



Parashat Toledot

After struggle ensues within the stomach of Rivkah during her pregnancy, Hashem transmits a prophecy declaring that Rivkah's twin children, Yaakov and Esav, are actually representative of separate nations; and that the older, Esav, will grow to serve the younger and mightier, Yaakov (בראשית כה:כב-נג). It is clear that Yaakov, the younger brother, will be granted with continuing Am Yisarel's lineage from Avraham and Yitchak– but why? Why was Yaakov granted the right to the birthright over his older brother, Esav?

Early on in the Parasha it is written:

"וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדַע צֹד אִישׁ שֹׁדָה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אֹהֶלִים"

“When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob became a mild man, raising livestock” (בראשית כה:כז).

This pasuk is not only a description of Yaakov and Esav's characters, but rather is a depiction of the nature of their descendants as well. Within their respective personalities and professions, we see inherent qualities that will characterize the nations that will come from them. Esav was a hunter, a man of the field, and involved himself in the world of nature and physicality. Men of nature instinctively engage themselves in desires and pleasure. They mainly care about the here and now, without acknowledging that there is a higher entity. Meanwhile, Yaakov is portrayed as a gentle person, civilized, wholeheartedly honest - the opposite of Esav. As a *roeh tzon*, shepherd, he recognizes God as a being that is above nature, and above himself because is forced to rely on and trust in God for his livelihood. He understands that his merit does not solely derive from his own doings, rather it also derives from the wishes of Hashem, unlike Esav who fails to recognize the involvement of God in our lives.

Immediately after this description of Yaakov and Esav, the Parasha continues on to demonstrate the manifestation of these qualities through the selling of the birthright. Esav returns home from hunting. Famished, Esav orders Yaakov to give him the soup that Yaakov made. Yaakov wisely offers to trade with Esav: the soup for the birthright, and Esav readily accepts:

וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו הֲנֵה אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוֹת וְלָמָּה־זֶּה לִי בְכֹרָה:

“And Esau said, ‘I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?’” (בראשית כה:לב).

In this situation, for the sake of momentary, bodily pleasure, Esav sells his birthright, constricting his focus to that instance. Esav gives no regard or concern for his future or for the future of his lineage. On the contrary, Yaakov understands that such a person like Esav is not worthy of continuing the heritage of Avraham and Yitchak. And so, Yaakov chooses to accept this responsibility and to devote his entire life to infusing this world with spiritual and ethical meaning by means of humbly adhering to God. He believed that he had to act in a way that would bring benefit to the future, and to the lineage of the “promised nation.”

Reading about the two starkly different qualities and approaches to life of Yaakov and Esav brought me back to an experience I had a few weeks ago, when I had the privilege of returning back home for a couple of days due to a simcha in my family. Spending a few months in Israel being surrounded by learning Torah has already impacted me to be more like Yaakov– having Hashem in the forefront of my mind almost everyday. However, I noticed that almost immediately after returning to New York, I so easily reverted back to routine and the everyday comforts of my home, mostly focusing on the present and getting distracted by physical things, rather than putting in effort to remain devoted to and close to God. The experience made me appreciate the challenge it is to have a Yaakov mindset in life rather than that of Esav.

Furthermore, it helped me internalize that it is our duty, as *Bnei Yisrael* and the descendants of Yaakov, to embody the values of God, to live our lives with an understanding that God is always above us, and to pass on these values throughout the generations to come.

Growing up in the Yeshivah of Flatbush community has helped Sarah Greenberg foster a deep passion for learning and leadership, as well as instilled within her strong family and religious values that she will uphold for a lifetime. Sarah played on the girls’ varsity basketball team and served on Flatbush High School’s Senior Council, where she organized the seniors’ activities throughout the past year. She devoted hours of her time throughout the year to helping others, including organizing programs such as the biannual blood drive and Yachad programs for the whole school. Her love for learning and desire to grow in her Judaic knowledge stemmed from her favorite class– Inquiry Bet Midrash. Different from the regular classroom environment, this class enabled her to question the basis of the texts, probing the things that were always accepted as true and analyzing them to eventually come up with her own conclusions. Sarah hopes to continue to learn and to strengthen her religious values at Midreshet Moriah next year and through the Allegra Franco program.