav, as the eldest, was destined to serve in the Temple and play a leadership role in the spiritual development of the family. But he rejected all of this for a bowl of beans.

In reality, this bowl of lentils holds greater significance to this story. It represents much more than a bowl of hot comfort food at the end of a long day. The Medrash states that Jacob was cooking these lentils for his father Isaac, who was mourning the death of his own father Abraham. Lentils are traditionally offered to mourners as their round shape alludes to the cycle of life. Those who are raised high now will stumble later; we should not look at success in this world as anything more than transitory. This message is especially powerful to the mourner who is face-to-face with mortality.

The irony of Eisav choosing the lentil stew, so symbolic of the transience of this world, over the Birthright which promised spiritual immortality, is striking. Eisav was rejecting the World-to-Come, a tacit admission of Eisav's values. Eisav's philosophy prioritized the temporal world over the eternal one. For him, a bowl of soup was valued more than spiritual perfection.

When we think about our own spiritual journeys, we should consider the lessons inherent in something as mundane as a bowl of soup. Which physical, temporal vices are we allowing to get in the way of our growth? We need to do all we can to strive for the eternal and push ourselves to grow beyond our base needs. We must make sure that we don't short-change ourselves and give up what's most important for fleeting pleasure and instant gratification.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein