

Kol Rina  
An Independent Minyan  
Parashat Vayishlach

December 14, 2019 \*\*\* Kislev 16, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

~~~~~Today's Portions~~~~~

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Vayishlach in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3197/jewish/Vavishlach-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3197/jewish/Vavishlach-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

Jacob returns to the Holy Land after a 20-year stay in Charan, and sends angel-emissaries to Esau in hope of a reconciliation, but his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with 400 armed men. Jacob prepares for war, prays, and sends Esau a large gift (consisting of hundreds of heads of livestock) to appease him.

That night, Jacob ferries his family and possessions across the Jabbok River; he, however, remains behind and encounters the angel that embodies the spirit of Esau, with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Jacob suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name Israel, which means “he who prevails over the divine.”

Jacob and Esau meet, embrace and kiss, but part ways. Jacob purchases a plot of land near Shechem, whose crown prince—also called Shechem—abducts and rapes Jacob’s daughter Dinah. Dinah’s brothers Simeon and Levi avenge the deed by killing all male inhabitants of the city, after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves.

Jacob journeys on. Rachel dies while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, and is buried in a roadside grave near Bethlehem. Reuben loses the birthright because he interferes with his father’s marital life. Jacob arrives in Hebron, to his father Isaac, who later dies at age 180. (Rebecca has passed away before Jacob’s arrival.)

Our Parshah concludes with a detailed account of Esau’s wives, children and grandchildren: the family histories of the people of Seir, among whom Esau settled; and a list of the eight kings who ruled Edom, the land of Esau’s and Seir’s descendants.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Obadiah 1:1-21.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/596328/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/596328/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week’s haftarah mentions the punishment of Edom, the descendants of Esau, whose conflict with Jacob is chronicled in this week’s Torah reading. The prophet Obadiah, himself an Edomite convert to Judaism, describes the punishment destined for the nation of Edom. The Edomites did not come to Judea’s aid when she was being destroyed by the Babylonians, and even joined in the carnage. Many years later the Edomites (the Roman Empire) themselves destroyed the Second Temple and mercilessly killed and enslaved their Jewish cousins.

Though the Roman Empire was one of the mightiest to ever inhabit the earth, the prophet forewarns: “If you go up high like an eagle, and if you place your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord. . . And the house of Jacob shall be fire and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau shall become stubble, and they

shall ignite them and consume them, and the house of Esau shall have no survivors, for the Lord has spoken."

After describing the division of Esau's lands amongst the returning Judean exiles, the haftarah concludes with the well known phrase: "And saviors shall ascend Mt. Zion to judge the mountain of Esau, and the Lord shall have the kingdom."

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[No Longer Shall You Be Called Jacob \(Vayishlach 5780\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](http://rabbisacks.org/vayishlach-5780/)  
<http://rabbisacks.org/vayishlach-5780/>

One fact about this week's parsha has long perplexed the commentators. After his wrestling match with the unnamed adversary, Jacob was told: "*Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings Divine and human, and have prevailed*" (Gen. 32:29, JPS translation). Or "*Your name will no longer be said to be Jacob, but Israel. You have become great (sar) before God and man. You have won.*" (Aryeh Kaplan translation).

This change of name takes place not once but twice. After the encounter with Esau, and the episode of Dina and Shechem, God told Jacob to go to Beth El. Then we read: "After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.' So He named him Israel" (Gen. 35:9-10).

Note, first, that this is not an adjustment of an existing name by the change or addition of a letter, as when God changed Abram's name to Abraham, or Sarai's to Sarah. It is an entirely new name, as if to signal that what it represents is a complete change of character. Second, as we have seen, the name change happened not once but twice. Third – and this is the puzzle of puzzles – *having said twice that his name will no longer be Jacob, the Torah continues to call him Jacob*. God Himself does so. So do we, every time we pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. How so, when the Torah twice tells us that his name will no longer be Jacob?

Radak suggests that "your name will no longer be called Jacob" means, "your name will no longer *only* be called Jacob." You will have another name as well. This is ingenious, but hardly the plain sense of the verse. Sforino says, "In the Messianic Age, your name will no longer be called Jacob." This, too, is difficult. The future tense, as used in the Torah, means the near future, not the distant one, unless explicitly specified.

