

The story of Isaac and Rebecca's twins is a study in contrasts. Commentaries often refer to the good Jakob and the evil Esau locked in eternal conflict: Jakob our Patriarch, Esau ancestor of the Edomites, and in Talmud and Midrash, of Rome. Esau's descendants live by the sword, while Jakob's descendants fight with words. Intelligent, obedient Jakob, Esau the disrespectful brute. However, nothing in our multifaceted world is that simple. The differing qualities of these dissimilar twins have their positive as well as their negative aspects, and family dynamics also play a part in the outcome of their story. It is a perplexing, multidimensional story, with many lessons.

Conceived with difficulty, the twins struggle so mightily in utero that Rebekka in her pain consults HaShem and learns that they will be the progenitors of two separate cultures. The word used in the Torah for struggle comes from a root meaning *to run*, and Midrashim have them running in two different directions – Jakob to houses of study, and Esau to debauchery. Indeed, they turn out to be vastly different from each other, but their polarity is far more complex than the good versus evil to which they are all too often assigned. Ruddy, hairy Esau is an outdoorsman, strong, brave, and impulsive. He is a simple person in that his needs are elementary, and his life is geared to pursuing them as they arise. In addition, the Torah's wording seems to portray him as being less intelligent than the rest of his family. When he enters the tent exhausted, he says, "Let me gulp down (*hal'iteini*) some of the 'red-red' (*ha-adom ha-adom*), rather than requesting to eat some stew. Rabbinic literature uses the verb *וּלַל* (gulp) only when referring to feeding animals, which is another reason Esau is often viewed as being stupid and boorish. Perhaps he is not as verbally gifted as Jakob, but neither is Moses when HaShem calls him to lead. He could simply be so drained from hunting that can barely gasp out a few words. But his seemingly careless disregard for his birthright as well as his marriage to two Hittite women, which greatly upsets his parents, suggests that because he lives in the moment, he gives little thought to the consequences of his actions. However, he later takes a wife from the family of Ishmael in order to please his parents, so he does have the capacity to reflect on his actions and take steps to make amends. Smooth-skinned Jakob is a homebody, an *ish tam* (a man who is innocent, whole, upright – but also simple). Midrashim portray him as being studious, respectful, domestic, and pliant. And as we learn later, he is also supremely patient, willing to wait long and work hard to achieve his goals. But Jakob is also as wily as his uncle Laban and as purpose driven as his grandfather Abraham. After all, he emerges from the womb grasping Esau's heel, he uses Esau's momentary weakness to obtain his birthright, and he needs little persuasion to go along with Rebekka's ruse and impersonate his twin at his father's deathbed.

It is noteworthy that Isaac loves Esau while Rebekka favors Jakob. Do they each see in their respective preferred child traits that they know they lack as well as recognize some of their own negative traits in the less favored child? That may be part of the answer. Impetuous outdoorsman Esau is everything his father is not, but there is another, more important layer. Isaac could be remembering how his older brother Ishmael was ousted so he could inherit Abraham's legacy. Perhaps he feels some residual guilt, however unwarranted, and resolves to make amends through his older son, blindly choosing to ignore the qualities that render him unsuited to carry Abraham's legacy forward. Rebekka, mindful of the prophecy she received from HaShem, sees in Jakob not only her own willingness to serve and be led by HaShem, but also her brother Laban's intelligence and cunning. Esau lacks both, and with this understanding she knows she must act to ensure that the right son is chosen to fulfill HaShem's prophecy. But there is yet another aspect to this story: a woeful lack of communication on the part of the parents. The Torah does not mention Rebekka's having shared her prophecy with Isaac, and he seems to be equally silent about why he prefers Esau when he certainly must realize that he is ill-equipped to perpetuate HaShem's covenant. Why? Of course, it is illogical to judge the protagonists of our stories from our perspective; their culture is vastly different from ours. But studying their behavior can help us make better decisions than they did. Rebekka's foresight did not reach far enough into the future; acting with the rashness of her older son, she is blind to the consequences of the events she is about to set in motion. Isaac's foresight is stunted by his inability to come to terms with his past. More than simply physical, his blindness represents the aftermath of his traumas. Thus, Jakob inherits the mantle of covenant, but unlike his grandfather Abraham, who dies contented, his life will be difficult, painful, and tragic. Lack of communication leads to profound misunderstanding with consequences that reverberate through the ages. We can't undo the past, but we can certainly learn from it. We each carry traits of both twins, traits with tremendous potential for good, as well as for evil. It's up to us to learn to use them wisely for the benefit of all.

Shabbat shalom!