

ESAU AND JACOB: BROTHERS CLASH, RECONCILE AND SEPARATE

CHAYA GREENBERGER

Rebecca was pregnant with twins who were prophetically destined from the womb to be competitors. As they matured, Esau and Jacob manifested their differences: Jacob preferred spiritual endeavors and early on secured leadership in this domain by acquiring the *bekhora* (firstborn rights) from Esau, while the latter, was a man of the world. Jacob usurped the mundane blessings designated for Esau by his father.

The brothers met and reconciled upon Jacob's return from Padan Aram. Each affirmed recognition of the other's legitimate claim to leadership in their respective realms. Subsequently, Esau had a short-lived change of heart and proposed shared leadership with Jacob in both domains. Jacob, however, declined the offer. He understood that to flourish, especially in its formative period, the ephemeral realm of the spirit needed one leader, singularly committed to cultivating its development. It required, furthermore, maintaining distance from a culture deeply steeped in the realm of the mundane. Esau reconciled with Jacob's position and the brothers parted to go their separate ways.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

The potential for conflict between Esau and Jacob was revealed to their mother Rebecca in the prophecy she experienced before their birth: *And the children struggled within her* (Gen. 25:22).

And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two kingdoms will separate from your innards, and one kingdom will become mightier than the other kingdom, and the elder will serve the younger' (Gen. 25:23).

Some commentaries, among them Netziv (Gen. 25:23) and *Sefat Emet* (Gen. 25:23) perceive the last part of the verse (*verav ya'avod za'ir*) as intentionally ambiguous, making possible an additional reading: the elder – the younger will serve. The significant point is that the brothers were destined to travel different paths and vie with one another. The text subsequently relates

Chaya Greenberger is Dean of the Faculty of Life and Health Sciences at the Jerusalem College of Technology and does research in the field of nursing and medical ethics.

that, in fact, as the two brothers grew up, they developed clearly distinguishable, perhaps even diametrically opposed, personalities: *Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet [serene] man, dwelling in tents* (Gen. 25:27). Sforno (Gen. 25:26) relates to the plural form of “tents” as indicative of two endeavors typically pursued in tents: sheep herding to sustain the body and meditative study to inspire the soul.¹

The selling of the *bekhora*, the right of the firstborn, the first recorded interaction between Jacob and Esau, which was in fact a transaction, reflects their fraternal differences. Sforno (Gen. 25:30) and Abarbanel (Gen. 25:29–34) view Jacob’s proposition to buy the *bekhora* as stemming from his understanding that Esau himself did not desire to take on the responsibilities of the *bekhora*, which he perceived as foreign to his natural tendencies. According to the Abarbanel (Gen. 25:29–34), the part of the *bekhora* “up for sale”, was spiritual leadership of the family in the service of God and perpetuation of the covenant; it was not related to the inheritance of material wealth.

Jacob chose to propose the sale upon Esau’s return from the hunt, hungry and fatigued. This was not necessarily a cynical exploitation of his current state, meant to manipulate Esau into a quick sale. It could rather have been an opportunity to reflect to Esau why he should sell his rights (Sforno 25:31). Abarbanel (Gen.25:31) specifically explains the words “*mikhrah kayom*” “sell as this day” to mean, “sell your rights to the *bekhora*, as your state of exhaustion from the hunt today is typical of your station, which precludes the possibility of your leading in matters of the spirit.”

Rashi (Gen. 25:32) offering a midrashic interpretation, relates that Esau and Jacob openly discussed the duty of the *bekhorim* to serve as priests (before the Levites replaced them subsequent to the sin of the golden calf²) and as a consequence, risk punishment by death if the laws of purity be violated. According to Rashi, it was to this that Esau replied: ‘*Behold, I am at the point to die [as I won’t be able to live up to the stringency of the laws of purity]; and what profit shall the birthright do to me?*’ (Gen. 25:32). If transcendental goals such as passing on a spiritual legacy to posterity had no value for “this worldly” Esau, ‘*I am at the point to die*’ – his reason why the *bekhora* lacks purpose- makes good sense from a *pshat* perspective.

