

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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Filtering

Nearly all our commentators offer different reasons in an attempt to explain why Eisav was so willing to forego the honor of the birthright and sell it to Yaakov. The Torah was not at all kind in passing judgment on Eisav's decision. "...and Eisav belittled and scorned the birthright" (25:34). How might we understand Eisav's fateful choice?

Ramban offers a valuable insight. Eisav was all about physicality; he was only interested in the here and now. To the question: "What do I want to do now; what ought I do now?" Eisav's answer was always the same. "I want to do whatever will give me immediate pleasure. Eisav's ethics - his "ought" - was completely defined by his intense hunger to satisfy his every hedonistic craving.

Ramban reminds us that then the birthright did not reward the firstborn with any material benefits. The rule of **PI SH'NAYIM**, the double portion, was to come much later. Rather, the privilege of the birthright was to commit to a great vision and feel responsible for ensuring that future generations would remain loyal to that same sacred destiny.

It was this birthright that Eisav rejected and held in contempt. During that conversation between Yaakov and Eisav, we might have heard Eisav declare: "Look, Yaakov, quite frankly, I'm not at all interested in the future. It's all nonsense. What future! What matters only is what I can sense, feel and experience right now. That's the only logic I know. Yaakov, you want it - it's yours, but pay me for it."

Here then was Eisav's tragic mistake. It was a mistake not born out of lack of intelligence. Eisav was not at all stupid. He was simply a fool and here's why.

Social scientists speak of something called a "tomorrow filter". What this means is that we need to filter all of our intended deeds by how it will affect our "tomorrow". This strategy counsels that before engaging in any behavior, we should stop and ask ourselves this sobering question: "How will gratifying my desires influence and permanently change my tomorrow?" It can be something as commonplace as excessive eating and drinking without thinking about the consequences. Or it can be a headstrong ambition to seek fame and success without giving much consideration as to the damaging effect this might have upon family and the continuity of our Torah heritage.

Eisav was ready to discard his "tomorrow filter". He was a fool! And Yaakov held it dear. Eisav cared only about what he wanted now. There was

no thinking about tomorrow. But Yaakov intuited very well what future awaits those who have the strength to resist the temptations of the "now" for the great rewards of the "tomorrow".

Gd set up a system that demands that we grow. And this can only happen by fighting through the enticements and "tomorrow-filtering" what is right. Then our lasting joy will forever be on a higher level than the temporary and fleeting pleasure we passed up. And the more you're able to do this, the happier you'll be - both today and tomorrow.

Opportunities

At the end of the parsha, we read that Eisav marries Machlat, the daughter of Yishmael. The Gemara asks (Yerushalmi Bikurim 3:3): But elsewhere we are told that her name was Basmat? The Gemara answers that indeed, her name was Basmat, but here, she is called by another name to teach us that when people marry, they are forgiven of all their sins. (Machlat means to forgive or pardon). Two questions: first, why should this be so, and second, why did Eisav's marriage result in no change in his character?

Rav Yochanan Zweig suggests we examine the complete passage in the Gemara. There, we read that three people are forgiven of their sins: one who marries, one who converts to Judaism, and one who is elevated to a position of importance. What is their common denominator? The Maharal

notes that in each of these three cases, the individual is presented with a unique opportunity to transform into a new person. Through marriage, conversion and a more prestigious position, we are challenged to rise and measure up to something bigger and greater.

A wedding signals an opportunity for self-transformation. Two people become one, and the character of each partner is profoundly changed and continues to change over time. The question is whether a couple takes advantage of their wedding event to bring about this transformation.

As such, when Chazal state that on one's wedding all previous sins are forgiven, the forgiveness is not automatic. Rather the sins are suspended until a determination is made as to whether the event of marriage resulted in some meaningful change. If, as in Eisav's case, it meant little, then no sins are pardoned. But if newlyweds truly understand the great potential a wedding can afford, then HaShem allows them to begin from scratch and build a new and better life together as one.

