

פרשת תולדות

OVERVIEW

For twenty years the young couple remains childless, just as Abraham's marriage was barren for many years. Finally, following their fervent prayer to G-d, they are blessed with twins, Esau and Yaakov. Soon the pronounced difference in their character becomes evident and the struggle between them ensues.

The episode of the sale of the first-born right for a dish of lentils precedes the final break between the brothers, following Esau's choice of pagan wives and the famous scene of Yitzchak's blessing and Yaakov's deception. After Esau discovers the ruse, Yaakov has to flee to escape his brother's wrath. He travels in the direction of Padan Aram, his mother's native city and dwelling place of his uncle Laban.

COMMENTARY

The Twins

Two nations, two powers, two opposing tendencies emerge from the union of Yaakov and Rivkah. The first son, of reddish skin, embodiment of excessive energies, a finished man who will dominate with the fist and the sword. And then there is the soft, colorless Yaakov whose life represents – as the antidote to his brother's flamboyant, ruthless character – spirituality and the realm of ideas and ideals. Both from the same womb, both reared in the same surroundings – yet so different, worlds apart. Each showed at an early age what the future had in store: arrogance, power, aggression and lust versus peacefulness, magnanimity, and intellectuality.

It is interesting to note that this confirms the findings of modern psychology that traces in the first moves of the young child the indications and traits that will mark his future life. It is in the art of the educator to recognize the child's characteristics and, through proper guidance and gentle persuasion, direct his potential towards the goal of his becoming an upright and useful member of society. It is a long and often dreary process requiring experience, understanding and, above all, patience. The history of the twin brothers will forever remain a

living example for a successful vs. a disastrous educational process.

The sale-of the birthright

Whole treatises have been written about this strange pact between the two brothers. One view holds that this was merely a childish game, without any significance, even if psychologically revealing. Others find in the "deal" a first sign of "Jewish business practices" which allegedly capitalizes on the partner's ignorance of the matter at hand. Neither view has any substance. The true object of the "negotiations" was the perpetration of Abraham's spiritual legacy. In Yaakov's eyes the eldest son assumes the responsibility for the continuation of the family tradition. For Esau, this role is unacceptable. It requires a spirit of sacrifice and devotion totally incompatible with his character. What is he to do with his birthright that is actually a "birth-duty"? He craves immediate gratification. A tasty morsel, a plate of delicious lentil soup, is of far greater importance than the nebulous ideas that meant nothing to him. Yaakov sees in the sale of the birthright a final proof of his brother's disdain for the duties of a firstborn. Not that Esau renounced any claim of his share of the inheritance. History shows that he became rich and powerful while Yaakov's acquisitions were the fruit of long and arduous labor for Laban and not wealth acquired by inheritance.

The purloined blessing

There is no denying the considerable difficulties inherent in the episode. It is certain that the entire affair-can only be understood in the framework of the education the sons received in their parental home. Let us briefly review the events and the problems of their interpretation.

Yitzchak, feeling his end near, wishes to bless his favorite son Esau. Rivkah wants Yaakov to receive the blessing instead. She devises a rather crude scheme whereby Yaakov will visit his blind father wearing goatskins normally worn by his brother. The plan succeeds and he receives the blessing. A few minutes later the whole house of cards collapses through Esau's arrival, However, Yaakov is upheld and

Esau must content himself with his father's "good wishes".

One is justified in questioning how Rivkah could believe in the effectiveness of a blessing obtained by a fraudulent act. How could she imagine that she would be able to "hoodwink" not only her husband but also – G-d! Moreover, it was more than likely that the "comedy" would come to a quick end by the appearance of Esau and that Yitzchak, deceived and angry, would change the blessing into a curse. And another puzzle: Why indeed was no curse pronounced over Yaakov who seemingly would have deserved it?

It appears that Rivkah's motive for plotting the deception must be sought in a different direction. She knew of Yitzchak's blind love for Esau. She also knew that this affection was the fruit of Esau's skillful manipulation of his old father to make him believe that he was a worthy descendant of Abraham. He is indeed the "hunter" referred to in the text as the man who knew how to how to capture his father's love. Rivkah is fully aware of her sons' contrasting personalities. She had no hope of ever changing Esau's ways. All her hopes and aspirations centered on Yaakov.

Yitzchak is about to bestow the blessing on the future head of the family, a son who was neither worthy nor able to fill this role. Rivkah cannot stand by and see this happen and she decides to act. But how? Should she go straight to her husband and tell him of his mistake and that he is the victim of a shameless fraud. She is afraid that Yitzchak will refuse to believe her allegations. Rivkah's task is to demonstrate to Yitzchak how easy it is to deceive him. Thus her plan provides for a denouement designed to make the father learn the truth.

The facts bear her out. Despite an initial suspicion, Yitzchak is quickly persuaded that he is talking to Esau. When the real Esau arrives the father suddenly realizes that his wife's warnings were justified. Now he understands that he was

the victim of a long intrigue. By upholding the blessing of Yaakov each of the sons finally receives a blessing that is in accordance with his character and potential. Yaakov will "bestow blessings on those who bless him and curse those who bring curse upon him". Esau will live by his sword and serve his brother. His soil will be fertile. Only by humbling himself will he able to loosen his yoke (imposed by his brother) from his neck. This episode is an outstanding example of feminine shrewdness while Yitzchak's greatness is evident in the quick recognition of his error.

Esau's wives

The final verses of our Sidrah tell us that Esau, though knowing that "the daughters of Canaan were displeasing to the eyes of his father", went ahead and married the daughter of his uncle Yishmael. This stresses the fact that "he took her" in addition to his wives as his wife". This lapidary report is deeply significant. It fully bears out the fears of Rivkah who could not stand idly by and see Esau become Yitzchak's spiritual successor. It is indeed hard to believe that Esau, surely aware of his father's disapproval of his heathen wives, never seemed to be bothered about it. Perhaps he feels a tinge of guilt and tries to appease his parents, not by sending his wives away, but by marrying his cousin. Is there a more convincing proof of Esau's total inability to show even the slightest understanding for Abraham's and his father's world of thought and ideals? Yaakov, on the other hand, must take flight and suffer during long years the agony of exile. He is determined to live up to and perpetuate the spiritual heritage of his forefathers.

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