The text continues to relate in meticulous detail that, subsequent to the “sale”, after becoming satiated with the food and drink Jacob provided,

Esau got up and left, with no sign of regret or even reconsideration of his decision but rather loathing, or at least belittling the value of the *bekhora* from his perspective (*Vayivez Eisav et ha-bekhora*) (Sforno, Gen. 25:34)³. This seems to imply that Esau was not pressured into his decision by Jacob.

With respect to Esau's puzzling renunciation of the *bekhora* for a mere meal, Abarbanel (Gen. 25:29–34) claims that, as part of the sale, Jacob renounced his rights to all Isaac's material wealth in lieu of the *bekhora* and the meal was simply ceremonial. He brings as a proof a subsequent text in which Jacob declared that he crossed the Jordan River with his "staff" (Gen. 32:11), i.e., his only remaining possession, says Abarbanel, when he left home for Padan Aram. If this is the case, leadership between the brothers was clearly divided early on: Jacob took the spiritual sphere and Esau, the material. Esau did not perceive himself as inferior to Jacob by selling his *bekhora* but rather as his equal. The brothers, according to Esau's understanding, redefined their respective roles in line with their individual natural tendencies, both legitimate.

Thus, both Esau's actions and words corroborated Jacob's intuition. Esau knew himself well and wished to remain in his comfort zone. He was a confirmed hunter who relished the physical pleasures of the "here and now". According to Abarbanel (Gen. 25: 29–34), Esau did not perceive himself as a candidate for carrying on the Abrahamic legacy of spiritual leadership inherent to the *bekhora*. It is important to point out that this legacy encompasses a great deal more than being morally upright individual which Esau could have been. It rather means: 1) Total devotion to God and willingness to submit to his commandments at the price of sacrifice - witness the *milah* and the *Akedah*- and 2) Recognizing and publicizing that God's way is the way of justice and righteousness, which man is to emulate. God testifies to Abraham's endeavors in this regard: '*For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him*' (Gen. 18:19).⁴ Hizkuni (Gen. 25:32) adds an additional dimension to understanding Esau's behavior. Esau knew from his father and grandfather that the *bekhora* included the inheritance of the land of Canaan, alas tied by a Gordian knot to exile

and slavery. Esau chose not to travail in the here and now for a reward his children would receive in the distant future.

ISAAC'S BLESSINGS: AN OPEN WOUND

Although willing to part with the *bekhora*, Esau was unwilling to part with his father's blessings. It is remarkable that, despite the sale, when Isaac asked for his identity, subsequent to blessing Jacob (Gen. 27:32), Esau still referred to himself as the *bekhor* (he had, after all, sold only his rights to its spiritual dimension). Esau understood that in Isaac's eyes, *bekhora* and *brakha* were inseparable. Rashi (Gen. 27:36) in fact perceives this to be the case, claiming that Isaac was relieved when he heard just moments later from Esau (who contradicted) himself, that he was in fact not the *bekhor*, as '...he [Jacob] took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing' (Gen. 27:36); in retrospect, formalistically, Isaac actually blessed the "right" son.

Initially, however, Isaac meant to bless Esau with superiority in mundane matters, knowing full well that Jacob was to lead in that realm. He perceived a partnership between the brothers whereby Esau would succeed in amassing wealth and he would, in turn, provide Jacob with sustenance, leaving him free to tend to matters of the spirit. In this vein, Shem M'Shmu'el (Lekh Lekha: 574) comments: Esau was destined to be a benevolent king, certainly a worthy role and Jacob, a priest. The text painstakingly mentions the many princes descending from Esau (Gen. 36: 15-43).

