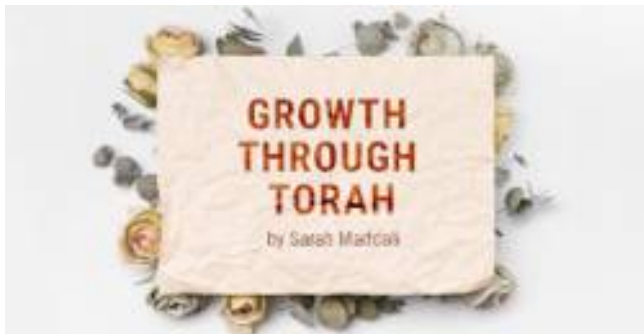


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## Channeling our Less Desirable Character Traits for the Good

The Torah describes Esau as “red” upon being born (25:24). However, it is not until later in the Torah portion when Esau says to Jacob, “Pour into me, now some of that very red stuff for I am exhausted” that Esau is called ‘Edom’, which means “red” in Hebrew (25:30).

Why would the Torah make a point of telling us Esau’s nickname (*Edom*) and why was he only called Edom 13 years later?

Lesson:

We are all born with innate character traits, personalities, capabilities, likes, and dislikes. Mothers of multiple children will often tell you that their children were very different even from the first day of being born, one child was very easy going, another more edgy, etc.

God creates everyone differently, with different inborn traits, dispositions and temperaments.

If that’s the case, how can we be held accountable for acquiescing? For example, if one is born with a stingy nature, how can they be held responsible for being anything other than stingy?

Our Torah portion holds the key: while it is true that God created us with particular dispositions and character traits, what we do with it is up to us. Our job is to channel it for a productive purpose and for the service of God.

Any character trait could be used for a positive, constructive purpose, or the opposite, God forbid. For example, if someone is competitive by nature, one could use that to compare and outcompete those around them. Or, rather, one could use that competitiveness for a constructive purpose, constantly challenging oneself to be the very best in every aspect of their life.

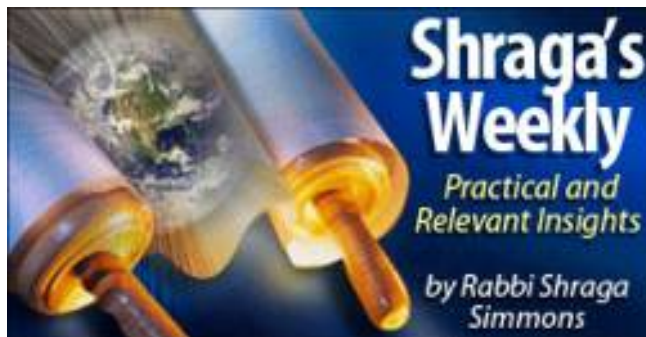
Or if one is naturally more selfish, channel that selfishness to do what it takes (obviously within limits) to make yourself happy. When you are

happy, you positively affect your family and those around you.

While Esau was born red, a metaphor for ruthlessness and cruelty, he was not called red until he showed a crudeness of asking Jacob to “pour some of the red stuff” and being willing to sell his birthright for it. Esau used a seemingly negative character trait for the negative. The proof that he could have become something greater with his disposition is that King David is also called “edom”, the red one. Yet, King David channeled that energy and fought and won against Goliath, protecting the Jewish people and sanctifying God’s name. Let’s try to do the same.

Exercise: Identify a weakness in your character and think about how you can channel it in a positive way.

(Idea inspired by “Torah for Your Table”)



## Instantaneous-ism

Of all types of sibling rivalry, probably the most intense is with twin boys. Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca, began struggling even inside the womb! At birth, they fought to see who would get out first. And they grew up vying

for the attention of their father Isaac -to see who would inherit the mantle of Jewish leadership.

The Torah (Genesis 25:29-34) describes a pivotal incident:

*"One day Jacob was cooking lentil stew, and Esav came in hungry from the field. Esav declared, 'I'm famished. I beg you to feed me that red stew!'"*

*Jacob said, 'In exchange, sell me your birthright.'*

*Esav said, 'Behold, I am dying, so what good is this birthright anyway?!' So Esav agreed to sell the birthright.*

*Jacob gave him bread and lentil stew. Esav ate and drank, and went on his way, despising the birthright."*

An obvious question: Why would Jacob take such unfair advantage of his hungry brother?

