

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

TO-L'DOT 5784

Most Biblical characters are quite complex, with often multi-layered qualities to their personalities, many of which are not always complementary, and sometimes even clash. Eisav is no exception. That there is a part of Eisav which is wicked, remains clear. In our tradition, Amalek, grandson of Eisav, is the embodiment of all that is evil. When Chazal declare that "Eisav detests Yaakov" (Sifrei, B'ha'alot'cha 69, s.v. OH), they were addressing this "Amalek" component of Eisav's persona. Indeed, as the Torah affirms, it is against Amalek that HaShem wages a perpetual war (Sh'mot 17:16). And it is this monstrous manifestation of Amalek, as the Pesach Haggada attests, which rears its fiendish head against us in every generation. And, at present, there is no contesting the fact that now, Hamas and its terrorist cohorts are Amalek's most recent barbaric and vicious reincarnation!

But Chazal also admitted to the truth that there is a dimension to Eisav which actually complements and completes the personality of his twin brother, Yaakov. Rashi (25:23) brings the story of the close friendship that Rebbe, R. Yehuda HaNasi enjoyed with the enlightened Roman emperor, Antoninus; Rome being a descendant

of Eisav (Rashi, Sh'mot 36:43). Moreover, the fact that Eisav was not thoroughly evil is borne out by the more laudatory aspects of Eisav's character which Chazal enumerate: he excelled in the mitzva of honoring his parents (Sh'moy 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'Bei 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 according to many, the tears he shed upon seeing Yaakov after so many years reflected his genuine brotherly love (B'reishit 33:4).

Precisely because of this rather positive facet of Eisav's behavior, a number of our commentators have a remarkable understanding of the deception episode in our Parsha where Yitzchak, choosing to bless Eisav, is duped into blessing Yaakov instead. Why would Yitzchak initially prefer to confer his blessing upon a son who had already earned the inglorious reputation of a criminal and villain (B'reishit Rabba 63:12)? Some suggest that after the ecstatic spiritual experience of the Akeida, Yitzchak was simply not wholly of this world and hence could not fully grasp the malevolent nature of his eldest son. However, there are clear indications that this may not have been the

case. First, we are told that upon Eisav's marrying his Canaanite wives, his parents - Yitzchak included - were embittered by his choice (26:35) and thus surely aware of Eisav's indulgent and unrighteous behavior. And second, the Midrash relates (B'reishit Rabba 65:19) that when Yaakov, disguised as Eisav, employs Gd's name in speaking to his father, Yitzchak is clearly aware that Eisav does not. What then were Yitzchak's intentions?

Yitzchak was not at all naive as to his son's delinquent conduct. But he also recognized - or so he thought - that Yaakov, the "dweller of tents", could not alone realize the Divine vision for a world where the global community would be purged of its dross and enter a redemptive era of messianic greatness. For this, it would require both the talents of an Eisav and Yaakov. Eisav, to create the physical infrastructure of society with its economic and technological advances and achievements. And Yaakov, to teach and inculcate the moral code and thus inspire all of humanity to reach for the highest levels of ethical and religious living. Yes, Eisav was crude and vulgar, but perhaps a bountiful and sincere blessing from a loving father might be enough to encourage Eisav to reign in his volatile nature, subdue his demons, fight his ghosts, and channel all that energy into productive greatness.

That Rivka chose to intervene and prevent Yitzchak from giving the first blessing to Eisav does neither refute nor negate the merit of what Yitzchak envisioned as the dual destiny for his two sons.

Rambam writes (Sh'moneh P'rakim 6) that there are those who are born with natural dispositions for goodness and virtue, and there are those who are fated with powerful negative and sinful inclinations. Each are challenged in different ways, but the latter, who many would deem as hopeless and incorrigible, are actually invited and pressed to rule over their YEITZER HARA (KOVEISH ET YITZRO) and in so doing, achieve a level of greatness surpassing all others. This was Eisav's test. That he struggled against the evil, did not make him evil. Tragically he failed, and the worst in him prevailed, but not all of him.

R. Menachem Azariya d'Fanu (Ma'amar HaNefesh 6:5), in the 16-17th c., Italy, presents the intriguing interpretation of a verse in our Parsha's haftara. When the Navi (Malachi 1:3) writes that the Almighty hates Eisav - V'ET EISAV SANEITI, the inclusion of the word ET "refers to that impurity which attaches itself to Eisav, and it is this evil that Gd hates, but, in the future, Eisav himself will become pure." What this essentially means is that when, in the end of days, the

prophet declares (Ovadya 1:21) that "the saviors will ascend Mt. Zion to judge the mountain of Eisav, and the kingdom will be HaShem's", at that moment of deliverance, the judgment and punishment will only be against the "Amalek" of Eisav, the V'ET EISAV, and not all of Eisav. At that momentous time, those who will be spared will earn the meritorious title of the CHASIDEI UMOT HA'OLAM, the righteous ones of the nations and they will rise to fulfill the original mission of Eisav as the loyal partner of his brother, Yaakov, in the building of a new world!

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In the wake of the Hamas vicious and savage attack on our beloved Israel, it is becoming increasingly evident that the war has profound and global implications far beyond a local battle against a heinous terrorist entity. The inhuman evil unleashed by Hamas has glaringly placed before every country and every individual an unavoidable choice. At no other time in recent memory have the sides been that painfully clear and unambiguous. It is a simple and portentous choice, uncomplicated and yet so terribly significant: Will you choose good over evil, truth over lies, the best of humanity over the worst!

And in this choice, there is no middle ground. As William James taught (Will to Believe, 1896), in life there are forced options when one cannot avoid selecting one of the alternatives, and there are momentous options when a great deal turns on one's decision. For us, as Jews, the choice is plain, but for all others, the decision - the "forced" and "momentous option" - is - and will be - an "Eisav moment". We pray that many - that all - will make the right decision and choose to be proud members in the great fellowship of CHASIDEI UMOT HA'OLAM, the noble descendants of the good Eisav, the righteous brother of Yaakov-Yisrael! 🙌