

Raising “Difficult” Children

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The stark differences and sibling rivalry evidenced between the fraternal twins Yaakov and Eisav are depicted in the Bible as starting from conception.

Beraishit 25:22
And the children struggled in her womb...¹

Ibid. 23
And God Said to her (Rivka): Two nations in your womb, and two peoples from your innards will separate, and one people will strive with the other, and the older will serve the younger.

Ibid., 25-26
And the first one emerged ruddy,² entirely covered with hair, and they called his name Eisav.
And afterwards his brother emerged, and his hand was clutching the Eikev (heel) of Eisav, and he called his name Yaakov.³

Ibid., 27
And the boys grew, and Eisav was a man who knew hunting, a man of the field.
And Yaakov was an uncomplicated man, sitting in tents.⁴

The first time that we are told about a direct interaction between them, a certain amount of, at best, competition, and at worst hostility, can be detected:

Beraishit 25:29-34

¹ Rabbinic literature sees this as more than the fetuses being active, but rather they were already displaying predilections for what they would do and become in the future:

RaShI on Beraishit 25:22

“VaYitrotzetzu” (And they struggled)--... Our Rabbis interpreted the word having to do with Ritza (running.) When she (Rivka) would pass by the doors of Tora (a Beit Midrash [while the Tora had not as yet been given, the assumption that there were study centers such as the one traditionally associated with Shem and Ever is standard in Rabbinic literature. See my essay “Stealth Tora Teachers” at www.kmsynagogue.org/Noach.html]) Yaakov would run and try to break out; when she would pass by the doors of a place of idolatry, Eisav would run and try to get out.

Another interpretation: They were struggling with one another and disputing the inheritance of the two worlds (this world and the World to Come

² The absence of any reference to Yaakov’s appearance with respect to hair or skin color at least implies that there was no hair to speak of and his color was not notable in any way, in contrast to his twin’s ruddy complexion. And even though Yaakov eventually states that compared to him, Eisav is hairy (Beraishit 27:11), there is no conclusive evidence that Yaakov was completely hairless either at birth or at this later point.

³ This strange aspect of the birth of Yaakov and Eisav calls to mind the anomaly associated with the births of Peretz and Zarach (Ibid. 38:28-30.)

⁴ The stark contrast between how each of these individuals spent most of his time is reminiscent of, but not identical to, the first two children in the bible, Kayin and Hevel (Ibid., 4:2.)

And Yaakov was making lentils and Eisav came from the field and he was tired. And Eisav said to Yaakov: Feed me (RaShI—stuff into my mouth) now some of these “very reds” (the color of the lentils) because I am tired. Therefore his name is called Edom (red, reflecting his food preference.)

And Yaakov said: Sell today your birthright to me.

And Eisav said: Behold I am going to die. What good is the birthright to me?

And Yaakov said: Swear to me today. And he swore to him and he sold his birthright to Yaakov.

And Yaakov gave to Eisav bread and lentils. And he ate and drank and rose up and went and Eisav despised the birthright.

While some commentators suggest readings that assume that the sale of the birthright was legally significant,⁵ R. S.R. Hirsch views the incident as a case of adolescent “horsing around”, and more revealing of the personalities of the protagonists than objectively justifying the subsequent “purloined Blessing”:

Beraishit 26:34

...Both of them were still just boys—according to Bava Batra 16b, fifteen years old, so that in any case the Bechora could only have been sold in boyish play. Bar Kappra, too, in Beraishit Rabba 63:14, calls them “Mesachakim” (playing) so that there can be no question of a real bargain, or a serious business deal.

Yet, even though the action did not “count”, the Gemora suggests that a great deal may be revealed about someone by how s/he “plays”

Eirubin 65b

Said R. Elayi: By means of three things a person becomes known—“BeKoso” (by his cup, i.e., the manner in which he acts when inebriated), “U’BeKiso” (by his pocket, i.e., what he spends his money on), “U’BeKa’aso” (by his anger, i.e.,

⁵ The rationale for suggesting that the status of being the firstborn can be bought and sold, is intended to take some of the onus away from the ostensible duplicity of Rivka and Yaakov, when they deceive Yitzchak into giving Yaakov the blessing intended for Eisav. An interesting source that advances such a position, is found in Midrash HaBeiur (Tora Shleima, Vol. 4, ed. R. Menachem Kasher, New York, 5712, p. 1034, #201):

(Beraishit 25:31 And Yaakov said: Sell it today your birthright to me.)