This is just one mystery among many when it comes to Jacob's character and his relationship with his brother Esau. So difficult is it to understand the stories about them that, to make sense of them, they have been overlaid in Jewish tradition with a thick layer of Midrash that makes Esau almost perfectly evil and Jacob almost perfectly righteous. There is a clear need for such Midrash, for educational purposes. Esau and Jacob, as portrayed in the Torah, are too nuanced and complex to be the subject of simple moral lessons for young minds. So Midrash gives us a world of black and white, as Maharatz Chajes explained.[1]

The biblical text itself, though, is far more subtle. It does not state that Esau is bad and Jacob is good. Rather, it shows that they are two different kinds of human being. The contrast between them is like the one made by Nietzsche between the Greek figures of Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo represents reason, logic, order, self-control; Dionysus stands for emotion, passion, nature, wildness and chaos. Apollonian cultures value restraint and modesty; Dionysian ones go for ostentation and excess. Jacob is Apollonian, Esau, Dionysiac.

Or it may be that Esau represents the Hunter, considered a hero in many ancient cultures, but not so in the Torah, which represents the agrarian and pastoral ethic of farmers and shepherds. With the transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer-and-herdsman, the Hunter is no longer a hero and instead is seen as a figure of violence, especially when combined, as in the case of Esau, with a mercurial temperament. It is not so much that Esau is bad and Jacob good, but that Esau represents the world that

was, while Jacob represents, if sometimes tentatively and fearfully, a new world about to be brought into being, whose spirituality would be radically different, new and challenging.

The fact that Jacob and Esau were twins is fundamental. Their relationship is one of the classic cases of sibling rivalry.[2] Key to understanding their story is what Rene Girard called mimetic desire: the desire to have what someone else has, because they have it. Ultimately, this is the desire to be someone else.

That is what the name Jacob signifies. It is the name he acquired because he was born holding on to his brother Esau's heel. That was consistently his posture during the key events of his early life. He bought his brother's birthright. He wore his brother's clothes. At his mother's request, he took his brother's blessing. When asked by his father, "Who are you, my son?" He replied, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

Jacob was the man who wanted be Esau. Why so? Because Esau had one thing he did not have: his father's love. "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob."

All that changed in the great wrestling match between Jacob and the unknown stranger. Our Sages teach us that this stranger was an angel in disguise. After they fight, he tells Jacob that his name would now be Israel. The stated explanation of this name is: "for you have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed." It also resonates with two other senses. Sar means "prince, royalty." Yashar means "upright." Both of these are in sharp contrast with the name "Jacob," one who "holds on to his brother's heel."

How then are we to understand what, first the stranger, then God, said to Jacob? *Not as a statement, but as a request, a challenge, an invitation.* Read it not as, "You will no longer be called Jacob but Israel." Instead read it as, "Let your name no longer be Jacob but Israel," meaning, "Act in such a way that this is what people call you." *Be a prince. Be royalty. Be upright. Be yourself. Don't long to be someone else.* This would turn out to be a challenge not just then but many times in the Jewish future.

Often, Jews have been content to be themselves. But from time to time, they have come into contact with a civilisation whose intellectual, cultural and even spiritual sophistication was undeniable. It made them feel awkward, inferior, like a villager who comes to a city for the first time. Jews lapsed into the condition of Jacob. They wanted to be someone else.

The first time we hear this is in the words of the Prophet Ezekiel: "You say, 'We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone.' But what you have in mind will never happen" (Ez. 20:32). In Babylon, the people encountered an impressive empire whose military and economic success contrasted radically with their own condition of exile and defeat. Some wanted to stop being Jews and become someone else, anyone else.

We hear it again in the days of the Greeks. Some Jews became Hellenised. We recognise that in the names of High Priests like Jason and Menelaus. The battle against this is the story of Chanukah. Something similar happened in the days of Rome. Josephus was one of those who went over to the other side, though he remained a defender of Judaism.

It happened again during the Enlightenment. Jews fell in love with European culture. With philosophers like Kant and Hegel, poets like Goethe and Schiller, and musicians like Mozart and Beethoven. Some were able to integrate this with faithfulness to Judaism as creed and deed – figures like Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch and Nehemiah Nobel. But some did not. They left the fold. They changed their names. They hid their identity. None of us is entitled to be critical of what they did. The combined impact of intellectual challenge, social change, and incendiary antisemitism, was immense. Yet this was a Jacob response, not an Israel one.