Esau despised Jacob because he usurped the blessing suited for him: '*Let peoples serve thee, and nations bow down to thee. Be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee*' (Gen. 27:41). This part caused Esau particular anguish. Esau clearly knew his place; superiority in earthly matters – power and wealth – was in Esau's realm, while Jacob had chosen the spiritual domain. Esau, therefore, saw Jacob as a trespasser. Taking this blessing was not only conniving and humiliating but a betrayal of their agreement.⁵

Before Jacob left for Padan Aram, Isaac bestowed upon Jacob an inherently different blessing: '*the blessing of Abraham to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land of thy sojournings, which God gave unto Abraham*' (Gen. 28:3, 4). By passing on to Jacob the inheritance of the

land of Israel with its unique affinity to the Divine, Isaac designated him as the spiritual *bekhor* – successor in the patriarchal line.

Remarkably, Esau did not contest this blessing, although he obviously knew about it. The latter is apparent from the text (Gen. 28:6–9):

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Padan Aram, to take him a wife from thence; and that as he blessed him, he gave him a charge, saying: 'Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan'; and that Jacob hearkened to his father and his mother, and was gone to Padan Aram; and Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan pleased not Isaac his father; so Esau went unto Ishmael, and took unto the wives that he had Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife.

Meshekh *Hokhma* (Gen. 28:4) sharpens the point. Exile, upon which the *birkat Avraham* was made conditional, began with Jacob's leaving home for Padan Aram in search of a mate worthy of being his partner. Esau did not offer to do the same, although, out of respect for his father, he refrained from taking additional Canaanite wives, instead turning to the family of Ishmael. The latter were, however, excluded from *birkat Avraham*.

PRE-REUNION

When Jacob made his way back home after twenty-two years in the house of Laban, he feared that Esau continued to harbor his hatred, justifiably so, for his mother had not sent word regarding the safety of his homecoming as she had promised (Gen. 27:43–45). Esau had apparently, in the meantime, moved to Seir, as it is from there that he came to meet Jacob (Gen. 32:4). This move was perhaps an additional concession to his brother with respect to the inheritance of the land of Canaan, the crux of *birkat Avraham* (Ramban, Gen. 36:6) to which Esau made no claim.

With respect to the blessing that had been intended for Esau, Jacob understood that it was he who needed to concede to his brother; he had been dishonest and shamed him. As will become apparent, during the course of the “reunion” between the brothers, Jacob actually chose to renounce this blessing – he had neither inclination nor interest in ruling over nations, certainly not over his brother. In this regard, it is possible that he agreed to conspire

with his mother to usurp the first blessing only because he mistakenly assumed it would be *birkat Avraham*.⁶

According to Rashi (Gen. 32:5), Jacob's first communication with Esau (via his emissaries): '*I have sojourned [garti is from the same root as the word ger "a stranger"] with Laban, and stayed until now*', was Jacob's elegant way of reassuring Esau with respect to two important matters regarding his destiny: 1) I remained a stranger with no political power or prominence, thus the blessing of rule and power I was given by our father had not materialized (see also Malbim, Gen. 32:5); and 2) As leader in the realm of the spirit, I remained estranged from Lavan's culture by heeding the commandments of the covenant (a midrashic interpretation).

It is true that Jacob mentioned "*shor ve-hamor*" – the livestock that he amassed in Padan Aram; these, however, although valuable material possessions, were not part of Isaac's blessings (Rashi, Gen. 32:6). They were needed for sustaining his family, as were the servants who were part of his entourage. Jacob later referred to these possessions as gifts bestowed upon him by God's grace rather than by his father; they should therefore generate no hard feelings on Esau's part (Gen. 33:11).

Sforno (Gen, 32:5) says that Jacob wanted to convey, apologetically, that his exile had precluded him from initiating a meeting "until now". Perhaps one can go even further and say that "stayed unto now" implies that Jacob was involuntarily delayed because he was enslaved by his father-in-law; he worked fourteen years for his two wives and stayed to work an additional six years thereafter against his will (Gen. 30:26), finally having to escape as a fugitive.⁷ This is hardly something to be envious of.

