

Toldot
11/16/2012

Esau: I've always loved hunting. There is something satisfying about knowing that you have worked; really WORKED, for your dinner. And let me tell you, I work hard. My brother isn't much of an outdoors person, so it's really up to me to make sure meat gets on the table every night.

Jacob: Okay, okay - I may not be good at hunting, but that doesn't mean I'm lazy! I do just as much work, helping mom out around the tent, and especially in the kitchen. And yet all dad can see is his perfect hunter son. Not that I'm jealous or anything...I just want to be recognized for my work too.

Esau: What can I say? Dad loves a good roast pheasant sandwich once in awhile, and pheasants are tricky! Sure, I'll admit mom isn't always crazy about how much time I spend out in the field, but sometimes, after I set my trap, I have to stake out an area for 24 hours before something edible walks into it. So what if I'm not always home by curfew, I'm helping to sustain the family!

Jacob: Helping to sustain the family? Who spent all day running back and forth from the well to the kitchen transporting water for boiling? Who took on the painstaking job of pounding herbs and spices into just the right mixture? Who has been stirring these lentils all evening so they wouldn't clump up and burn?

So begins the story of how Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of soup.

Our Torah portion, *Toldot*, tells a multi-layered story of family dynamics. We begin, as we read earlier, with Rebekah, who in the midst of a difficult pregnancy cries out to God. God responds by explaining to her "*shnei goyim b'vitnech...v'ravyaavodtzair*" – two nations are within your womb, and the greater shall serve the younger.

Thus, Esau and Jacob are brought into the world with a mother who already is biased toward Jacob. Later we learn that Isaac too is biased – he prefers Esau.

Esau is born "admoni" – red. He also has an intense proclivity for red lentil soup. For this reason, he is also called Edom.

Jacob, after some soul-searching and a wrestling match, is given a new name as well: Israel.

For the rabbis, there is much behind these two names. Because Jacob becomes the namesake patriarch of the people of Israel, his counterpoint Esau, and thus the nation of Edom, must be vilified. Talmudic Rabbi Yochanan bar Nappaha charges Esau with murder, rape, and atheism¹, and elsewhere in the Talmud Esau is actually blamed for his father's loss of sight!²According to Rashi, the whole reason Abraham died was so that he wouldn't

¹Babylonian Talmud BavaBatra 16b.

²Babylonian Talmud Megillah 28a

have to see his grandson Esau “fall into degenerate ways”³. The Zohar calls Esau “a true progeny of the serpent”.⁴

In short, the rabbis tell us a black-and-white story where Jacob is the good son and Esau is the bad son: “Big bad hairy Esau was all brawn and no brains, and gave away his precious birthright all for a bowl of soup. It’s a good thing Jacob tricked Papa Isaac into giving him the blessing for the firstborn, for if Esau had received it he would probably have turned it into a curse and used it to wreak havoc!”

The Torah text, on the other hand, provides a less colorful story. The Torah tells us that Esau was a hunter and Jacob stayed at home. The “birthright for soup” interchange goes something like this:

“Gimme some soup.”

“Only if you give me your birthright.”

“Dude, I’m so hungry I could DIE! Gimme some soup!”

“Only if you give me your birthright.”

“Fine.”

Okay okay - the interchange I just read you is also an interpretation; it’s MY interpretation. And I’ll be honest, it’s suited to my point. In fact, whenever I write a d’var torah or a sermon, I craft it toward a point. I want you to understand the Torah portion in a certain way so that I can essentially argue one possible meaning of the text and how it can apply to our world.

This might seem like a simple admission, but it is incredibly important. You’ve heard the rabbi’s version of the story and you’ve heard mine. If we were to read this week’s Torah portion from the perspective of Esau, or Rebekah, or Isaac, or even from Jacob himself, we would probably hear four entirely different stories. Jacob might tell you that he was sick and tired of Esau coming home and demanding things from him all the time and just wanted to teach him a lesson. Esau might say that there was more than enough stew to go around and that Jacob was being a brat and figured he wasn’t serious about the birthright thing. Rebekah could argue that this was simply the fulfillment of God’s explanation that the elder would serve the younger, and Isaac would probably side with Esau in appreciation of his eldest sons ability to procure the meat he loved so much.

One situation, four characters, infinite stories.

This phenomenon is not limited to the biblical narrative.

As I’m sure many of you have heard, this Wednesday the Israeli Defense Force began Operation Pillar of Defense, targeting and killing Hamas military head Ahmad Jabari in response to the barrage of rockets that have been falling on Southern Israel from Gaza. Since the operation began on Wednesday, over 550 rockets have made their way from Gaza

³Rashi on Genesis 25:30

⁴ According to Jewish Encyclopedia on Esau and his vicious character in rabbinical Literature

into Israel⁵, and while Israel's anti-missile defense system Iron Dome has intercepted over 190⁶ of them, many have hit real targets. There have been deaths on both sides and many more have been wounded.

Numbers keep changing and no one can know what will have happened by the time we wake up tomorrow morning. Even the barebones facts are hard to determine. Each person living in, witnessing or reading about the conflict comes with his or her own history and prior knowledge, and so each person is telling a different story.

The story of the Torah is similarly ambiguous. We have one text, but within that text we can find infinite understandings. In fact, when we read Torah, our job is to look at the text from various perspectives. We are to learn not only how the rabbis read the words but also how the characters might have told the story, and furthermore we are to work to understand the Torah and what it can teach us today, in 2012.

So too with Israel.

Each news article, each photograph, each set of numbers and each op-ed piece about the current situation presents one slice of an infinite pie of knowledge.

It is important to recognize bias but it is equally important that we remember not to write off news for its bias. Instead, we must look to multiple sources for information.

- View it as Jacob would view it.
- View it as Esau would view it.
- View it as Rebekah would view it.
- View it as Isaac would view it.

Then, and only then, can we determine how we ourselves view it.

I conclude with a comment from a friend currently in Jerusalem:

- First she quotes Kurt Vonnegut: "There are plenty of good reasons for fighting, but no good reason ever to hate without reservation, to imagine that God Almighty Himself hates with you, too."
- Then she states a prayer: "Praying for a swift resolution, and for the safety of those caught in the middle."⁷

⁵<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/live-blog-rockets-slam-into-israel-south-in-third-day-of-idf-operation-in-gaza-1.478193>

⁶<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4306759,00.html>

⁷ Rachel Mylan, Facebook wall post, 11/16/2012