What is meant by “today”? Today the birthright is sold, but after the Giving of the Tora (following the Exodus, at Sinai, Shemot 19 ff.) the status of firstborn cannot be sold, as it is said, (Devarim 21:17) “...But rather the firstborn of the hated wife has to be declared the firstborn”... (Just like the father cannot transfer the status of firstborn son from one to another, so too the status of being firstborn is not open to transfer via sale.)

In R. Kasher’s commentary, in addition to making the distinction between pre-and post-Sinai with respect to various practices (Yaakov’s transfer of the firstborn status from Reuven to Yosef can also be explained in this manner,) he mentions two other explanations for the fore-cited Midrash: a) Ohr HaAfeila—“KaYom” suggests that the practice at this time was to sell the firstborn status, even if this will not be the practice forever, regardless of what the Tora codifies at Sinai, and b) RIV”A in the name of R. Aharon HaKohen—when the Bechora becomes associated with service in the Temple (BaMidbar 3:12-3), at that point the firstborn status could not be sold (because that would be considered not simply a deprivation by the person of a particular status, but also an affront to God when the individual opts out of serving Him.)

what happens when he “loses it” out of frustration or disappointment). And there are those who say: “BeSechako” (by his play.)

Consequently, in addition to the manner in which the boys spend their time—in the fields hunting or dwelling in tents—we now are informed by means of this incident that Eisav was impulsive, prone to trading a long-term value for immediate gratification, while Yaakov, in contrast to obtaining food by trapping and killing it, prepared beans,⁶ and was keen on exploiting another’s neediness to his own advantage.

R. Hirsch adds a stinging critique of Yitzchak and Rivka’s parenting when he claims that this profound difference in attitude and behavior between the two brothers had more to do with “nurture” than “nature”.⁷

Beraishit 25:27 “And they grew up...”

...They (our sages) point out the striking contrast in the grandchildren of Avraham may have been due, not so much to a difference in their temperaments as to mistakes in the way they were brought up. As long as they were little, no attention was paid to the slumbering differences in their natures, both had exactly the same teaching and educational treatment, and the great law of education, (Mishlei 22:6) “Bring up the child in accordance with his own way” was forgotten, that each child must be treated differently with an eye to the slumbering tendencies of his nature, and out of them to be educated to develop his special characteristics for the one pure, human and Jewish life...

To try to bring up a Yaakov and an Eisav in the same college, make them have the same habits and hobbies, want to teach and educate them in the same way⁸ for some studious, sedate, meditative life is the surest way to court disaster. A Jacob will with ever increasing zeal and zest imbibe knowledge from the well of wisdom and truth, and an Eisav can hardly wait for the time when he can throw not only the books, but at the same time, a whole purpose of life, behind his back,

⁶ The generalization is limited when accepting the Rabbinic comment that this was food engendered by mourning for the death of Avraham, the shape of beans similar to the shape of an egg suggesting that it is impossible to question God’s Judgment at such times, rather than an every-day meal—see RaShi Beraishit 25:30.

⁷ While the Mussar value of such a comment to parents striving to properly bring up their children is obvious, to state categorically that the text clearly conveys this message would be difficult. In light of this comment as well as the one that R. Hirsch makes with reference to the Ben Sorer U’Moreh that will be cited below, his agenda is clear; whether this was also the point of the Tora narrative can be readily disputed.

⁸ In one aspect of my own approach to education, I remember being brought up short when reading several years ago Tamar Ross’ controversial and engaging book Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism (Brandeis U. Press, Waltham, MA, 2004.) The author writes at one point (pp. 8-9) of the different ways of knowing distinguishing men from women. This challenged a long-held personal assumption, particularly with respect to my teaching girls and women Talmud, that the material should be presented to them in the identical manner that boys and men were taught. I had focused on the lack of opportunity usually afforded women in this discipline and therefore strove to rectify the imbalance by teaching women no differently than I would men. In my first teaching context, which was co-ed, distinguishing between boys and girls in the same class was not even a possibility, and perhaps it is there that I developed my philosophy which I carried over into gender-specific settings. But is such an approach appropriate if the manner of knowing, and consequent educational needs, are fundamentally different? It even begs the question of whether a male should be teaching females and vice versa. Just reading about such ideas sensitizes the teacher and parent to try to recognize the need to properly differentiate teaching and child-rearing approaches when these are called for.

a life which he has only learned to know from one angle, and in a manner for which he can find no disposition in his whole nature.

