Covenant & Conversation

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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## Toldot

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# Chosenness and its Discontents

It is one of the most emotionally affecting scenes in the Torah. Jacob, dressed in Esau's clothes, has taken Esau's blessing. He leaves and, shortly thereafter, Esau enters. What is remarkable is not what happens next but how the Torah describes it, its use of language and narrative art:

> Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had just left his father Isaac, when his brother Esau came back from the hunt. He too had prepared delicious food and he brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father sit up and eat some of his son's game, so that your soul may bless me."
>
> "Who are you?" asked his father Isaac.
>
> "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau," he replied.
>
> Isaac was seized with a violent fit of trembling. "Who then was it that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it all before you came, and I blessed him - and he will be blessed."
>
> When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into a loud and bitter cry. He said to his father, "Bless me, me too, my father!"
>
> "Your brother came in deceit and took your blessing," he replied.
>
> Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob [= heel-grasper]? Twice he has supplanted me. He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing." And then, "Do you not have any blessing left for me?"
>
> … And Esau wept aloud.
>
> Gen. 27:30-38

In general, the Torah is sparing in its details, especially about the emotional state of its characters. Its descriptions are understated, leaving the reader to supply what the text omits (what the characters look like, their location, body language and so on). Emmanuel Levinas was surely correct in seeing this as an invitation to Midrash, summoning the reader to complete the text in dialogue with the written word. The Torah is more like radio than television, actively enlisting the imaginative participation of its hearers. So we are dealing here with a passage unusual in its literary explicitness and psychological depth of drama.

As readers, we feel with - and for - Isaac and Esau. We are drawn into their subjective states. We enter into Isaac's dawning realisation that he has been deceived. We identify too with Esau, whose first thought is not betrayal or desire for revenge but simple, sharp, and shocking disappointment ("Bless me - me too, my father"). Then comes Isaac's helplessness ("So what can I possibly do for you, my son?") and Esau's weeping - all the more poignant given what we know of him, that he is a man of the fields, rough in some ways, impetuous in others, not a man given (as Joseph will later be)

to tears. The scene of the two of them together, father and son, deceived and disappointed, robbed of what should have been a moment of great tenderness and intimacy (son feeding father, father blessing son) is deeply affecting. We can imagine the painting Rembrandt might have made of it.

Why this detail? The question is unavoidable. In Torah, form follows function. Nothing is accidental. If there is a marked stylistic feature to a given text, it is there for a reason. Our sympathies are drawn throughout the chapter to Esau, rather than Jacob. It is not that we feel that Esau was the rightful heir of the covenant; that history has taken a wrong turn; that things should have been otherwise. Manifestly this is not so. Rebecca favours Jacob, and in Bereishit, mothers know their children better than do their fathers. Esau - the hunter, the man who "despised his birthright" once he had sold it - was clearly not destined to be the faithful follower of an invisible, transcendent God. The Abrahamic covenant must surely pass through Jacob, the child described as "a quiet man, staying among the tents." Why then does the Torah go out of its way, using unusual stylistic devices, to enlist our sympathies with Esau, to enter his world and see things from his perspective? Before we can answer this, we must first take a wider look at what we know of him and his descendants from the rest of the Torah.

The first is that Esau does receive a blessing from Isaac:

> Of the cream of the land your home shall be, of the dew of heaven above. By your sword you will live, and your brother you will serve; but when you break loose, you will throw off his yoke from your neck.
>
> Gen. 27:39-40

The "cream of the land" and the "dew of heaven" are not so circumscribed, implies Isaac, that there will not be enough for both of you. This is a blessing both sons can enjoy without the one diminishing the other. As for Jacob's supremacy, it will last only as long as he does not misuse it. If he acts with unwarranted high-handedness, Esau will simply "throw his yoke off" his neck. There is a basis here for coexistence.

The second insight comes when Esau 'marries out,' taking two Hittite girls as wives. This was "a source of bitterness" to Isaac and Rebecca, and provides her with the necessary pretext to reconcile Isaac with Jacob, as well as giving Jacob a legitimate excuse to leave home.[1] Esau's reaction is interesting. He "understood that the Canaanite girls were displeasing to his father Isaac" and tries to ameliorate the situation by taking a third wife - Machlath, daughter of Ishmael. The gesture fails for two obvious reasons: he does not divorce the other wives, and he has not internalised the fact that Ishmael, too, has been rejected as an heir to the Abrahamic covenant. Esau is not overly endowed with intelligence, but he cares for his father and does not wish to cause him distress.