There was no unfair advantage because Esav didn't want the birthright in the first place. The birthright primarily entailed spiritual, rather than material, wealth. In addition to the birthright privileges, there came many responsibilities as well, such as being a role model for the Jewish nation. Esav wanted the easy life; he wasn't looking for more responsibility. That's why the Torah says that he "despised the birthright."

Yet this doesn't really answer the question. If Esav was in fact starving to death, how could Jacob have coerced him into a deal? Jewish law states that a person is not bound by agreements made under the threat of life-and-death!

The answer is revealed by a careful reading:  
"Jacob gave him bread and lentil stew." Jacob first gave Esav bread, to satisfy his urgent hunger and be removed from the status of "starving to death." Only then did Jacob give the lentil stew, which Esav – by accepting it – sealed the deal, fair and square.

### **I Want it Now**

On a deeper level, there is another way to understand Esav's statement, "I'm going to die anyway." Esav is revealing his philosophy of life: "The world begins when I'm born, and ends when I die. So who needs to be concerned with intangibles like a 'spiritual birthright.' I'll take the stew and be happy now!"

The Midrash says that after consummating the deal, Esav mocked Jacob's stupidity. "I got a hot bowl of soup and you got some abstract future reward!" laughed Esav.

Esav is driven by physical desire, concerned only with the here and now. He demands instant gratification. He seeks physical pleasure and comfort, because for him, the pleasures of the body are all that life has to offer. This is reflected in his actions:

1. Esau says, "*Feed me that red stew.*" He is so hedonistic that he doesn't even want to expend the effort of lifting the bowl himself. "Just pour it down my throat," he tells Jacob.
2. Esau refers to the stew as "red stuff." He is attracted to its bright, colorful packaging. The inner content is less important; he

likes the way it looks from a superficial, sensual perspective.

3. Esav is so stricken by desires that he is even willing to consume nearly-raw lentil stew. "*Na*" means half cooked (as in Exodus 12:9), yet Esav has to have it NOW! (source: "Me'am Loaz " – Genesis 25:30)

### **Signs of Maturity**

Every human being is comprised of two components – the physical (body) and the spiritual (soul). Each part needs to be nourished and sustained, yet achieves this through very different means. The body seeks comfort and immediate gratification: food, sleep, money,. The soul seeks longer-lasting, eternal pleasures: meaning, love, good deeds, connection to God.

The Talmud says: "Who is the wise person? He who sees the future." This ability to consider long-term consequences is what distinguishes the mature from the immature. A child cannot predict that eating 20 pieces of candy now will lead to a stomachache. A college student may not see that late-night parties might affect his entire career track. Or a father may not see that working overtime can lead to irreparable disconnection from his wife and children.

If things had played out differently, the Jewish patriarchs could have been known as "Abraham, Isaac and **Esau**." But alas, Esau lost the struggle between body and soul. Instead, for thousands of years until today, millions of Jews pray to the God of "Abraham, Isaac and **Jacob**."

## Soul Food

Today, each of us is fighting Esav's battle: body versus soul. The multi-billion-dollar media machine constantly entices us to buy into the lifestyle of "Instantaneous-ism." Between fast-food, iPad, streaming-hands-free-one-click-ordering, we've become accustomed to a world where immediacy is the norm. The affect is that we've lost our sense of perspective.

Marketing experts don't want us to mature. They want us to remain in our impulsive, ego-driven demand for games and instant fun.

To win the battle, we must be pro-active in undertaking spiritual activities. Something as simple as saying a blessing over food turns a "physical" act into a spiritual experience. We reflect on the deeper aspect of eating as a way to give the body energy to then fulfill a higher purpose. The mere pause is a counter-balance to instantaneous urge.

Rabbi Alexander Ziskind (19th century Europe) had the custom of breaking his Yom Kippur fast with boney fish. This forced him to eat slowly and not gorge the food. In the throes of hunger, the rabbi was determined that his soul maintain control over his body.

Our ability to moderate (not squelch, but curb) the body's needs gives us the freedom to pursue the needs of the soul. Because when all is said and done, our lives are only as good as the soul we've nurtured.

Next time you're at a funeral, listen closely to the eulogy. You will never hear about what kind of car he drove, how many different restaurants he

visited, or how much money he shrewdly invested. At that moment of everlasting truth, what is truly important is being a devoted parent, donating money to build a hospital, caring for others, and personal integrity.

## Change of Mind

Now we can understand more deeply why the verse says that Esau "*went on his way, despising the birthright.*" Subconsciously, Esau knew he had sabotaged his own potential for greatness. Now in order to alleviate his guilt, he rationalized: "I didn't want that lousy birthright, anyway!"

