

Every year when I read this parashah I am captivated anew by the unparalleled character transformation of Esau, which still reverberates today. It is noteworthy that the Torah sees Esau much more favorably than do the sages of Talmud and Midrash, who find a multitude of creative ways to vilify him. His gradual decline, which actually begins with the later prophets, must be understood as a reaction to historical events that negatively impacted Israel. When Rebecca consults HaShem during a difficult time in her pregnancy, she learns that she is carrying the progenitors of two nations, along with the cryptic message that “one kingdom will become mightier than the other kingdom, and the elder will serve the younger.” (25:23) The Talmud sages highlight textual indications that Jacob and Esau are fundamentally different from each other, not just in appearance, but also in character. For example, the Torah uses the incomplete spelling of the word for twins (tomim). In the case of Tamar, whose twins are both righteous, the full spelling תְּאוֹמִים is used, while here it is spelled תוּמִים, omitting the letters in red. The incomplete spelling also evokes the word תוֹם (tam): pure/innocent/naïve (Remember the Pesach Haggadah’s naïve child?), which defines one aspect of Jacob’s character. “And the youths grew up, and Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.” (25:27) Now, we are in the thickets of this character study. Midrash Genesis Rabbah teaches that already in utero, when Rebecca passed by the Torah academies of Shem and Eber, Jacob ran – the word used to describe her discomfort – toward them (another delicious midrashic anachrony!), while Esau ran toward the pagan temples she passed. Interpreting the following verse, “And Isaac loved Esau because game was in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob.” (25:28), Midrash Tanchuma Toldot equates ציד (game, hunting) with bribery, citing Exodus 23:8: “You shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe will blind the clear sighted and corrupt words that are right.” In describing Esau’s character, the midrash quotes Proverbs 6:16-19: “There are six things that the Lord hates, and the seventh is an abomination of His soul; haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood; a heart that thinks thoughts of violence; feet that hasten to run to evil; one who speaks lies with false testimony and incites quarrels among brothers.” Here is part of how the midrash elaborates: “Whenever Esau entered the house, he would ask his father, ‘My father, is one obliged to tithe for salt?’ ... Isaac would exclaim in amazement, ‘See how scrupulous my son is with the commandments!’ By such remarks, he entrapped his father with his mouth. ...” Midrash Genesis Rabbah discusses the order of their birth: “Go forth and learn from a tube that has a narrow opening. Insert two stones into it, one after the other. The one that entered first will emerge last, and the one that entered last will emerge first. The result is that Esau, who was formed last (from the second drop of semen) emerged first, ... and Jacob came to restrain him so that he (Jacob) should be the first to be born ... and he would open her womb and take the birthright by law.” The midrash also interprets the word אֶדְמוֹנִי (ruddy), which describes Esau’s appearance at birth, as a sign that he will be a person who sheds blood (based on the root דָּמָה – blood). This leads us to Edom (from the same root), home of Esau’s descendants. Although Deuteronomy 28:8 commands us “not to despise an Edomite, for he is your brother,” nearly 1000 years later Malachi 1:2-3 reads: “I have loved you, said the Lord, and you said, ‘How have You loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother? says the Lord. And I loved Jacob. And I hated Esau ...” (The prophets blamed Edom for the destruction of the 1st Temple.) Later, the Edomites became the Idumeans, who around 110 BCE were (likely forcibly) converted to Judaism by the Hasmoneans after they gained power following the Maccabean revolt. This leads to Talmud and Midrash associating Esau with the Roman Empire, and it begins with the notorious tyrant King Herod the Great, an Idumean. “He then rose up and killed all the Sages, but spared Bava ben Buta in order to take counsel with him. Herod placed a garland of porcupine hide on Bava ben Buta’s head, which pricked his eyes out. ...” (Talmud Bava Batra 4a) He advised Herod to renovate the Temple, which he did in grand style. But Herod’s reign brought Judea squarely under Roman rule, and Esau came to stand for Roman oppression, which drastically increased after Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in 312 CE. Having weathered the devastating loss of Jerusalem and the severe persecutions under Hadrian, the sages now had to deal with the triumph of Christianity and the resulting doctrine of supersessionism, which teaches that the Church has replaced Israel, making Judaism obsolete and Jews heretics. Despite the efforts of many Christian theologians today, this concept has still not been completely eradicated. Tracing Esau’s evolution it is easy to see how the character of a person can be defined and transformed to serve certain needs. From mere troublemaker in the Torah to Edom, Idumea, and pagan Rome, Esau came full circle with Tertullian (c. 150-220 CE), who identified Jacob with Christianity and Esau with Judaism. Of course Jewish writers continually pushed back, and none vilified Esau more than Rashi in the 11th Century. But as their origins tell us, Jacob, Esau and their descendants – Jews and Christians – are siblings. And just as Jacob and Esau finally reconcile (no matter how Genesis Rabbah spins that), Jews and Christians are now actively engaging in respectful dialogue that despite irreconcilable theological differences, honors each other’s uniqueness and allows us to live side by side in peace.

Shabbat shalom!