



**THE GOOD SIDE OF ESAU**

**O**UR SACRED TORAH IS OFTEN HIGHLY AMBIGUOUS. AN EXAMPLE IS THE ACCOUNT of Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac, in our Sedra<sup>1</sup>. Jacob is described as “a pure man, dwelling in tents”, and Esau is “a man who knew how to hunt, a man of the field”<sup>2</sup>. This is understood<sup>3</sup> as meaning that Jacob represents goodness, simplicity and purity, dwelling in the tents of Torah study, while Esau represents evil. He is a hunter, a man of battle and of conquest. Yet the Torah adds also a note of ambiguity, which has challenged scholars for thousands of years: their father Isaac openly preferred Esau to Jacob.

If Jacob represents good, and Esau represents evil, how possibly could the great Patriarch Isaac prefer Esau?

The same ambiguity is found in the teachings of the Sages. The Sages tell us that while Esau was an embryo in the womb, he struggled to come out whenever his mother went near an idolatrous Temple. Further, they say, even before the twin babies were born they were struggling over the two worlds: the World to Come, which was Jacob’s choice, and This World, which was the focus for Esau<sup>3</sup>. Yet, conversely, the Zohar explains that when the Torah says “and the boys grew up”<sup>2</sup>, it means in spiritual terms: their spiritual inheritance from their grandfather Abraham began to be seen in them and, in fact, Abraham himself, who was still alive, was active in educating them<sup>4</sup>.

Was Esau evil from his earliest embryonic months of life? How could that be? Surely, each person has free will? And if he really was evil, what about his spiritual growth, his education from his grandfather Abraham, and the fact that his father Isaac preferred him to his brother?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, who always seeks the positive perspective in everything, explains as follows. The real difference between Jacob and Esau was Jacob's concern to develop goodness further, versus Esau's goal of *transforming* bad to good. Esau was a man who struggles with Evil in all its forms and - ideally - conquers it. He had this transformative quality from before birth: his embryo struggled to emerge when his mother passed an idolatrous temple because he wanted to change it from bad to good. Similarly, before birth, he struggled to make This World reveal goodness, while Jacob felt that true good would be revealed primarily in the World to Come. Hence the unborn babies fought inside their mother's womb.

Then as two youths, while Jacob stayed in a tent, studying Torah, Esau became a hunter, a man of the field, because he wanted to conquer the negativity of the "outside" and transform it to good.

This is a highly commendable path, and his father Isaac saw it as ultimately reaching higher than the path of Jacob. However, unfortunately, although Esau began in a positive way, eventually he succumbed to the bad: instead of transforming it to good, it overcame him and he became bad himself. Consequently, his ultimate transformation to good has to come through his brother Jacob. At the same time, Jacob himself later incorporated the path of transformation, as we see in the next Sedra.

The original paths of Jacob and Esau are part of the sacred Torah, and both are significant for us today. In our personal service of G-d, and in our involvement with society, we each have to be a person who dwells in the "tents of Torah", climbing higher and higher spiritually, and also a "man of the field", seeking out the apparently negative and revealing its positive potential. Combining both approaches we reveal ultimate goodness: higher than the World to Come, a real world of good<sup>5</sup>.

1. Genesis 25:19-28:9. 2. Gen. 25:27. 3. See Rashi on the previous reference. 4. Zohar I 138b. 5. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 20 p.108-115.

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SEDRA TOLEDOT

**EVERY MITZVAH COUNTS**

Sam glanced at the clock and saw to his disappointment that only two minutes and 18 seconds had passed since he last looked at it. After a long day in school today, he couldn't wait for the last lesson to finish so he could go home.

"Okay boys," Mr Cohen announced, "I have a special assignment which is to be handed in at the end of this week." Sam wondered what the special assignment was. Sometimes Mr Cohen gave them really fun assignments.

"I want all of you to choose one Mitzvah you did this week and write two or three paragraphs on why you think it is important to yourself and to others around you. It can be any Mitzvah!"

The boys looked at each other in surprise. They usually studied about how you do the Mitzvah, or which passage it comes from in the Torah. They didn't usually discuss what made it important to yourself and others. You just do it, because it is a Mitzvah!

That night, Sam tried to remember a Mitzvah he had done that week that he could write about for his assignment. He remembered that yesterday he had found a couple of pennies in his pocket and decided to put them in a charity box. Well that's a Mitzvah, isn't it, he thought, I'll write about that – the Mitzvah of giving money to charity. But he couldn't really think of why it was important. After all, it was only two pennies!

Later that week, Sam was sitting with a couple of friends during break, discussing what they had written about for Mr Cohen's assignment. "I wrote about the Mitzvah of keeping

Shabbat,” said Josh. “Now, that’s a biggie!”

“Yeah,” Dan piped up, “I wrote about Kosher. That’s also really important!”

Oh no, thought Sam. All these boys wrote about really big, impressive Mitzvot. I only wrote about putting two coins in a charity box. He kept quiet and felt relieved when the boys changed the subject.

That afternoon, Mr Cohen came into the classroom. He went to the front of the classroom and cleared his throat before he began talking. “I have marked these assignments, and each one is really good! I am very impressed. I know you may have spent some time thinking about which Mitzvah to choose. I asked you to write about why it is important. And I can see that some of you tried to find something really impressive to write about. But I want you all to know, that no matter which Mitzvah you chose, every Mitzvah is important! We cannot tell how important it is. It might be something that looks tiny and insignificant, but still, a Mitzvah joins us to G-d who gives us the Mitzvah.

“What about if a bad person does the Mitzvah?” asked Josh.

“Especially then!” said Mr Cohen. “As we see in this week’s Sedra. Esau was very careful about honouring his parents and G-d rewarded him just because of that one Mitzvah, even though otherwise he was a wicked person. Every Mitzvah is infinitely important and connects us to G-d! Even if it is something which seems very small, like putting a penny or two in a charity box!”

Mr Cohen’s words comforted Sam. He realized that a Mitzvah has great significance, even if it is just a tiny action. When the bell rang, he made his way to the door to leave, when he noticed that his friend Joey had dropped some papers. He ran over to help him pick them up and Joey thanked him. See, he thought happily, that was an easy Mitzvah, helping someone. But it is also something important, connecting me to G-d!

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