

THE TRAGIC FLAW OF BROTHER ESAU

by Rabbi Label Lam

And the youth grew up and Essau was a man who knew how to trap. He was a man of the field. And Yaakov was a wholesome man who dwelt in tents. And Isaac loved Essau because he trapped him with his mouth while Rebbecca loved Yaakov. (Breishis 25:27-28)

To trap: To trick his father. He asked him, "How does one tithe salt and straw?" His father thought he was careful in the performance of Mitzvos. (Rashi)

A wholesome man: Was not an expert in all these matters. As his heart so was his mouth. (Rashi)

Because he trapped him with his mouth: Targum translates, "the mouth of Isaac"(with food). The Midrash explains with "Essau's mouth", that he trapped and tricked him with his words. (Rashi)

From Essau we can learn a few good things. Even from the apparently bad things we can glean a few helpful lessons, not just what not to do but what can and must be done. There is purposeful ambiguity in the statement that, "Isaac loved Essau because he trapped him with his mouth". Who is the antecedent to the pronoun, "his"? The mouths of Essau and Isaac are each candidates for the meaning of the verse. Which one is the real one, though?

Down on the "Lower East Side" we had just finished one of those exciting back to school shopping sprees. Our bags were filled with a year's supply of socks and personal under sundries. It's not like we couldn't wait to get home and try everything on! In that ho hum mood, we stopped in a local restaurant for a bite of lunch. This was my first encounter with such an eating establishment.

The waiter had an attitude and an approach that set new limits for over-familiarity bordering on downright intrusiveness. We sometimes call it "chutzpah"! Everything we selected on the menu he recommended something different and without consulting and in the face of open objections wrote it down as the final order, insisting, "You'll like it! Trust me!" We rolled with the punches and accepted his idiosyncratic antics with minimal resistance. He was right. We liked it! The time came to vacate the premises so we called for the bill. He came over to the table with a new quietude and paused before ripping the bill off his pad. He bowed his head and said with the most perfect sincerity, I'll never forget those words, "You're the nicest people I've ever met in my entire life!" He tore the paper from the pad, placed it upon the table and humbly backed away.

For a few moments we sat in shock. What had we done to deserve such a compliment? This fellow looked as if he was waiting on tables for 50 years. He must have seen tens of thousands of

customers. We reasoned before digging out a handsome tip to add onto the bill, that although we had not been extra friendly, we didn't give him a hard time either. Probably he gets plenty of complaints and we're kind of pleasant. Yeah! That's it! We had convinced ourselves.

Moments later we witness the same waiter at another table laying the bill down and declaring aloud, "You're the nicest people I've ever met in my entire life!" Then to the next and the next table unashamedly making the same statement. At first we we're shocked and then humored. The truth is though, it's so seldom that one is ever treated to such a superlative compliment, we continue to revel in the glory of it, even still and although is also a shared honor and understandably hollow.

Essau gave his father what he liked to eat and also told him what he wanted to hear. These are powerful tools for winning friends and influencing spouses and children. However, the cautionary note is that if these approaches are not used to build bridges of trust, furthering relationships, but to mask malevolence, then it cannot qualify as communication but rather a campaign of manipulation.

Ultimately, Essau fell prey to the politics of perception, believing that symbolism substitutes for substance, and public relations portrays reality. Blaming Yaakov for his own failure in the end betrays the depth of his self-deception, and magnifies that much more the tragic flaw of brother Essau.

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