It is happening today in large swathes of the Jewish world. Jews have overachieved. Judaism, with some notable exceptions, has underachieved. There are Jews at or near



the top of almost every field of human endeavour today, but all too many have either abandoned their religious heritage or are indifferent to it. For them, being Jewish is a slender ethnicity, too thin to be transmitted to the future, too hollow to inspire.

We have waited so long for what we have today and have never had simultaneously before in all of Jewish history: independence and sovereignty in the state of Israel, freedom and equality in the diaspora. Almost everything that a hundred generations of our ancestors prayed for has been given to us. Will we really (in Lin-Manuel Miranda's phrase) throw away our shot? Will we be Israel? Or will we show, to our shame, that we have not yet outlived the name of Jacob, the person who wanted to be someone else? Jacob was often fearful because he was not sure who he wanted to be, himself or his brother. That is why God said to him, "Let your name not be Jacob but Israel." When you are afraid, and unsure of who you are, you are Jacob. When you are strong in yourself, as yourself, you are Israel.

*The fact that the Torah and tradition still use the word Jacob, not just Israel, tells us that the problem has not disappeared.* Jacob seems to have wrestled with this throughout his life, and we still do today. It takes courage to be different, a minority, countercultural. It's easy to live for the moment like Esau, or to "be like the peoples of the world" as Ezekiel said.

I believe the challenge issued by the angel still echoes today. Are we Jacob, embarrassed by who we are? Or are we Israel, with the courage to stand upright and walk tall in the path of faith? [1] In the Mavo ha-Aggadot printed at the beginning of Eyn Yaakov. [2] To read more on the themes of sibling rivalry in the Bible, see Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, 2015.

[Vayishlach by Daniel Nevins](#)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/wrestling-for-blessing>

On the eve of his dreaded reunion with Esau, Jacob remained alone in the dark, and "a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." The mysterious assailant injured Jacob, dislocating his thigh, but Jacob refused to let go, so the man pleaded with him, saying: "Let me go, for dawn is breaking!" Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The assailant asked for Jacob's name, and conferred a new one, Israel, "for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:25-29).

This puzzling passage cries out for interpretation. Who was this man, and why did he attack Jacob? Why was he in such a hurry to depart before dawn? How did Jacob manage to hold on, despite his injury? If this was an unprovoked and injurious attack, then why did Jacob try to prolong it, even asking his attacker for a blessing? Who does that? How is the new name Israel a blessing, and if it really is, then why does the Torah continue to refer to him as Jacob? Why do we?

Into this blizzard of questions step the Rabbis, and they offer many answers. According to the Talmud (BT Hullin 91b), during their match Jacob questions the man—are you a thief of some sort that you are afraid of daylight? "No," he replies, "I am an angel, and today is my first turn to sing the morning praise." In a parallel midrashic version (Gen. Rabbah 78), Jacob pragmatically offers, "then let one of your friends sing the praise today, and you can sing tomorrow." The angel replies, "If I miss today, then they will say, since you didn't praise yesterday, you can't praise today."

These rabbinic texts address two of our questions—the attacker was not a man, but an angel, and he was eager to commence his next (and presumably more pleasant) task, singing the morning song of praise to God. If the attacker was an angel, then this could also explain our other questions. Jacob held on because he is accustomed to angels—they appeared in his dream at Beth El on his flight from home, and according to the Rabbis, the "messengers" sent by Jacob to Esau at the start of the portion were also angels. If so, then Jacob had grounds for confidence to hold on to the spectral being. But why did he request a blessing from the angel? There are two lines of rabbinic interpretation, both playing on the competitive nature of Jacob. According to one line,

Jacob recalled that when angels appeared at the tent of Abraham and Sarah, they blessed the aged couple with miraculous fertility. Why should Jacob get anything less? The second interpretation is that Jacob worried about his position in the family. First there was the porridge incident, when he took advantage of his brother's hunger to secure the birthright; and then the fur sleeve story, when he took advantage of his father's blindness to steal Esau's blessing. Jacob had reason to wonder whether those blessings really belonged to him, and how he would face his family, even after all these years. Since the Rabbis believe that this angel is not a random character, but rather Esau's heavenly patron, they understand Jacob to be seeking confirmation of his blessings, so that when he meets Esau tomorrow, the two brothers can put this nasty business behind them. Recall that Esau had a problem with Jacob's name—it implies crookedness, in that the younger brother has wrested both the birthright and the blessing of the older (Gen. 27:36). Equipped with his new name Israel, Jacob will stand upright before God (Yashar-EI) and thus also before Esau.

