

"Esawism" and "Jacobism" – Then and Now

The midwife of Jacob and Esau probably remembered them all her life, both because of the difficult pregnancy and because of the unusual birth. In her despair as a childless woman, Rebecca had gone “to inquire of Adonai” (*Gen 25:22*.) In so doing, she had invented the powerful device of Midrash (to inquire in Hebrew – *lidrosh*, to create a midrash). There were two unusual occurrences: one baby was born “ruddy, all over like a hairy mantle” (25:25) and the other one emerged holding his brother’s heel. Even during their mother’s difficult pregnancy, there were indications of the specialness of Jacob and Esau. God’s “divine ultrasound” prophesied: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (25:23). When the two boys grew up, the differences between them could be seen: “And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents” (25:27). We also hear that Jacob was “mama’s boy” and Isaac loved Esau, who was hairy and temperamental.

The Jewish tradition harshly condemned Esau: The Sages said that while Jacob was dwelling in tents and learning in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Ever, Esau committed the three most severe sins that are completely forbidden: idol worship, incest, and bloodshed. If this was not enough, it was said that Esau hunted the people with his mouth, which is interpreted as that he was a liar and even gave in himself to prostitution.

What in the text shows us that Esau was such a terrible sinner? We do not find evidence of his sins in the text. On the contrary, the Bible teaches us that he was an active man, who worked in the fields, took care of his father and wanted to satisfy his parents. When he understood that his parents disapproved of him being with Canaanite women, he married Mahlah, Ishmael’s daughter; he married within the family to please his mom and dad.

Despite his looks, Esau was sensitive. His bitter reaction when he found out about the theft of his birthright is one of the dramatic and heartening expressions in the Torah: “Has you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, my father. And Esau lifted up his voice and wept” (Genesis 27:38). Esau also knew how to forgive, and when, after many years he met his brother again he ran to him: “And Esau ran to meet him, and

embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept” (Genesis 33:4). Only after insistent pleading did Esau agree to accept Jacob’s presents.

In the text of Genesis, we find that Esau is not really condemned, so what is the real reason that the Sages portrayed him as such an evil person?

Human nature often leads people to characterize themselves according to the other: “I am everything he is not.” During all generations, the Jews have identified themselves with Jacob, the tent dweller and defined themselves as “non-Esau”. Since Israel was exiled from their land, Jews lost their relationship with nature and their physical strength. Their hunting fields and wars were the Talmud pages on which they struggled with each other. The Jews did not focus on physicality and strength, but instead they emphasized the spirit and the soul. Esau, a strong and well-traveled person, embodied worldliness, strength and aggression, everything the Sages were not. Esau symbolized nature, wide open spaces and freedom, and Jacob was an example of culture, home, restraint and the strength of the weak.

Edom, the Biblical Empire, ceased to exist and its place as enemy of Israel was taken first by the Roman Empire and later by Christianity. Another enemy was Ishmael, Abraham’s other son, who represented Islam in subsequent generations. Ibn Ezra wrote: “By Ishmael we were held in contempt; we ran to Edom and did not live.” The identification of Esau as the hostile gentile continued in new Hebrew literature; for instance, Chayim Nachman Bialik, showed Jacob’s superiority over Esau in a Yiddish song that he penned:

Esau rises and runs for a drink
Like a barrel of booze his mouth does stink [...]
Jacob rises and runs to pray
And gives his Maker praise upon praise [...]

The physical and worldly description of Esau demonstrates hostility and fear, but also attraction and even a hint of jealousy of all the “Esaus” of their time. In his Book of the Beggars, Mendele Moycher Sforim brings together Jewish wagon-drivers whose carriages were stacked and gentile wagon-drivers came to help them. The Jews are described as helpless and embarrassed by needing the strong hand of Esau in order to release their carriages:

And if the truth be told, it was mostly on account of them that my caravan did get hoisted out of the mire. Because otherwise me an Alter would've been sweating away over the thing for oh God only knows how long, and probably would've got our prayershaws ripped up something cruel as well into the bargain. But with pair of "Esau's kin" (as 'twere) giving us a hand, it was a different story altogether, as you might say. Because these lads did really have the knack; for pushing, I mean; whilst Alter and me, well, we were kind of better suited to the grunting and groaning end of business. You might even say it went a bit like in the Scripture, more or less: you know – about the hands being Esau's but the voice being Jacob's... but I', getting off the point, kind of – so let it drop. Anyway, the moment the road was clear, the whole gang of country clowns went their ways... though they were still laughing uproariously, and ragging us about being all "doll' up" as they called it [...]

Now, this didn't seem to trouble Alter very much; and he only shrugged the whole thing off, saying, "lookit what's doing the name callin'! Psssh. Ain't only buncher Esau's jackanapes anyhow..." –Oh but it did too bother me; and I addressed a prayer to the almighty in the style much favored of our woman folk, as it seemed to suit my mood.¹

The humorous description of the handy gentile and the confused Jew depicts a clear difference between the contemporary “Esau” and “Jacob”, but it reveals a more complex picture than that of the Bialik poem, that of tension but also care (well, at least on the part of the gentile peasant).

And today?

Today, now that the Jews have returned to their historic homeland, have we managed to keep our “Jacobness”? The early Zionists desired to restore “Esauness” to Judaism in order to become a “normal” people again; are we quite there nowadays? Did we succeed in returning the body to Judaism? Would it be fair to say that we are in a situation of being neither Jacob nor Esau? And more - Is there really a contradiction between Jacob and Esau, body and spirit?

Maybe it is time to acknowledge that the two brothers dwell inside every one of us and sometimes they struggle inside of us. Maybe the time has come for a true reconciliation between Jacob and Esau, between us and the Esau of other nations. Our task as contemporary Jews is to keep our unique identity, but also to reach out to other nations and religions. More than that, maybe the time for reconciliation between the two brothers in every one of us, has come.

¹ S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moycher Sforim), *Tales of Mendele*, translated by Ted Gorelick, New York 1996, pp. 25-26

The numerical value of “Esau” equates with “peace”. Rabbi Jacob *Baal Haturim* (c.1269 - c.1343) said that there will not be peace to Israel until there will be reconciliation with Esau, and we will add – with Esau from within and without.

Ursula’s response:

Unlike the Christian tradition, the Jewish tradition identified Edom first with Rome and then with the Christian empire(s). Esau was the oppressor and persecutor of Jews and Judaism. Heinrich Heine characterizes this with much acerbic wit.

To Edom
WITH each other, brother fashion,
Have we borne this many an age.
Thou hast borne with my existence,
And I borne have with thy rage.

Many a time, in days of darkness,
Wonder-strange hath been thy mood,
And thy dear and pious talons
Hast thou reddened in my blood.

Now our friendship groweth closer;
Nay, it waxeth daily now:
I myself begin to bluster
And am nigh as mad as thou.
Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)

In light of the historical background I can very well understand this ascription. The concrete experiences of Jews with Christians and Christianity in Europe during long periods of time gave little occasion for a friendly perception.

You, Dalia, point out the change that occurred with the return to Israel and the founding of an independent state. Jews are no longer in the position of Jacob who has to suffer brutality from the hands of Esau. It is necessary to look at the history which has shaped us and our traditions. And in the case of my tradition, I must reject these ascriptions. Furthermore, it is helpful to look inward and to discover parts of Jacob and of Esau within myself.