With respect to the emissaries, Maharshal (cited by Siftei Hahamim, Gen. 32:6) relates that it was customary in the ancient world to use a "go-between" when pacifying the anger of one's fellow, as it was considered brazen to face him/her head on. Rashi, as well as the Netziv (Gen. 32:6), emphasize, however, that the messengers were nevertheless also instructed to make clear that they were not intended as a substitute for Jacob who planned to greet Esau face-to-face. With this in mind, Rashi comments that the two words – *veshlekha*/[and I sent] *le-hagid* [to tell], reflect the two separate messages: [Jacob] commanded [the emissaries] to tell Esau: first, that he was coming to greet him, and second, that Jacob sought his master Esau's affection.

Esau had, in the meantime, himself gone out to meet Jacob accompanied by 400 soldiers, perhaps to battle, or perhaps to parade the “consolation” blessing his father gave him – ‘*and you will live by your sword*’ (Gen. 27:40). He meant to convey that he had not forgotten that Jacob usurped the initial blessing his father had intended for him.

Although Jacob naturally wanted reconciliation out of fear for his family’s safety, he also wanted, as will become apparent, reconciliation for its own sake. Jacob painstakingly prepared an elaborate peace-offering by which to honor his brother (Gen. 32:14–21), commanding his servants, one by one, to describe to Esau, in detail, the nature of the offering. Jacob conveyed to Esau that he accepted his superiority in the material realm, calling him “master” and referring to himself as his servant (Gen. 32:5). Jacob’s servants were instructed to add that he was close behind (“*ahareinu*”, Gen. 32:19), preparing to meet him face-to-face.

Engaging Esau face-to-face was critical to the nature of their meeting. Indeed, the text employs the root *p-n-h* (meaning: face, turn towards, meet, accept, approve, come before [in the sense of greet]) five times in the span of a mere one and a half verses (Gen. 32:21–22):

*...and ye shall say: Moreover, behold, thy servant Jacob is behind us. For he said: ‘I will appease him (akhaprah **panav** “his face”)⁸ with the present that goeth before me (**lefanai** “my face”), and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept me (yisah **panai** “my face”). So the present passed over before him (al **panav** “his face”); and he himself lodged that night in the camp.*

As the root *p-n-h* reoccurs subsequently in the narrative, its overall significance to the meeting of the brothers would be postponed to a later point.

PROPHETIC ENCOUNTER

The saga of the meeting between the brothers is interrupted by Jacob’s prophetic encounter with a heavenly being the Sages deem to be Esau’s celestial protagonist (Rashi, Gen. 32:25; Midrash Rabba, Gen. 48:3). There are different shades of meaning with respect to the event, the common denominator being Jacob’s empowerment in preparation for the impending “confrontational reconciliation” with his brother.⁹ Jacob wrestled with the being face-to-face; the significance he himself attributed to the latter is manifested in nam-

ing the venue of the prophecy Pniel: *'for I have seen God face-to-face, and my life is preserved'* (Gen.32:31). The text itself refers to the venue as *Pniel*, in the plural form. The Netziv (Gen. 32:32) understands this to reflect that *each* one of the two beings *faced the other*. The prophecy, as will become apparent, was a preview of the brothers *facing one another* and mutually accepting each other's separate and legitimate identities and destinies; this would subsequently be reenacted on earth.

Witness the details of the encounter: A "man" wrestled with Jacob, who succeeded in holding "him" at bay. Unable to prevail against Jacob, he strains the '*hollow of his thigh*', which some commentators interpret as a euphemism for the organ of the *brit mila* (*Psikhta Zutratah Bereishit 32; Midrash Sekhel Tov*, Gen. 33:17).¹⁰ Embracing this explanation, Rav Meidan¹¹ perceives the wrestling match as Jacob's defense of his claim to *berkhat Avraham*, which was intertwined with the *brit milah*. The latter is clear from the text:

And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings... every male among you shall be circumcised (Gen. 17:6–10).