The third passage comes twenty-two years later, when the brothers finally meet again. This is one of the great passages of the Torah, full of depths and resonances. But the surface narrative is clear (and there is a rabbinic principle: "Scripture does not depart from its plain meaning"). Jacob is full of fear in advance of the encounter - fear that leads him to make elaborate preparations (involving prayer, diplomacy and war) as well as a wrestling match, alone at night, with an unnamed adversary. Yet when they finally meet, Esau runs to meet Jacob, embraces him, weeps, and shows none of the hostility he had once harboured. The internal drama is played out entirely within the soul of Jacob. Esau, true to character, is swift to anger, equally swift to forget. When Jacob, pleading with him to accept a gift of cattle and flocks, uses the deeply significant phrase, "please accept my blessing" - with its reference back to that event twenty-two years earlier - Esau shows no sign of understanding what he is hinting at. Esau does not harbour a grudge, not because he forgives but because he forgets. He is not an Absalom.

The fourth passage (in Bereishit 36) is the list of Esau's descendants. At first glance it is no different

1 "I loathe my life because of those Hittite women," she tells Isaac. "If Jacob marries such a Hittite woman like them … why should I go on living?" (Gen. 27:46).

from the many other genealogies in Bereishit, but it contains two significant pieces of information, one explicit, the other implicit. The first is the statement, "These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before any king reigned in Israel." The second is the contrast between the closing verse of chapter 36 and the opening verse of chapter 37: "These are the tribes of Esau, each with its own settlements in its hereditary lands [*eretz achuzatam*] . . . Meanwhile, Jacob lived in the land where his father had lived as an alien [*be-eretz megurei aviv*]." The implication could not be clearer. Esau's descendants establish themselves geographically and politically long before Jacob's. Not for them the twists and turns of covenantal history - exile, slavery, redemption, and the wilderness years. Both may eventually inherit the cream of the land and the dew of heaven, but for one the route is straightforward, for the other, anything but.

The fifth insight, much later, concerns the nature of the relationship between the Israelites and Edomites. Here two verses in particular stand out. The first is God's instruction to the Israelites:

> You are passing by the borders of your brothers, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. Although they fear you, be very careful not to provoke them. I will not give you even one foot of their land, since I have given Mount Seir as Esau's inheritance.
>
> Deut. 2:4–5

The second is the no less emphatic command:

> Do not abhor an Edomite, since he is your brother.
>
> Deut. 23:7

There is nothing in these commands to remind us of the eternal strife between the two nations predicted before their birth ("Two nations are in your womb . . . one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger"). During the biblical era there were periodic tensions and shifting fortunes in the relationship between Edom and Israel.[2] But normatively, the Israelites were commanded to respect both the Edomites and their land.

Putting these facts together, what are we to infer? At the simplest level, there is a humanity here that defies all stereotypes and conventional categorisations. Esau is a child loved by his father, who loves him in return. So striking is this that, despite the generally negative evaluation of Esau in the midrashic literature, this fact shines through:

> Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: no man ever honoured his father as I did mine, yet I found that Esau honoured his father even more than I did.

There is a marked tendency on the part of the Midrash to separate biblical characters into the wholly good and wholly bad, and for this there are good pedagogic reasons, as R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes points out in his *Mavo ha-Aggadot* (printed at the beginning of standard editions of *Ein Yaakov*). To serve effectively as role-models, biblical heroes must be seen as consistently heroic, and non-heroes as systematic villains.

Yet beneath this overlay of Midrash, the Torah teaches a different and equally important message, albeit one that demands a certain maturity to appreciate. Namely, even heroes have their faults and non-heroes their virtues, and those virtues are important to God. "The Holy One, blessed be He, does not withhold the reward of any creature," said the Sages. The Esau who emerges from the Torah has none of Abraham's faith, Isaac's steadfastness or Jacob's persistence. He is carved of an altogether coarser grain. But he is not without his humanity, his filial loyalty and a decent if quick-tempered disposition.

This too is part of the Torah's message. Just as we cannot predict God's actions in advance ("I will be who I will be," "I will have mercy and show kindness to whomever I desire"), so we cannot predict in advance where God's image will shine in the affairs of humankind. It was the sectarians of Qumran, not the rabbis, who divided humanity into the "children of light" and the "children of darkness".

2 See II Samuel 8:14; II Kings 8:20.

Such anthropological dualism is as alien to Judaism as is theological dualism.

There is, however, something far more fundamental at stake in the story of Esau. It has to do with the very concept of chosenness itself. The book of Bereishit is, among other things, a profound meditation on what it means to be chosen and what it means not to be chosen. There can be no doubt that chosenness has deep psychological consequences on both sides of the equation. To be chosen means - as Jacob discovers - a life of high demands and great hardship ("Few and evil have been the days of my life" he says to Pharaoh). But not to be chosen is also deeply disturbing. We see this time and again - on the two occasions in which Hagar is sent away, in the relations between Joseph and his brothers, but most explicitly in the case of Leah and Rachel:

> [Jacob] also married Rachel, and he loved Rachel more than Leah . . . [God] saw that Leah was hated [*senuah*]. . .

