

THE WORST FROM THE BEST

by Rabbi Label Lam

The children (yisrotzatzu) agitated within her, and she said, "If so, why is this to me?" And she went to inquire of HASHEM. (Breishis 25:22)

Agitated: Our sages learned that this is an expression of running (rotz). When Rivkah passed the house of Torah of Shem and Eber, Yaakov ran and struggled to go out, and when she passed by a house of idolatry Essau ran to break out. (Rashi)

Poor Essau had the cards of life stacked against him. From the early moments of his existence in this world, even from within the womb he had a predisposition for the wrong things. It's no wonder he became an infamous personality, a poster child for corruption. Was it his fault? On the surface it seems as if he was set up for failure, while Yaakov was predestined for success. Why should he be heralded as a hero? Where in this equation is there room for free will? Where is the fairness of the system?

Psychologist and parents too debate, "Which is the dominant force that shapes our personalities- 'nature' or 'nurture'?" Nature is the stuff we enter the world with and nurture is what the world around us does to us. Essau had a coarse personality, naturally, but who in life ever had a more envious spiritual environment? Look who he had for parents: Yitzchok and Rivkah! See who his grandfather was for the first almost thirteen years of his life: Avraham! His brother was Yaakov. He was surrounded by the three patriarchs of the Jewish Nation and his mother was one of the four famous Matriarchs! Wow!

What went wrong? Maybe he was irredeemably wicked! The Rambam writes in the Laws of Teshuvah that although many things in a person's life are determined, whether or not a person will be righteous or wicked is entirely up to that individual. The Vilna Gaon is quoted in Evan Shleima, "A man should not go completely against his nature even if it is bad, for he will not succeed. He should merely train himself to follow the straight path according to his nature. For example: Someone who has an inclination to spill blood should train himself to be a ritual slaughterer or a mohel." Our Sages say, "One who is greater than his friend has a greater inclination for evil" (Sukkah 52). It is worth contemplating how- great Essau might have become had he sublimated all that brute force and genius.

The third and most crucial factor that makes the man is the man himself. Hillel used to say, "If I am not for me, who will be for me?" Rabbeinu Yona explains that a person is ultimately responsible for himself. If I don't produce me who will? If I don't inspire myself who else can? I can have the greatest parents and teachers in the universe and still remain deaf to their message if I choose.

Yaakov had a good nature and a rich spiritual surrounding. He sure looks set up for success! Where was his challenge? Who did he have for a brother? He was parked in proximity to one of the master deceivers of all time, yet he managed to remain good and not become corrupted by his influence.

Maybe now we can estimate what was going on in Yitzchok's mind when he said, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Essau!"(Breishis 27:22) He was getting a mixed message. Who did he think it was standing before him? He was hopeful to the very end that Essau would adjust, his tone would soften, and that his heart might accept what his head had always known. It was less likely that Yaakov would change his appearance and it was desirable if not probable that Essau would finally make him self a worthy candidate.

Avraham grew up in the worst environment and found his way to HASHEM! Adam was put in an ideal place and invited ruin. All depends upon choice. Some make the best of a bad situation. Others manage to make the worst from the best. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.