The angel's blessing is apparently effective; things go surprisingly well with Esau in the morning. In chapter 35, God appears to Jacob, confirms the new name Israel, and blesses him. "You whose name is Jacob, you shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel shall be your name" (35:10). Following this, God bestows the covenantal blessings of Abraham and Isaac: numerous descendants, including kings and an "assembly of nations," and possession of the Land. We learn from this that Israel is not only a new name but a new identity, a marker and mechanism of expanded blessing. It is stunning, therefore, that just four verses later the Torah reverts to calling Israel by his original name, Jacob. After Abram and Sarai were renamed Abraham and Sarah, they never went back, and the Rabbis say that whoever calls them by their original names violates a positive, and perhaps also a negative, command. Yet Jacob remains Jacob—even his renaming verse states, "Your name is Jacob" before adding that it will now be Israel. The Rabbis reconcile this ambiguity by saying that Jacob remains his primary name, and Israel will be the secondary name (Gen. Rabbah 78).

This strange story and its rabbinic exegesis reverberate in Jewish liturgical practice. Like the angel, we too hurry in the morning to sing God's praise, ideally starting with the Shema at dawn, and reaching the Amidah prayer exactly at sunrise (BT Berakhot 9b; Tur and Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 89). Like Jacob, we too can delay the morning song of the angels, at least according to Midrash Sifre Devarim, which says that the angels in heaven must wait for the people of Israel to pray before they can sing their own supernal song (Ha'azinu 306, interpreting Job 38:7).

And like God, we continue to call the patriarch Israel by his original name, Jacob, opening each Amidah with the phrase, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Why? We don't say the "God of Abram," so why should we say, "the God of Jacob"? A creative answer is found in the halakhic magnum opus of Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (1829-1908): If you count the letters of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Hebrew, the total is 13. Likewise, if you count the letters of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, the total is 13. If you add them together, then you get 26, which is the gematria, or number value of the divine name.

By this account the mothers and fathers together witness the reality of God. This effect would be lost if we prayed to "the God of Israel" which would add an extra letter (Arukh Hashulhan, OH 113). Rabbi Epstein surely did not intend this, but he has provided us with support not only for the traditional text of the Amidah, which opens with the three patriarchs, but also for the updated text as many of us say it, including both the patriarchs and the matriarchs together.

Like Jacob, we wrestle with beings human and divine. We struggle to understand how to live with integrity in a time of conflict and confusion. We worry how others will view us, and we wish to be a blessing for those yet to come. Like Jacob we bear complex identities, and like the angel, we are eager to sing our unique song. We examine the

examples of our ancestors, matriarchs and patriarchs together, and link their lives to ours. Reading their stories, we come to understand our own, learning to wrestle with matters mundane and divine, so that we may deserve to be known as upright before God. (*Daniel Nevins is the Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership*)

Parashat Vayishlach 5780 by Rabbi Bruce Albert  
<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

Two recent experiences color my reading of this week's parashah, Vayishlach. The first involved my family watching *When Harry Met Sally* for the umpteenth time. After the movie, we turned to the DVD's special features which included an interview with the screenwriter, the wonderful Nora Ephron. In it she said that there were two kinds of romantic comedies. In the Christian kind, the protagonists are kept apart by a real, physical barrier. In the Jewish kind, they are separated by the man's neuroses. I thought about that as I read of Jacob's preparations to meet his brother Esau at the beginning of this week's parashah. First he sends an obsequious message to Esau hoping for a favorable reply (Gen. 32:4-6). When that fails, he divides his camp in two, seeking to secure the safety of at least part of his clan (Gen. 32:8-9). Then he sends gifts to his brother, along with specific instructions to the bearers as to what they are to say in response to Esau's anticipated questions (Gen. 32:14-21). Jacob's behavior displays an essential part of his character. He thinks through every angle and consequence of a situation before acting. We usually think of such behavior as the hallmark of rationality, and that may well be the case here. But in other circumstances, an obsession with imagining every possibility and preparing for every eventuality can cripple one into inaction. It is also the very stereotype of Jewish neurosis. And perhaps Jacob himself succumbs to such neurosis in his inability to respond to Dinah's rape or, later, Joseph's reported death.