Jacob's internalization of the prophetic message unraveled in his subsequent actions, the first of which is part of the prophetic vision itself. He made freeing the "man" conditional upon receipt of the latter's blessing. The blessing Jacob received took the form of an additional name: Israel, '*for thou hast striven with God and with men and hast prevailed*' (Gen. 32:29). The name reflects an admission by Esau's protagonist to Jacob's claim to the *brit*; he was to be master in the realm of the spirit.¹² This he earned by courageously meeting the celestial challenger face-to-face. The Kli Yakar (Gen. 32:27, 29) specifies that the addition of the name Israel reflected Jacob's "*head on*" striving for spiritual superiority. The strategies Jacob's used for staking out his spiritual turf vis-à-vis his brother earlier in life reflected the insecurity of his inferior position of being second born. Jacob's original name stems from the root *a-k-v* meaning "heel" as he held on to his brother's heel in the birth

canal. The name Israel reflects bravely and fairly vying face-to-face with one's adversary.

Parenthetically, when God reiterates the name change in a subsequent prophecy, He puts it into the context of the *specific blessing* to Jacob- clearly excluding the blessing Jacob took from Esau:

And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. And God said unto him: 'Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name'; and He called his name Israel. And God said unto him: 'I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins [also part of the blessing received from God by Abraham and reiterated by Isaac to Jacob] and the land which I gave unto Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land' (Gen. 35:9–12)

Jacob is not satisfied with a unilateral blessing. In his desire to give reciprocity, he asks the “man” to reveal his own name. Of course, Jacob had no power to add a name to a celestial being. However, sensing that his rival was Esau's protagonist, he intended to affirm the legitimacy of Esau's different but no less potentially honorable destiny.

As we have seen, a name in this prophetic vision reflects the essence of one's being. Although the “man” remained nameless (celestial beings change missions and do not have a stable identity), he [Jacob] blessed him *there* (Gen. 32:30)¹³ – i.e., in light of his *current* mission as Esau's protagonist, Jacob affirmed Esau as master in the realm of the material. What took place subsequently “on earth” between the brothers is a reflection of what took place “in heaven”.

MEETING ON EARTH

Following to the prophecy, an empowered Jacob went to meet Esau face-to-face, walking *in front of* (reappearance of the root *p-n-u* “face”) his wives and children (Gen. 33:3). The text further relates: *and Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, Esau came and with him 400 men* (Gen. 33:1). Remarkably, the text states that Esau too *lifted up his eyes*, and saw Jacob's wives and children (Gen. 33:5), reciprocal actions of the brothers. Perhaps

lifting up one's eyes is an allusion to the burgeoning of an ability to see beyond differences and reach out to one another in mutual conciliation. The brothers embraced as the barriers appeared to have broken down.

THE BLESSING OF 'KOL'

Jacob subsequently entreated Esau to accept his gifts which he called "*min-hati*" (Gen. 33:10). Esau initially refused; he was a wealthy man and not in need of his brother's possessions (Malbim, Gen. 33:9; Ohr HaHayim, Gen. 33:9). What he wanted was recognition. In his own words: *'I have enough my brother, let that which thou hast be thine'*. Esau reiterated his own recognition of his brother's claim to the Abrahamic blessing (Rashi, Gen. 33:9) and left an opening for Jacob to reciprocate.