I have translated this last phrase literally to give it its full, shocking force in the Hebrew. Leah, of course, was not hated. She merely felt rejected. Yet the sense of rejection cuts deep, so deep that the Torah does not hesitate to compare it to the feeling of being hated. And one who feels rejected may hate in return. That is why the brothers "hate" Joseph (the verb is used three times - a significant repetition - in chapter 37).

Love chooses. But choice creates estrangement, which leads to tension, which can sometimes erupt into conflict and sometimes (potentially or actually) violence. This is a theme signalled almost at the beginning of the biblical narrative, where God's choice of Abel's offering and not Cain's leads to fratricide.

Something of the deepest possible consequence is being intimated in the story of Esau. The choice of one does not mean the rejection of the other. Esau is not chosen, but he is also not rejected. He too will have his blessing, his heritage, his land. He too will have children who become kings, who will rule and not be ruled. He too will have his virtues recognised, above all his love and respect for his father. It is no accident that our sympathies are drawn to him, as if to say for all time to all humanity: not all are chosen for the rigours, spiritual and existential, of the Abrahamic covenant, but all are precious to God, each has his or her place in the scheme of things, each has his or her virtues, talents, gifts, and each is precious in the eyes of God. As God will later tell Jonah: "You are concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow . . . Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:10-11)

Or as the Psalm puts it:

> "The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made."
>
> Ps. 145:9

To be chosen does not mean that others are unchosen. To be secure in one's relationship with God does not depend on negating the possibility that others too may have a (different) relationship with Him. Jacob was loved by his mother, Esau by his father; but what of God who is neither father nor mother, but both and more than both? In truth, we can only know our own relationship with our parents. We can never know another's. Am I loved more than my brothers or sisters? Less? Once asked, the question cannot but lead to sibling rivalry (one of the central themes of Bereishit). But the question is an invalid question. It should not need to be asked. A good parent loves all their children and never thinks of giving one 'less' love. Love is not quantifiable. It rejects comparisons. Jacob is Jacob, heir to the covenant. Esau is Esau, doing what he does, being what he is, enjoying his own heritage and blessing. What a simple truth and how beautifully, subtly, it is conveyed. It is one of the Torah's most profound messages to humanity - and how deeply (in an age of "the clash of civilisations") the world needs to hear it today.

## Around the Shabbat Table



- If being chosen does not mean others are rejected, how should that shape the way Jews understand their place among other peoples?
- What does Esau teach us about recognising goodness in people whose values, choices, or religious commitments differ from our own?
- Why is it so difficult to accept that another person can be loved and blessed without diminishing what we have?



# Covenant & Conversation

## FAMILY EDITION

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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## Toldot: The Hero Within

DEVELOPED BY SHOSH HILL



**parsha recap**

After waiting a long time and praying to God, Yitzchak and Rivka are blessed with twin sons, Eisav and Yaakov. As they grow up, Yaakov becomes a scholar, while Eisav becomes a hunter.

Eisav impulsively sells his birthright to Yaakov for some red lentil soup. When Yitzchak is old and blind, he feels his life is nearing its end and wants to bless his sons. He sends Eisav to hunt and prepare a meal, planning to give him the firstborn blessing. Rivka overhears and tells Yaakov to disguise himself as Eisav. Yaakov does this, and he receives the blessing. When Eisav realises what has happened, he is heartbroken and asks his father for a blessing as well.

- → Why didn't Rivka just tell Yitzchak who she thought should get the blessing?
- → Since lying is wrong, why did Yaakov agree to trick his father, as Rivka suggested?
- → Can something good come from doing something wrong?



**a closer look**

### הַבְּרָכָה אַחַת הִוא־לְךָ אָבִי

"Have you only one blessing, father."

(BEREISHIT 27:38)

#### RABBI SACKS TEACHES US:

"There is at times a tendency on the part of the Midrash to separate biblical characters into the wholly [completely] good and wholly bad, and for this there are good reasons. To serve effectively as role-models, biblical heroes must be seen as consistently heroic, non-heroes as villains. The Torah teaches a different and equally important message: Even heroes have their faults and non-heroes their virtues, and these virtues are important to God."

Source: *Toldot: Isaac and Esau (Covenant & Conversation: I Believe).*



**moral matters**

#### LET'S DISCUSS!

- → Why might it be important for the Torah to show that **even heroes make mistakes**?
- → What **good qualities** do you think were within Eisav?
- → How can knowing that even 'bad' people have good qualities help us **treat others more fairly**?

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