The other experience that influenced my reading occurred at our synagogue's weekly Torah study for Parashat Vayera. I have been using Talmudic texts in our sessions and on this day, we were looking at the story in which Satan tries to dissuade Abraham from sacrificing Isaac by assuring him that God has already provided a substitute (BT Sanhedrin 89b). This led to a discussion which was, at times, very critical of Abraham. But as the discussion progressed, I could see that one of our attendees – a Christian woman whom I know to be very thoughtful and insightful – grew more and more distressed.

She approached me after the session. "Why do you keep bringing in Talmud," she wanted to know. "It takes everything and makes it so complicated. People want assurance in their faith, not all this complication and questioning."

I thought about her comments as I considered Esau's side of this story. To me, Esau is a deeply sympathetic character, perhaps more so than his brother. He is impetuous, guileless, quick to strike and quick to forget. He wants to be loved – especially by his parents and his brother – but is never assured that he is. Esau demands the simple response because he, by his nature, is impatient with equivocation.

In thinking about Esau, I understood the power of my Christian friend's plea. Life is complicated. Often our well-considered actions lead to unintended consequences. And often our passions get in the way of our better judgment. In such a complicated world, shouldn't faith offer answers, not questions? It's a powerful argument and one that the many Christians who attend my Torah study impress upon me. They have taught me much; in particular a deep respect for the power of Christian teaching to bring assurance and comfort to a troubled soul. For them, questioning the righteousness of Abraham's actions at the Akeida undermines the very notion of faith. That is how God made them. That is how God needs them to be.

At the same time, their attendance at a Jewish study group speaks to the power of our religion's determination to struggle with its texts. We do so – as we do with the Akeida –



not to undermine an act of faith, but to better understand what God wants of us. We recognize that such an approach can lead us to apostasy or neurosis (or perhaps both) but we cannot have it any other way. We are, after all, Israel – the ones who contend with God. That is how God made us. That is how God needs us to be.

At the end of our parashah the two brothers stand together at their father's grave. They face life's ultimate reality side by side. Perhaps each has come to different conclusions as to the nature of that reality. But perhaps each has also come to the realization that for the other, he followed the path that was meant for him. (Rabbi Bruce Alpert (AJR '11) is Rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue in Wallingford, CT)

### Being Made Small by Gabriel Gendler

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=6d0dde00-e22d-4bb8-972a-9eb206fdf6ca>

Before encountering Esav, Yaakov prays to God and makes the incredible declaration: קטנתי מכל החסדים - katonti mi'kol hahasadim - "I have been made small by all of the kindnesses and by all of the truth that you have done your servant, for with my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps." (Genesis 32:11)

The manuscripts disagree about the cantillation of the word katonti (the markings that indicates how a word of Torah is sung). The early 11th century Leningrad codex has an uplifting azla-geresh, whereas the 10th century Aleppo codex suggests a more downbeat rev'i'a. To this day, different humashim give Torah readers contradictory instructions. Discrepancies in trope such as these are rare, and often suggest differing readings of the underlying words. We often think of smallness as negative, and the verse katonti mi'kol hahasadim is read accordingly in many midrashim and targumim (translations) and eventually by Rashi:

I have been made small by all of the kindnesses - my merits have been diminished as a result of the kindnesses and the truth which you have done with me; therefore I fear that since you promised me [that you would protect me] I have been sullied by sin, and this will cause me to be delivered into the hand of Esav.

The Vilna Gaon, the 18th century scholar and foremost leader of Misnagdic (non-Hasidic) Jewry, would have had this interpretation in mind when he ruled that the correct trope for the word is indeed the minor *rev'i'a*. His rival and the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, however, encouraged his followers to use the major *azla-geresh*. After the death of the Vilna Gaon, opponents of Hasidism made accusations against Shneur Zalman which led to his arrest by the Russian empire on suspicion of treason (the Lubavitcher tradition argues that the accusations in the earthly courts were successful because they were concurrent with theological accusations being leveled in the heavenly court by the newly arrived Vilna Gaon). His last Shabbat in captivity was Parashat Vayishlah, and on the 19th of Kislev, he was released. When he returned he sent the following to his followers:

"I have been made small by the kindnesses..." With each hesed [kindness] that the Holy Blessed One does for a person, he should become very humble. Because "hesed is [God's] right arm", and "[God's] right arm embraces me" (Shir Hashirim 2:6) and [embracing] describes meaningful closeness to God, with greater intensity than before. And all who are close to God and thus raised up higher and higher should become humbler and humbler, as it becomes more clear that everything is as nothing before God. - The Holy Letter, Epistle 2

Schneur Zalman takes *katonti* to be a more positive and far more profound statement. Yaakov's response to God's overwhelming kindness is not to weigh this kindness against his own merits and to find himself undeserving. Rather, it is to give himself over completely to God, and to make himself small - to shrink his sense of self-importance and to recognize the wonder of God's presence in the world, which embraces all of us and alone is worthy of our service and devotion. No word in the humash could be more worthy of euphoric cantillation.

