



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly¹

Traditionally, Esav is the ugly one; Yaakov is the tzaddik. Indeed, the Midrash tells us that from the get-go, Yaakov was contesting his redheaded brother. By clinging to Esav's foot during their birth, Yaakov was laying claim to the birthright based on "first-in (to be conceived); first out."

Like Rashi, some say that Esav, the hunter, was bad from birth; others claim that the twins were alike until they came of age. Only later did the evil side of Esav emerge. But does it matter? The Torah narrative pits the brothers, one against the other, in any event.

Yaakov is a tent-dweller; Esav is a man of the field. Yaakov sits and learns Torah while his brother is busy killing, raping, and worshiping idols (Bava Batra 16b). Yaakov is passive (or so it seems); Esav is active. Esav is the beloved of his father; Yaakov is his mother's pride. No wonder that Shimon bar Yochai said: "*Halacha.*

¹ Inspired, independently, by Rabbi Dr. Abba Engelberg and Rabbi Mendy Kessen

Beyadua she' Esav soneh leYa'akov" – It is axiomatic that Esav hates Yaakov.

In other words, Esav is an archetype. He represents the ongoing oppression of the Jewish people by those who deny God's dominion over the world. Esav is evil personified, the antithesis of all the moral and ethical principles that define who we are. However, an "Esav" must exist as the representative of the "other side" to trip us up, to challenge us, to put us to the test.

Is there not a dichotomy to be harnessed in our world? For God created heaven and earth, *Tahara* and *Tum'ah*, and that, which is holy, and that, which is mundane. It is written, after all: יוצר אור ובורא חשך עושה שלום – ובורא רע – 'Who fashions light and creates darkness, who makes harmony, and creates evil' (Isaiah 45:7).

Perhaps Yitzchak recognized that there had to be a Yaakov and an Esav. Just as his father, Avraham, initially entreated Hashem to let Yishmael succeed him (Bereishit 17:18), so now Yitzchak yet sees in Esav potential assets.

The Hebrew name עסו (Esav) conjures up associations with the root עטה, indicating the one who does. So, Esav, it appears, is not all bad. He supplies the food for the family and prepares for his father the dishes that he loves. Despite those who saw in

Esav's actions deceit, some commentators conceive him as the archetype of "Kibbud Av Va'em" – giving honor to one's parents. Indeed, Esav is the ancestor of Edom. Edom is Rome, which transforms into America, the initiator of Father's Day and Mothers' Day!

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When Yaakov and Esav finally meet, Esav embraces his brother. For some, his kiss was genuine; it was an act of reconciliation. Esav even concedes the birthright to Yaakov: "Take what is yours" (ibid 33:9). Nevertheless (following the Midrash), Yaakov desists from exposing his daughter Dina lest Esav ends up marrying her. Then Esav, perhaps, would have been reformed, a possibility entertained when later he and Yaakov together attend to Yitzchak's funeral (35:29).

Esav, it appears, had potential that was not nurtured. His task was to go out to the nations, to be part of them, and to spread Hashem's word in this world. Eventually, Yaakov took on that mission too. But Esav's better side yet filtered down to Antoninus, the Roman governor who befriended Yehudah Hanassi and enabled the Mishnah to be compiled.

Some have posited that Trump followed Antoninus' example and that moves to support Israel and change the Middle East map were all "messianic moves" orchestrated by Hashem – to bring about the Ge'ulah, speedily, and in our days. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff

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