The purpose of Jacob's gifts was not to fill a need of Esau's but rather his own (*Kli Yakar*, Gen. 33:10). To clarify his intentions, Jacob "re-labeled" them – no longer referring to them as "*min-hati*" but rather as "*birkhati*": 'take my blessings '. According to Abarbanel (Gen. 33: 1-17), the gifts were a symbolic renunciation of the mismatched blessing Isaac bestowed upon him: *heveh gviv lahikha ve-yishtahavu lekha bnei imkha: Be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee* (Gen 27:29). Jacob was not a man of prowess; political power suited not him but Esau; and God had provided him with all his basic needs (Gen. 33:5). Esau would hopefully harness his blessings to benefit humanity. He, Jacob, however, was suited for the blessing of "*kol*" (Gen. 33:11). "*Kol*" is a reference to the Abrahamic blessing: *...and God blessed Abraham with 'kol'* (Gen. 24:1). This is the blessing that interested Jacob – to lead in the realm of the spirit by continuing the Abrahamic legacy.

The two brothers now stood before one another as equals, recognizing the legitimacy of their respective, potentially constructive destinies.

(UNAVOIDABLE?) SEPARATE WAYS

Esau, inspired by Jacob's genuine desire to set things right, offered him partnership: *nesa* – "let us travel together", and perhaps more significantly, *nelkha* – "let us share our existential being" (Gen. 33:12). The root **l-kh** in the Bible often connotes connecting rather than merely walking. Some examples of this are: *'et Ha-elokim hithalekh Noakh* (Gen. 6:9); *Hithalekh l'fanai*

v'heie tamim (Gen. 17: 1) ; *Ha-elokim asher halkhu avotai l'fanav* (Gen, 48:15).

Esau perceived reconciliation as an opportunity to blend their lives together. He added: *esa ke-negdekha*, “I will travel (life’s path) together with you as your equal – no less worthy” (Rashi, Gen. 33:12 – *shaveh lekha*). We can proceed together despite the fact that I am *negdekha* – “against” you in the sense of having different, even opposite inclinations, yours of the spirit and mine of the mundane. *Ke-negdekha* can also mean “at some distance from you” (as in “And she [Hagar] sat herself down against him a good way off [*mi-neged*]”, as it were a bow-shot, so as not to see the suffering of her son [Gen. 21:16]). Perhaps Esau wanted to reassure Jacob that he would respect his need for “distance”, that is, “space” for independent development.

The text itself is ambiguous with respect to how Esau specifically sharing their lives. The midrash *Tana Devei Eliyahu Zuta* (18) puts the following words in Esau's mouth: ‘*let us divide between us this world (olam hazeh) and the next world (olam habah)*’. This approach seems to intimate that Esau at this point reconsidered his place in the world of the spirit¹¹. He wanted an opportunity to take part in developing the spiritual realm while maintaining his foothold in the realm of the mundane, although sharing it with his brother. Jacob, however, did not see this as an option. Clearly, Esau had less to fear from being engulfed by Jacob as the spirit is naturally weighed down by the gravity of the material, not vice versa. Besides, the development of the two realms needs to be distinct, each with its own advocate. This is in line with Rebecca’s prophecy: there will be two nations each with their own agenda.

Jacob perceived the nature of the fraternal reconciliation in a different light than did his brother. It is a matter of mutually honoring the potential unique contribution of each brother and allowing each the freedom to make that contribution without being cramped by the other. To thrive, at least in its formative stages, spiritual development will be successful if it is cultivated in relative isolation, so Jacob thought. Esau had, moreover, settled down in Seir getting a head start in building, while Jacob had just returned from a long exile.

There was also an additional and much longer exile to endure for which he needed to prepare his family. Jacob had to make his way slowly and solitarily, not in Esau’s shadow.¹⁴

Witness Jacob's reply to Esau's proposition as presented in the text:

And he said unto him [Jacob to Esau]: 'My lord knoweth that the children are tender and that the flocks and herds giving suck are a care to me; and if they overdrive them one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant; and I will journey on gently, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come unto my lord unto Seir (Gen. 33:13–14).