The Midrash says that years later, as Esau grew older, he began to reconnect with his inner voice and gain more clarity about life's priorities. So Esau decided to go to Jacob with an offer to renegotiate the birthright. The offer was a dramatic turnaround: Esau was willing to part with all his wealth, in order to gain a share in the eternity of the Jewish people!

Alas, when Esav's children heard how he was planning to buy an intangible spiritual connection, they promptly put a stop to his plans. "Forget it, Dad," they said, "We're not letting you spend our inheritance money!"

Understandably, Esav was disappointed in his children's attitude. Then he realized where they'd learned it from.

## Think Twice

The Midrash concludes that upon his death, Esav's head rolled into the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, where it was buried alongside

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca. Esau was not evil; he was just confused. His "head" was worthy of burial with the founders of the Jewish people. The desires of his body, however, caused him to be cut off from eternity.

So keep your eye on the ball. Acquire wisdom. Know exactly what you're living for. Keep the material desires in check. Beware of our microwave-SMS-instantaneous urges that can affect not only our own lives, but generations to come.



## Nature or Nurture: It's All In Our Hands

In *Parashas Toldos*, we find that when Esau was born, he emerged from the womb red in appearance.<sup>1</sup> It was only later, however, when he was full grown and demanded of his brother Jacob, "Pour into me, now, some of that very red stuff,"<sup>2</sup> that he was called "*Edom*" (red). Edom is a metaphor for cruelty and blood lust. At birth, Esau already had the potential to be a killer, but he also had the potential to channel his inclinations in a positive way. It was only when he used his talents negatively that he received the

name Edom. We learn that all tendencies and character traits can be directed either for the good or for the bad. The choice is ours, and it is by the choices we make that we are measured. Once Esau expressed himself in such a crude and cruel manner, "Pour into me, now, some of that very red stuff," he was called *Edom* because he had chosen to be a crude and cruel person.

From this we learn that our words not only impact on others, but perhaps even more significantly, they influence and shape our own personalities. Thus, if you speak in a cold, uncaring manner, you will eventually become cold and uncaring; if you speak in loving, caring language, the possibility that you will become loving and caring can become a reality. The Torah is alerting us to the far-reaching effects of our deeds and words as they shape and mold our character. Therefore, we must be ever on guard to use refined language and gentle, compassionate words, not only so that we might interact with others with warmth and love, but also so that we ourselves might become better, kinder people.

One might argue that Esau can hardly be held responsible for his barbaric ways. After all, he was *born red*, and his propensity for evil was inborn. Moreover, isn't it true that everything is pre-determined, that the script of our lives is written before we are born? To a certain extent, this is true; nevertheless, we have been given free choice in the most crucial of all decisions: that is, shaping our character. The Talmud states, "Everything is foretold except our *yiras Shamayim* [reverence for God]." Thus, for example, before birth, it is determined how high our I.Q. will be, but it is our decision (based on



our reverence for God) whether we will use that high I.Q. to bring blessing to others, or God forbid, to inflict harm and pain upon them. Just consider how different the world would have been had Hitler used his ability to sway public opinion for good rather than for evil. The same holds true in every area of life.

David, king of Israel, is a perfect example. He demonstrates how one can harness one's inborn characteristics and channel them for the benefit of mankind. It is written that he, too, was born *red*, but his *yiras Shamayim* was the guiding light of his life. Thus, with his words he created psalms and with his courage, he defeated the evil Goliath and forever changed the course of mankind. These thoughts from the *parashah* should inspire us to scrutinize our own personalities, measure our own words, and evaluate our own deeds so that we may convert our weaknesses into strengths, our failures into wisdom and our apathy into caring. Let us each do our share to create a better world.

### **Our Roots – Our Treasures**

We are all familiar with the story of Jacob and Esau, which is the focus of this *parashah*. There are, however, also passages of which we may be less aware and which at first glance appear to have less personal meaning or significance. Upon closer examination, however, they reveal to us the history of our people and our eternal resilience.

