

Vayishlah 5768

Giving the Benefit of the Doubt

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Shabbat Shalom.

“Esav?”

“Esav? I’ve never heard of a Jewish kid being named Esav!”

Does anyone here know anybody named Esav? The Hebrew form of Esau is not exactly a traditional Jewish name. So you could imagine my surprise when I learned that an old childhood friend had named his son Esav. It’s simply not done. So you might ask: why not? Why have there been no Esavs in Jewish history since the first?

Well, he is not exactly a favorite son. While his dad likes him, he and his mom do not hit it off, and he seems to come up with the short end of the stick most of the time. Our rabbis even wrote *midrashic* commentaries that portray Esav in a negative light. Some of our ancient rabbis repaint the scene of reconciliation between Jacob and Esav in this morning’s Torah reading, making Esav out to be a villain.

The Torah states that Esav and Jacob had a powerful reunion after being apart for twenty years. Things were bad when Jacob ran away – Jacob had deceived Esav out of the birthright and tricked his father into giving him the special blessing meant for his brother. Esav wanted to kill Jacob at the time, but things are different after a long separation and because of the changes that both have undergone. It seems fairly clear that they have forgiven each other.

Listen to their reunion in the Torah: “Looking up, Jacob saw Esav accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids. Jacob himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esav ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him and they wept.”

There is clearly tension present – why does Esav have four hundred men with him? And Jacob is definitely afraid, especially after his all-night wrestling encounter the previous evening. But they reconcile and the deep love each brother has for the other takes center stage.

Our ancient rabbis struggled with the word “*Vayishakehu* – and he kissed him.” It’s one thing to embrace, but this kiss – was it real? It seems almost too much, given Esav’s previous resolve to kill his brother.

The rabbis weave *midrashim* that claim this kiss was not really a kiss – *neshikah*, but a *neshikhah* – a bite. Esav bit his brother on the neck. The Masoretes, who set the Torah's letters on the parchment the way we still have them today, reinforced this ambiguity by placing dots over that word. Other *midrashim* follow in the same vein – portraying Esav as a violent man, bent on hate.

Before we simply attack or dismiss these interpretations, it is critical to ask, why?. Why does our tradition push Esav into this problematic place? Why did they often have it in for Esav?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the historical context in which our ancestors lived. They did not simply have it in for Esav. They understood Esav as being a paradigmatic example of an enemy of the Jewish people. As opposed to Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, Esav came to symbolize many other nations in history. Esav's descendants become like the Amalekites, those who would attack the most defenseless among us, and we portrayed our enemies in a harsh light.

One needs to examine the context. For the rabbis, Esav was not simply a biblical character, the brother of Jacob who was the father of the Jewish people. He came to represent our enemies, those who would do us harm. In the rabbinic mind, he was related not only to the Amalekites, but he is also the progenitor of the Edomites who teamed up with other enemies of Israel some twenty-five hundred years ago. Esav was linked to Haman in the Purim story, the oppressive Roman Empire two thousand years ago, and finally Christianity when it was filled with anti-Semitism.

*Hazal*, our rabbis, were not inclined simply to dislike Esav for no reason. When they wrote that he bit Jacob, they were writing much more of the experience of when Rome destroyed Israel, Jerusalem, and the Holy Temple, killed one-third of the Jewish people, and tortured and killed the greatest rabbis of our people, like Rabbi Akiva. One can imagine their writing that *midrash* with a tear in their eyes, thinking about those terrible losses and all the suffering.

Our *haftarah* follows in the same vein. While we are not exactly sure when Ovadiah the prophet lived, it was probably around the time of the destruction of the First Temple some twenty-six hundred years ago. Ovadiah writes a strong message against Edom. Again, why? And why would the rabbis want this to be the *haftarah* for a Torah reading where the true theme is reconciliation and forgiveness?

This *haftarah* was selected in a time of Jewish powerlessness when Jews were being oppressed by Rome or perhaps under Christian sway. For the rabbis, there was a direct link – Esav's red hair (*adom* is red in Hebrew) linked him to the Edomites who lived where Jordan is today. When a number of us were at the Dead Sea last February, we looked across the water to Jordan and saw red cliffs, the ancient homeland of the Edomites. It all makes sense – for our

ancestors saw Esav's hatred of Jacob as the paradigm of hate that many have had for us.

