

# TO CHARM AND DISARM

by Rabbi Label Lam

*He slept there that night and then he took from that which had come to his hand, a gift for Esau his brother: Two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats; two hundred ewes and twenty rams; thirty nursing camels with their colts; forty cows and ten bulls; twenty she-donkeys and ten he-donkeys. He put his servant in charge of each separate drove and said to his servants, "Pass on before me and leave a space between each drove and drove." (Breishis 22: 14-17)*

Leave a space between each drove: One flock before the other as far as the eye can see, in order to satisfy the eye of that wicked one and to impress him with the magnanimity of the gift. (Rashi)

The eye is never sated with seeing and the ear is never filled with hearing. (Koheles 1:8)

Jacob had only three silver bullets to survive a confrontation with his brother. One strategy was preparation for the possibility of war. Another was prayer. Thirdly he aimed to win his heart with gifts. We can wonder aloud and speculate about why Jacob adopted this latter approach. What led him to believe that it might be effective in neutralizing Esau's anger? Perhaps with an insider's look at the planning stage we can gain an insight into our patriarch Jacob's thinking if it isn't apparent already.

I once shared with a group of prisoners something I had read in a nature magazine. It described the methodology employed by hunters in South America for capturing monkeys. They hollow out a coconut and put rice inside. Then they place it in a clearing. The unwitting monkey finds the prize and squeezes his hand into the perfectly calibrated hole to grasp the rice. Holding the rice in his fist the monkey quickly discovers that he cannot remove his hand from the hole anymore and he cannot figure out how to access the rice without opening his hand. While he is there contemplating his quandary the net comes over his head and he's trapped. When the prisoners heard this they all broke into spontaneous laughter. I was surprised. I asked them, "What's so funny?" One fellow answered, "That's how we all got here!" They all laughed again.

Jacob understood from his early experiences what Esau's weaknesses were. He had been willing to forfeit his heritage for "red-red soup". As a man of this world and only this world he is mostly drawn to colorful wrappings. A good marketing campaign could turn his head. Even though thirty-six years had lapsed since their last meeting there was no reason to assume that his basic nature had changed. He had always worked not on himself but rather upon the eyes of others, trying to make a great and even noble appearance. He projected images, mistaking symbolic gestures for substantive living, the sound of sizzle for the steak.

Even if one really wants to improve it's still extremely difficult. Reb Yisrael Salanter ztl. is quoted as having said, "It's easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change one character trait." How much more so when one is blithely unaware of his tragic flaw, things left to chance go to chaos.

There's a dispute amongst psychologists about whether children are small adults or whether adults are big children. I think that you find some in each category. Some children are impish and precocious little adults while some adults are like children playing with bigger, more expensive, and more dangerous toys.

It was safe to assume that Esau had not changed much in the years gone by. He had perhaps become more sophisticated at guarding his reputation from appearances of impropriety but the native weaknesses remained. Appealing to his brother's eyes Jacob understood that Esau couldn't resist putting his hand into the coconut if it would be presented in a sufficiently handsome package. With a heartfelt prayer and some good presentation skills he now hoped against all odds to charm and disarm.

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