Although addressing the travails of the physical journey which necessitated that Jacob progress at a slow pace for the sake of the children's and animals' safety, Jacob appears to be addressing a more profound issue. This is apparent from the text which informs us that Jacob refused even the accompaniment of Esau's escorts; the latter would not have endangered his family and flock (Gen. 33:15) and perhaps could have even eased the hardships of the travel. It appears that Jacob was determined to separate from Esau to build his destiny independently.

Jacob leaves open more intimate cooperation with Esau at a future undesignated time – ‘*until I come unto my lord unto Seir*’ (Gen. 33:14). Jacob referred to a time in the future, after having secured his leadership in the domain of the spirit. Rashi (Gen. 33:14), based upon *Bereishit Rabba* [Vilna] 78:14, perceives Jacob as referring to the utopian times of the messiah, a different existence in which the brothers would be able to partner. Netziv (Gen. 33:16), however, claims that Jacob himself planned, in due course, to go see his brother but without his family, whom he wanted to shelter from Esau's world. He continues to say that Esau departed angrily, having difficulty accepting Jacob's position and doubting whether Jacob was really sincere in the affection he displayed at their meet. Rabbi David Asbag,¹⁵ on the other hand, perceives Esau as accepting Jacob's position with equanimity. The text states that Esau “*returned*” “*on that day*” on his way unto Seir (Gen. 33:16). The use of the word *shav* “returned” rather than *halakh* “went” is remarkable. The verb *y-s-v* in Hebrew can connote *yishuv hada'at* “equanimity”. Esau “returned” to a deeper understanding of the destinies of the two brothers.¹⁶ Rabbi Asbag¹⁷ regards the phrase *bayom hahu* “on this day” as a flashback to the selling of the *bekhora – mikra kayom*, a final acceptance by Esau of what the

bekhora signifies and the need for him and Jacob to separate into their respective realms.

It is remarkable that *bayom hahu* is a phrase frequently employed in the Bible to designate an event signifying a turning point, in this case, Esau's new insight.¹⁸

After Jacob returned to his father's home, the text again refers to Esau as leaving Canaan *mipnei Yaakov ahiv* (Gen. 36:6). It is unclear as to whether the text is referring to his prior departure to Seir (before he meets Jacob) or perhaps to a later departure, indicating that Esau continued to maintain a presence in Canaan until he subsequently left for good. Either way, what is critical for understanding the destinies of the brothers is the reason noted for his departure. *Mipnei Yaakov ahiv* – *mipnei* as the antithesis of *lifnei* – *l-* to "come before" or "be close to" as opposed to *m-* to "move away from", thus Esau leaves, acquiescing to Jacob's request for separation.

Surprisingly, the text in the very next verse gives another reason why Esau left – *mipnei mikneihem*. Again the text uses *mipnei* – indicative of distance – but offers a prosaic reason for Esau's departure: there was not enough room for the animals of the two brothers. If, however, this had been the true reason, Esau could have asked Jacob to leave. Esau left of his own initiative, out of deference to Jacob who took upon himself the conditions set forth in the *brit* (which Rashi, Gen. 36:6, and others refer to as the *shtar hov* "promissory note", so that he might earn Canaan for posterity.

SUMMARY

The saga of Jacob and Esau does not reflect the black and white existence of two brothers, one good and one evil. Rather, Esau was destined to be King and Jacob, Priest. Jacob in line with his spiritual inclination became the successor to his father and grandfather in the service of God. Esau in line with his inclination became leader in the sphere of the mundane.

The different inclinations of the brothers were present early on and each vied for their respective turfs. Spiritual *Bekhora* and *birkat "kol"* was sequestered by Jacob. Material supremacy designated for Esau was unrightfully, although apparently mistakenly, sequestered by Jacob, but eventually "returned" to its "rightful owner"- Esau. God gave legitimacy to the "territory" staked out by each of the brothers. Jacob became "Israel", father of the Israel-

ite nation and Esau inherited Seir for himself and posterity. Esau's temptation to share in modelling the spiritual realm of life was perhaps short-lived. Jacob, knowing his brother's inclinations and the nature of the challenge he was up to, in any case declined. Esau himself came to understand that his destiny lay elsewhere. Esau left to Seir and the brothers parted ways in mutual respect.

