

MORAL SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

In *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Toldot we read about Esav and Yakov, the sons of Yitzchak and Rivka. The Talmud, Midrash, and traditional rabbinic commentaries all note the evil in Esav's character and the motivations of Rivka and Yakov in deceiving Yitzchak to get the *bechorah* (בכורה), the birthright of the firstborn, for Yakov.

But what was the birthright of the firstborn son at that time? And what, if anything, does it have to do with the leadership and legacy that we bequeath to our own children today?

I confess to knowing less from personal experience about childrearing than virtually any parent, not having had children of my own. But over the years I have worked as a deputy probation officer, family therapist, community organizer, and rabbi, and I learned much from parents who had extensive experience from raising their own children. One of the first lessons they taught me—it's sufficiently commonplace to be a cliché—is that when a family has two or more children, one child is very likely to follow in the moral spiritual footsteps of the parents, assuming that the parents are more or less unified in such matters, and one child is very likely to depart notably from the parents' path.

Given their character, Esav and Yakov represent what sociologists call "ideal types." Apparently, they are in many respects prototypical evil and good sons. That is to say, they represent consistent types that serve as models against which later examples are judged—Esav the prototype for Rome's ideal of conquest, Yakov for Jerusalem's ideal of peace.

On the one hand, regarding Esav, the Talmud teaches that on the day he sold his birthright to Yakov, he also dishonored a betrothed maiden, committed murder, denied God, and denied the resurrection of the dead (Baba Batra 16b). Moreover, Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) teaches that it was *Esav* who deceived his father, not by a transparent ruse of affecting his

brother's *physical appearance*, as Yakov did, but by camouflaging his *moral character*, asking his father disingenuous questions about the *mitzvot*.

On the other hand, Yakov had nothing material to gain by acquiring the *bechorah*. As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) notes: ". . . Out of this whole 'sale' agreement, we do not find that Yakov derived the slightest preference or advantage. On the contrary, Esav became great as a rich prince while Yakov was still slaving as a shepherd for Lavan's sheep. So the בכורה gave him no material advantage at all. The question could only have been, to whom was the spiritual leadership of the house to be entrusted." (Comment on Genesis 25:34) But Yakov nonetheless, knowing his brother's anger and tendency to do violence, effectively risked his life to obtain the birthright.

Why might he have taken such a risk?

Because he knew his brother's character, that Esav was unworthy to perform the sacrificial rites as head of the family. And as Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaches: "Yakov was aware that the *heter bamot* (התר במות), the permission to erect altars for God wherever one wanted . . . [on the high places] could lead to grievous abuse if the exercise of the priestly functions was left in the hands of the unworthy."

Recall that the central Sanctuary was a place that instructed the individual and the community on self-sacrifice, through the symbolism of animal sacrifice, for the purpose of living or returning to a godly life. The means were the rites and education, guided by the *kohanim* (priests), employing the Sanctuary's symbol-laden furnishings and utensils. The *bamot* or high places, however, could easily become venues dedicated to little more than pouring out personal thoughts and feelings rather than internalizing the Torah's words and expectations for behavior. So the high places had the very real potential to promote worship of nature and the

moral indifference that not uncommonly accompanies it.

And yet, withal, the Torah narrative leaves us with questions about such absolute characterizations of these two brothers. So one might think to ask: How did Esav and Yakov become what they seemingly became?

Rabbi Hirsch comments that the contrast between them “. . . may have been due, not so much to a difference in their temperaments as to mistakes in the way they were brought up.” Despite their differences, “. . . both had exactly the same teaching and educational treatment, and the great law of education *הנוהך לנער על פי דרכו וגוי* ‘bring up each child in accordance with his own way,’ was forgotten.” (Comment on Genesis 25:27)

Presumably, if Yitzchak and Rivka had come to understand Esav’s unique character and qualities at an early age, they might have challenged themselves more effectively to direct his “strength and energy, agility and courage” to God’s service. If so, Esav might never have become a *gever tzayad* (גבר ציד—a man of hunting), but instead a *gever lifnei Adonai* (גבר לפני הדי—a man before God). And it certainly wasn’t helpful that Yitzchak and Rivka played favorites with their sons, he favoring Esav and she partial to Yakov.