Had Yitzchak and Rivka studied Eisav's nature and character early enough and asked themselves how can even an Esav, how can all the strength and energy, agility and courage that lies slumbering in this child be used in the service of God, and the future Gever be trained to become not a Gibor Tzayid (a mighty hunter) but in truth a Gibor Lifnai HaShem (a mighty one before God), then Yaakov and Eisav, with their totally different natures could have still remained twin brothers in spirit and life...

A parallel call to action is implicitly directed at parents of children coming of age in R. Hirsch's approach to the topic of the Stubborn and Rebellious Son in Parashat Ki Tetze:

Devarim 21:18 "Ki Yihyeh LeIsh Ben..." (When there is to a man a son) ... While "Ben" (son) in itself would include a son also in childhood, "Ki Yihyeh LeIsh Ben" designates the son at that age when the father recognizes in him the future man, who is already moved nearer to him, the "Ish." (Sanhedrin 68b) "Ben HaSamuch LeGevurato Shel Ish" (a son who is close to his strength as a man). According to the Halacha this is the first three months after attaining puberty, after thirteen years of age... With this limitation we think the Tora gives a very important hint to all those educators who are seriously concerned with the moral future of their pupils. It is within the first three months after attaining Bar Mitzva that the Tora sees the critical time for the decision over the moral future of the boy. Just in the time when according to the usual opinion with the awakening sensuality, the "evil" in man becomes aroused to activity, the Tora expects the decisive breaking through of the "good" which just in fighting against sensuality works itself up to the virile moral strength of a man...

By the obedience which the boy, now matured as a youth, pays to his parents in this first period of the nobility of youth, by the degree with which in that period he keeps himself afar from that which is low and sensual and turns towards what is spiritual and lofty, the Tora recognizes the power that "Mitzva" has over him...

While in his comments in Devarim, R. Hirsch identifies the time period during which an adolescent's identity crisis reaches a critical crossroads, the commentator's insights in Beraishit emphasize that "one size does not fit all" and each child's unique personality and proclivities will have to be taken into consideration when a parent and/or teacher attempt to guide him constructively and appropriately.

An even more nuanced and sympathetic portrait of Eisav's specific persona is offered by R. Elimelech Bar Shaul.⁹ He states that Esav's parents, Rivka in particular, did not have to wait until the twins were Bar Mitzva to realize how different they were; when she receives the prophecy, (Beraishit 25:23) "Two nations in your womb, and two peoples from your innards will separate..." it was clear that the individuals who would be the progenitors of these nations would

⁹ Min HaBe'er, Moreshet, Tel Aviv, 5725.

be profoundly different from one another. R. Bar Shaul writes regarding the prophecy, “They are two, they are different, separate in characteristics, distinct in their ways...” He continues,

The younger Yaakov did not pose a problem; His body was smooth, his soul was straight and his path was correct...

However, the first born, Eisav, presented a serious problem. He was different in every respect...His body was full of fire and conflict. And within his soul, storminess. The house was too restrictive for him. He was drawn to the field and the forest, not to be a farmer, but rather to travel far and wide, free of responsibility and structure, to pursue whatever would strike his fancy. Fear and danger were of no concern to him, and by means of his bow he would obtain his food.

...And yet was this the whole Eisav? Was he completely disconnected from the home of his parents? He would return from time to time to his home and would wait on his father Yitzchak, and try to find favor in his eyes and looked forward to his blessing. Apparently he believed in the blessing and held it in esteem...

And perhaps this is the way to understand this. When he would occasionally return home, he might have been physically weary from his exertions and transgressions. And his soul was also tired. He would be captured by the pure spirit of the home and it would touch his soul. Something would warm up, dissolve within him. At that moment he would yearn to be a member of the house, and tried to conduct himself as would someone belonging to the house. And the shining image of the father also sent some rays of light into the heart of the son...

Eisav was a conflicted individual...He would lurch from extreme to extreme, between the field and the house, between a connection to the patriarchal home and a distancing from it...

The challenge that Eisav posed to the parenting powers of Yitzchak and Rivka was considerable. It is possible that even the best of their efforts would not have in the end made that much of a difference. Yet, thinking about this particular family dynamic offers much food for thought in the way that we relate to our children, grandchildren and students. “Derosh VeKabeil Sechar” (Interpret it and reap reward!)