

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

TO-L'DOT

After Ya'akov Avinu fled home because of Eisav's wrath:

Eisav perceived that [his Canaanite wives]... were evil in the eyes of Yitzchak, his father. So Eisav went to Yishmael... and married Machalat, the daughter of Yishmael (28:8-9).

Rashi comments with hard words: "He added wickedness onto wickedness, as he did not divorce his first wives.

In contrast, the Rashbam observes that Eisav did not seek wickedness, but an element of reconciliation. He suggests that Eisav paid special attention to his father telling his brother Ya'akov not to marry a daughter of Canaan, but to leave home immediately for a far-away destination connected with the family. That brought home to him that he himself had grieved his father for marrying into that alien culture. It was for that reason, Eisav reasoned, that he did not receive the b'racha (the blessing) and what came with it: it was Ya'akov who was to get the B'RACHA OF AVRAHAM (28:4). Eisav therefore married into the family of Yishmael, his uncle, in the hope that by doing so his father would reconcile to him and give inheritance within Avraham's legacy.

Whereas Rashi's explanations here, and throughout the parasha, show Eisav going from one evil to the next, the Rashbam seems to view Eisav in a more nuanced way. Here, he implies, that despite his disappointments, there was something within him that wished to please his aging father and be part of what the family stood for; even spiritually. For Eisav did not lack in material wealth (c.f. 33:9).

We see several other examples in this parasha where Rashi and Rashbam similarly differ about Eisav's character. When Ya'akov asks Eisav to sell him the B'CHORA (the Birthright): the privileges and duties that come with that exalted family position, Eisav replied: "I am going to die: what use is the b'chora to me?" (25:32). Rashi interprets severely, explaining that Eisav wanted nothing of the complex laws and associated dire penalties connected with b'chora. In contrast, the Rashbam, following the simple context of the text, explains that Eisav's occupation as a hunter meant that his life was constantly at risk and that he would be unlikely to live long enough to get that position. Similarly, after the sale, "Eisav despised the b'chora" (25:34). Rashi emphasizes that the Torah bears witness to Eisav's belittling the bechora's associated special services to G-d. The Rashbam explains that Eisav, in sealing the sale with the customary refreshments (c.f. Ya'akov later doing

similarly with his non-aggression deal with Lavan, 31:54) which in this case was the red lentil dish, temporarily made light of the b'chora, though unlike Rashi, he bitterly regretted having done so later and saw himself as having fallen into the trap (c.f. 27:36).

Much has been written about the Rashbam's interpretations of the Torah and how they differ from Rashi, his grandfather. Both Rashi and the Rashbam were not only early Rishonim, but teachers, who strove to make both the Written Torah and Oral Torah intelligible and meaningful for the public that wanted to know and wanted to understand. Both were masters of the numerous layers of MESORA, sacred traditions. The difference are in their priorities. Though Rashi repeats his objective in communicating the plain meaning of the Torah text, he does employ a concise digest of Talmudic and Midrashic sources to inform the understanding of the Torah on different levels according to the mesora - often opening with "The Midrash tells us" or "Our Rabbis derive". His work thus enables his intelligent readers to form a synthesis between the simple meaning of the text and the layers of tradition associated with the holy text. In addition, Rashi was living during a period of widespread pressure to convert out of Judaism: associating

Eisav with Edom (37:1), Rome and what flowed from them down the centuries to the current situation. Eisav was held up as a Torah-grounded warning not to go in his ways, and in the ways of Edom.

By the time the Rashbam wrote his commentary, Rashi's was already widely studied: Rashbam in several places refers to Rashi's commentary as "HaMefaresh", The Commentator. Possibly he could have been concerned that not all Rashi's readers were as particular in distinguishing between the plain meaning and Midrashic exposition as Rashi wished them to be. His purpose was therefore to ground his people to the P'SHUTO SHEL MIKRA, the plain meaning of the text, holding that it was valid, was able to stand up in its own right and that it contained vital Torah values, even where practice may be greatly modified by the Oral Law and traditions. 📖