Yaakov's display of gratitude is the culmination of years of personal growth. After his

dream at the beginning of Parshat Vayetzei, he declares a bargaining position: *if* God gives me food and clothing and protection, *then* I will give tithes. Decades later, Yaakov has realized that the hesed that God shows us cannot be reduced to a checklist, nor can its value be compensated by any wealth we acquire. God's hesed is the beginning and the end of everything, and the only response available to us is deep and life-changing gratitude.

In this month Kislev, as we recite Hallel for Hanukah, may we all merit to hold this gratitude in our minds and hearts as we sing: הודו לה' כי טוב, כי לעולם חסדו - Hodu la'shem ki tov, ki l'olam hasdo - Give thanks to God who is good, whose kindness is forever.

*(Gabriel Gendler is a Conservative Yeshiva Alum, runs Monday Night Seder at the yeshiva as he pursues his PhD in Mathematics at the Hebrew University)*

Israel & Edom by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein (Conservative Yeshiva Faculty)

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People often ask how Esav came to be characterized as evil. While it is clear that Yaakov and Esav were adversaries, the Torah's storyline does not leave us with this impression. Only later in biblical and post-biblical literature does this picture emerge. Its roots are in historical experience. Esav, or Edom, was seen as the progenitor of the Edomites, a nation which dwelled on the other side of Yam Hamelah (the Dead Sea). During the Babylonian conquest of Judea and Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the Edomites allied themselves with the Babylonian enemy, who they aided and abetted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. From the vantage point of the Judeans, the Edomites prospered on their account. The book of Obadiah, a prophecy of a single chapter, reflects the Judeans' pent up animosity over this betrayal.

Ironically, during the period of the Hasmoneans, the Edomites were driven into the Negev and eventually absorbed into the Jewish people. With the demise of the actual Edomites, the negative imagery associated with Esav and Edom became associated with Rome, who, towards the beginning of the Common Era, conquered the land of Israel. The upshot of this was that the book of Obadiah in rabbinic times became associated with Jewish bitterness over Roman oppression. Hence, the verse: "For the violence (me-amas) done to your brother Yaakov, disgrace shall engulf you (Edom) and you shall perish forever" (1:10) never lost its bite.

What object lesson should we tease from this pent-up bitterness? In one midrash, the sages took a counterintuitive approach. Instead of focusing on their anger, they expressed their concern that the oppressed people might seek to emulate the "successful" behavior of their Roman oppressors: "And so said the Holy Spirit through Solomon - 'Do not envy the man of violence (Esav/Rome) and choose none of his ways' (Proverbs 3:31) 'Do not envy' the peace which Esav (Rome) enjoys and 'do not choose its ways', namely, do not imitate their deeds. Why? Look to the end of the matter. For a day will come when God will scorn those who scoff at His commandments, as it is written: 'The Lord abhors the man of blood and deceit' (Psalms 5:7)." (adapted from Bemidbar Rabbah 11:1)

The sages who composed this midrash expressed a fear that people might see oppression as a means for attaining their ends and it frightened them. Their answer is definitive: God will not abide such an idea.~~~~~

Yahrtzeits

Willa Bruckner remembers her mother Anita Cohen (Chana Bat Shalom v Sarah) on Sat. Dec.14 (Kislev 16).

Albert Gottlieb remembers his father Arnold Gottlieb on Mon. Dec.16 (Kislev 18)

Nancy Rothchild remembers her son Joshua Rothchild on Mon. Dec.16 (Kislev 18)

Ken Kraus remembers his father David Kraus on Tues. Dec. 17 (Kislev 19)

Amy Cooper remembers her aunt Charlotte Stieglitz (Sora Duba bat Avraham) on Fri. Dec. 20 (Kislev 22)