Eisav was given this chance to change when he married Yishmael's daughter. How lamentable that he squandered a critical chance for growth and greatness. He sadly failed to take advantage of this opportunity and thus remained who he was. His sins stayed. Eisav remained Eisav.

The message is clear. In life, there are potentially transforming experiences that can yield major breakthroughs in our personalities and lives. When we take advantage of these occasions - regardless of age, intelligence or economic status - we can actually recreate ourselves in deed and heart, and all for the better. Unfortunately, too many people simply let these moments pass. They not only remain who they were, but they run the risk of becoming worse. It need not be so. The decision is ours!

Consistency

With the birth of Rivka's twins, it would be well to consider the personality of Eisav. In what way was he fundamentally different from his brother Yaakov? The claim that he was wicked and committed many crimes, especially in the wake of his grandfather's (Avraham's) death is clear (Bava Batra 16b). Our Sages, however, list other much more laudatory aspects of Eisav's character: he excelled in the mitzva of honoring one's parents (Sh'mot Rabba 46:4); he yearned for the blessings of his father (B'reishit 27:34); he fought for a share in the World to Come (Tana d'Vei Eliahu 19); he sought to sit with the righteous in Gan Eden (Yerushalmi N'darim 3:8); he posed intricate halachic questions to his father (Tanchuma Toldot 8), and the tears he shed upon seeing Yaakov after so many years reflected a genuine brotherly love. (B'reishit 33:4)

True, there are those who interpret Eisav's displays of righteousness as pure chicanery (Zohar 1:139a). Eisav, masquerading in virtue, aimed at deceiving and preying upon the innocent and weak. But, the Alter of Slabodka chose to take Eisav's deeds at face value. When Eisav acted properly and commendably, he was nothing short of a tzaddik! If so, how was he so much different than Yaakov?

In Mishlei (10:20), we read: "...LEV RESHA'IM KIM'AT, the heart of the wicked is but little." The Alter explains KIM'AT to mean that the personality of the wicked can change on a dime. The prophet (Yeshayahu 57:20) compared the RASHA to a wave at sea. One moment - tall and imposing, the next - flat and calm.

The key then to explain Eisav's immorality lies in the fact that Eisav's dichotomous personality was volatile, unsteady. He had elements of both goodness and evil, but in the face of tempting physical desires, Eisav simply couldn't hold on to the sparks of his better self. He failed to remain consistent in his righteousness, and it was that lack of consistency that defined his delinquency.

What this interpretation tells us is that although bad people can do good things, that fact alone does not make them good! Much like Eisav, when the moral mood strikes a wicked person, the individual can be positively charming.

His villainy, however, lies in the fact that his show of virtue is transitory and fleeting. Eisav is all about the moment; he is all "mood". Some external factor triggers feelings of sympathy and, with a burst of unrestrained emotions, Eisav responds. But the reaction is all surface; the behavior does not "strike roots in the innermost recesses of his personality". Soon, Eisav's physicality and hedonistic passions return with a vengeance and his evil behavior surfaces once again.

Yaakov was different. He was YOSHEIV O'HALIM. He had moral staying power. He "sat" and as such, displayed a constancy in his virtuous behavior. His ethics were not shifting and shallow; they were deep and lasting. Yaakov was not about "mood". He was about creating the ennobling experience, about fashioning a life of moral permanence, of enduring righteousness. Unlike his brother whose motto might have been, "If it feels right, it is right." Yaakov's was, "If it is right, it is right even if it doesn't feel right!"

True, righteous people also make mistakes, but their goodness consists in the remarkable strength they muster to remain, for the most part, consistent in their goodness. Their goodness is not the exception, it's the rule!

The prophet tells us that sometime in the future, the evil in Eisav will be purged and with his own goodness, he will join with Yaakov in the brotherly

partnership that will hallmark the Messianic era.