Even as in the days of Abraham, when famine forced the Patriarch to leave his home, so, too, Isaac was confronted by hunger and, as commanded by Hashem, went to dwell in the land of Gerar, where King Abimelech reigned. There,

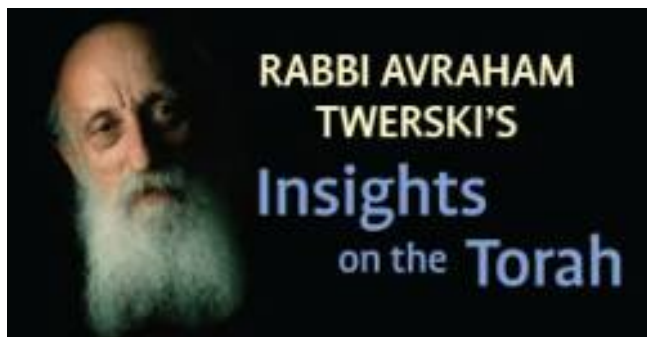
Isaac became very prosperous and re-dug the wells that the servants of his father, Abraham, had dug, wells that produced "living" water. Those wells had been stopped up by the people of Gerar because of hatred and jealousy. Isaac not only opened the wells, but he called them by the very same names as his father had.<sup>3</sup>

The message of these wells is profound and has direct bearing on us today. Wells that produce living waters are symbolic of Torah. Those who hate us cannot bear for us to dig deeply into our wells and bring forth the spiritual treasures buried in our souls. In every generation they find different ways to persecute us and close our wells. But even as Isaac re-opened the wells of his father, so too must we open our ancient wells, keep digging, and plumb the Torah to its depths so that its living waters may pour forth and refresh our souls. We learn that we are never to be disheartened, never to give up. Torah study is not just an avocation: it is our very life, the essence of our being, and no force on earth can separate us from it.

Furthermore, when Isaac called the wells by the very same names designated by his father, he taught us that, when it comes to spirituality, we must go back to the very roots and foundation that our parents set forth for us. We dare not even change names; how much more so must we retain the way of life that our ancestors paved for us. Our prayers, our mitzvos, our *chesed*, are all symbolized by those wells, and therein lies our resilience. Isaac renewed Abraham's wells, and those three wells are reminders of our Holy Temples: the first two that were destroyed and the third that is yet to be built and will stand eternally.

Our generation has encountered those who would shut down our wells. The Nazis, the Communists – they tried, and failed. The Torah that was once studied in the mighty yeshivas of Europe was not consumed in the flames of the Holocaust; that Torah found new life on these shores, in Israel, and the world over – wherever the descendants of Isaac live. Fortunately for us, in this blessed country our wells have not been shut down. We do not have to endanger our lives in order to study Torah. We just have to dig deeply into our hearts and renew our commitment to our covenant with God, and we will discover a wellspring of treasures.

1. Gen. 25:25.
2. Ibid. 25:30.
3. Ibid. 26:15-18.



## Different Blessings for Jacob and Esau

When Isaac blesses Jacob, the verse states: “And may God give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth” (Genesis, 27:28).

When he blesses Esau, the verse says, “Behold, of the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling and

of the dew of the heavens from above” (Genesis, 27:39).

Although the blessings to Jacob and Esau appear similar, there are two striking differences between them. To Jacob, Isaac said, “May God give you,” whereas in Esau's blessing he does not invoke the Name of God. Secondly, in Jacob's blessing, the blessing of “the dew of the heavens” precedes the blessing of “the fatness of the earth,” whereas in Esau's blessing the order is reversed.

Although Isaac thought he was blessing Esau, the Divine Spirit motivated him to give Jacob the blessing appropriate for him. Jacob was to know that everything he possesses, even if it appears to be the result of his own efforts, is a gift from God. Moses warned the Israelites that when they inherit the Promised Land and become affluent, they should not think that it was their skill, prowess and work that produced their affluence, but that it was God Who gave them the ability to acquire wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). Jacob's descendants can have this faith, but to Esau's descendants it is an alien concept. Living by the sword, Esau's descendants gained their wealth by plunder and robbery.

The Divine Spirit also bestowed upon Jacob the awareness that the goal and purpose of life is spiritual, “the dew of the heavens.” This is achieved via the fulfillment of the Divine will. Inasmuch as one cannot fulfill the mitzvot without the physical means to do so, earthly belongings, “the fatness of the earth,” are a necessity, but they should be seen only as a means, not as an ultimate goal.



## **Toldot** (Genesis 25:19-28:9) *basic compendium*

Esau, on the other hand, lives for earthly pleasures. “The fatness of the land” is primary, and any spirituality is but an afterthought.

The two nuances are related. We can live spiritual lives only if we are aware that all mundane possessions are Divine gifts. If we lose sight of our utter dependence on God, we can degenerate into creatures that seek only physical pleasures, and we thereby lose the dignity of spirituality that elevates us above all other living things.

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