Was there any good reason for Yitzchak and Rivka to think that only one of their sons would be chosen for moral spiritual leadership?

God had singularly chosen Avraham to serve as the father of a special nation—him and him alone, although with Sarah as his partner, of course. He was to convert the men and she the women. Their son, Yitzchak, was also singularly chosen, although with Rivka as his partner, to fill a special destiny. But the process of choosing one son for the birthright ended with Yakov.

So at what point should it have become apparent that to build and sustain a great nation, it wouldn’t be enough to choose only one son for moral spiritual leadership. In fact, since Esav and Yakov were fraternal twins, born of the same mother, might it not have been reasonable to assume that both of them should share the moral spiritual leadership of the family?

What’s the difference between the parental expectations of Yitzchak and Rivka and our own?

They expected that all of their children would meet their family’s minimum moral requirements. They expected that one of their male children would exercise moral spiritual *leadership*, for the sake of their immediate family and their future generations. And the Torah narrative tells us that, notwithstanding dramatic differences in our children, they can all be raised to exercise such leadership. So seemingly there was nothing inherent in

the character of Esav and Yakov to have prevented such an outcome, only the parenting failures of Yitzchak and Rivka.

But why should Yitzchak and Rivka have assumed that *any* of their children would show extraordinary moral spiritual leadership?

One may answer that it was simply tradition for the firstborn to do so. But that begs the question, because already there was a departure from the tradition. Ishmael, although the firstborn of Abraham and Hagar (Genesis 16:4), was not given the *bechorah*.

More to the point of the question, we read in the Zohar: “Said Rabbi Yitzchak: ‘The words “and Sarah saw” imply that she looked at him [Ishmael] disdainfully, as being the son not of Abraham but of Hagar the Egyptian, and, furthermore, only Sarah regarded him so, but not Abraham, as we read that “*the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight on account of his son*” [Genesis 21:11]—not the son of Hagar, but his son.’ Rabbi Shimon said: ‘The Scripture really speaks in praise of Sarah. For what she saw was that he was indulging in idolatrous practices. Hence she said: Surely, this is not the son of Abraham, who follows in the footsteps of Abraham, but the son of Hagar the Egyptian, who is reverting to the type of his mother.’” (Zohar I:118b)

The simple meaning of the text, according to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), is that Abraham was grieved because Sarah had sent Ishmael away, but that he was even more “greatly displeased” since Ishmael had fallen into “wicked ways.” And according to Bereshit Rabbah (53:15), “Even as he [Ishmael] grew, so did his cruelty grow with him.”

What this may teach us in the final analysis is that the expectation of moral spiritual leadership by one’s children is closely related to the extent that as a parent one has exerted moral spiritual leadership and created a moral spiritual legacy to be passed on to succeeding generations.

All of this leaves us with some questions:

- What is our living moral spiritual legacy, as Jews in the fifty-eighth century of the Jewish people, to the generations that come after us?
- If we raise our children with an ambition to show moral spiritual leadership, what is it that we do differently from other parents to enable their success?
- And why should we bother with such a seemingly lofty ambition—what’s really in it for us, for them, and for all who come after them?

Finally, what if we’re mostly stumped by these questions? And what if many others like us are also mostly unsure how to answer them?

My conclusion, not surprisingly, is not a happy one: If it’s true that we’re not purposively and ac-

tively living lives that enable us to readily and confidently answer these questions, then we face an awesome challenge.

To remedy the deficit, all of us—beginning with the adults—have to equip ourselves with a much more deeply illuminating and relevant education in traditional Jewish texts. Anything less is

likely to be insufficient if we want to bequeath a dynamic example of moral spiritual leadership and an inspiring legacy of living a moral spiritual life. Insufficient because such leadership and legacy are the sources of sustenance needed to nurture the survival and success of future generations of Jews.

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