NOTES

1. Although the second explanation is not *pshat*, additional commentators, among them Saadia Gaon, Recanati, and Abrabanel have also explained *ohelim* in a similar fashion. The point of the text seems to be to contrast the two brothers with respect to a feature that will play a significant role in their destiny. The text tells us that Esau was a man of the outdoors who relished conquering the physical world. Shepherding does not constitute a clear cut contrast to this description, in light of the future development of the brothers. The engagement in indoor and inward endeavors to master the world of the spirit appears more meaningful in this regard and perhaps is the reason for the commentators' deviation from *pshat*.
2. *Bamidbar Rabba* [Vilna] 4:8.
3. *Ktav Ve-Kabala* (Gen. 25:34) specifies that Esau despised only the spiritual aspect of the *bekhora* which is the only part he relinquished; he still referred to himself as the *bekhor* when he came for his blessing.
4. For further details, see C. Greenberger, "Submission of Abraham", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 45 (2017) pp. 73-78.
5. Malbim, Gen. 27:36.
6. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, קה-נא-את-ברכת, from a Friday night discussion of Rabbi Amital with his students on Parashat Vayishlah, edited by Dov Karul, <http://etzion.org.il/he/>
7. See article by Yonatan Achituv, *Yaakov avimu*, www.herzog.ac.il/tvunot/fulltext/mega48_achituv_48.pdf.
8. Sforno, Gen. 32:21–22: Jacob is herein making atonement (*kapara*) for taking away the blessing which rightfully belonged to Esau.
9. See, for example, the following commentaries: Rashi 32:29; Hizkuni 32:25, 28; Radak 32: 29.
10. *Torat Hayim*, in his commentary on TB *Hulin* 92:a, identifies the hollow of the thigh as symbolic of Esau's oath to Jacob to relinquish the *bekhora*. In ancient times, an oath was enacted by putting one's hand in the hollow of the thigh; Abraham requested this of Eliezer, for example, in the context of his oath not to leave Isaac in Padan Aram (Gen. 24:9). According to this interpretation, Jacob symbolically defended his right to the (spiritual) *bekhora* on the basis of Esau's oath).
11. Avihud Schwartz, ed., *Meydan Yaakov Ki Karov Eilekha Lashon Hamikrah ve-Lashon Hakhamim Sefer Bereishit* (Tel Aviv: Miskal Yediot Aharonoth/Hemed, 2014), pp. 260–263.
12. Jacob's perception of a blessing as a prayer for the realization of the recipient's unique potential is echoed in the blessings Jacob himself gave his children on his deathbed, each according to their inclinations (Gen. 49:28).
13. Although most commentaries interpret "he" to be the being and "him" to be Jacob, Daat Mikrah takes the approach reflected in this manuscript.

14. For elaboration on this, see *Devarim Rabba* [Vilna] 1:20.
15. David Asbag, *Leket Ani* (Meknes: Meknes Publishers, 1933), p. 49.
16. *Da'at Mikrah* (Gen. 27:40) interprets Isaac's blessing: *ka'asher tarid u'farakhta ulo*, as encouraging Esau to leave (*tarid* in the sense of depart) Canaan, and thereby become independent of his brother's sphere of influence. Esau, at this point, takes his father's advice.
17. Asbag, *Leket Ani*, 49.
18. For example, in Genesis the phrase appears in the verse relating to the covenant God made with Abraham, the *brit bain ha-betarim*, which significantly changed his status for himself and posterity (Gen. 15:18). In Exodus, it appears in the description of the deliverance of the Israelites on the Red Sea. For more examples: Ex. 14:30; Isa. 2:11; 3:7; 10:20; Ezek.2:6; 2:1; 29:11.



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