For me, this approach to studying our tradition is vital. It is called "*l'khaf zekhut*." When we judge actions that are ambiguous – and much of life is – we should be generous. The tradition uses the metaphor of a balance scale with two pans shaped like the palm of a hand. One holds deeds that redound to our credit; the other holds our blameworthy actions. We should then, in a sense, turn our hands around, opening them up to others, giving them the benefit of the doubt.

This does not apply only to judging our ancestors; we should utilize this approach across the board. Sometimes, we look at our parents and judge them without fully taking their context into account. We often judge others in the same manner. And, most often, we do this to ourselves.

We need to act *l'khaf zekhut* – trying to understand where someone is coming from and taking that into the equation to truly appreciate his or her actions.

This is not easy. In the Mishnah we find the first recorded use of the term by Yehoshua ben Perahiah who lived two thousand years ago. Because this dictum follows his mandate that one should acquire a friend, *knei lekha haver*, some interpreters create a link: the better we are able to judge positively, the more friends we will have. But they also note that this is difficult. Often it is against our natural inclination; it is a life-long goal for which we should strive.

There are also clear limits. Even if we judge everyone positively, we may not, in fact, bring more justice into the world. Even if we understand why people commit hateful acts, we cannot ignore what they did. They are still responsible and must deal with the consequences of their actions.

The same is true here – while we can look at some of our tradition and understand it as poetic justice, words to comfort an oppressed, disempowered people, we must know its limits. It is one thing to read Ovadiah's *haftarah* against Edom, but it must not overwhelm our future. Recalling the past is wise; living in it is provincial and maybe dangerous.

There is a fine line in remembering the past, especially for us, a people with a long history and a good memory. The founder of Hasidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught: "*Shekhiyah meviyah galut; Zekhirah sod Geulah* – forgetfulness leads to exile and remembering is the secret of redemption."

This recalls George Santayana's saying: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." What makes humans unique is our ability to remember, to learn, and to grow from the past. As Jews, our focus on recalling the past has helped push us forward to a better place, an improved world, a redeemed place.

When we remember the Shoah, the Holocaust, or other tragedies of the past, we are accomplishing redemption on three levels. First, we are simply remembering those who were killed – a *mitzvah* in itself, like reciting the *Kaddish* or a memorial prayer for a loved one on their *yahrzeit*. Second, it is not simply recalling the past; it is using it to improve our world now. We must be in the front rows of those who cry out against similar horrors that are occurring in our world today – we must continue to be active in ending the Genocide in Darfur. We can draw a line from the hate of the Amalekites, Haman, Syrian Greeks, Romans, Crusades, Cossacks, and the Nazis to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran’s leadership. We must remember what some forget.

But, it does not end there – there is a third aspect. We cannot only be about remembering; we must also be about hope and reconciliation – the fundamental message of this *parashah*, and of Jacob and Esav. This often comes up around the issue of Israel.

We must remember what has happened to Israel and the real threats that surround our sisters and brothers in our holy land. But, as I have said before, we need a more nuanced position that allows us to move from the past to a new future.

We try to do that here in our shul. We recall the kidnapped Israeli soldiers, we remember those killed by terrorists as I did this morning, but we also hold out a branch of peace. With the Annapolis Peace Conference only days away, it’s time to raise our voices for peace. Let’s call our representatives and tell them and the world that we want and need peace – we need real compromises on both sides. We need a Palestinian peace partner who recognizes that, as the UN stated explicitly 60 years ago, there should be Jewish state for Jews and another for the Palestinians. Then Israel can move to help the Palestinian people establish their state. We need to make the most of the opportunity.

Our *parashah* implicitly weaves together this message of reconciliation – it ends with a long chapter about Esav’s descendants. While the Torah’s narrative does not focus on him, he is given a central space as the spotlight moves off of Jacob. It’s strange to spend so much time on someone who is not linked to our future. So why does the Torah turn to Esav? The Torah wants to remind us of Esav and Jacob’s reconciliation and the importance of approaching not only our ancestors with the benefit of the doubt, but even our enemies.

“May the One who makes peace in the heavens, make peace upon all of us and upon all Israel – *Oseh Shalom Bomromav hu ya’ase shalom aleynu v’al kol Yisrael V’imru Amen.*”

Shabbat Shalom.