

YOU HAVE POTENTIAL!

by Rabbi Label Lam

And Yitzchok loved Eisav because he trapped him with his mouth (Breishis 25:28)

Who is the antecedent to the pronoun "his"? Is it referring to Yitzchok's mouth or Eisav's mouth? The verse seems to be intentionally obscure to include both possibilities. According to the approach that it was Yitzchok's mouth, the Sages explain that Eisav brought freshly captured meat for his father to eat. In accordance with the understanding that it was Eisav's mouth that did the trapping, the Midrash informs us that he asked his father questions that would indicate his ultra piety like, "How do I tithe salt?"

The question that shouts out from this account of our family history is, "how could Yitzchok have been so blind to the failures of Eisav?" How could such a holy individual allow himself to be bribed by beef and/or a barrage of insincere questions? Was Eisav so tricky? Could Yitzchok have been so naïve? The question becomes even more amplified when considering that Yitzchok specialized in the character trait of "Din" - strict justice, just as Avraham had excelled in kindness. A person with such a hyper-severe focus should certainly be able to detect Eisav's deceitful designs. Someone who had perfect mastery of his own negative inclination should not fall prey to such a child's game and risk misappropriating the family heirloom - an historic legacy for the sake of some "fleish". How do we make sense of this episode?

I remember that it was almost thirty years ago I received both a stinging rebuke and a flattering compliment simultaneously. It was just after lunch-time in the Yeshiva and I had an appointment to learn with a South African buddy who was as much of a beginner at Talmud learning as I. Upon entering the study hall I encountered my friend, a lone figure, sitting there and occupied with his studies. When he detected that I was in the room he arose from his seat as one should do to pay proper homage to a Talmud Scholar. Noticing his behavior, I looked behind me to see if perhaps one of the Yeshiva's Rebbeim wasn't trailing in behind me, but no one was there.

Immediately I let him know in forceful tones my objection to his irreverent behavior, "Zach, you can't joke around like that! What are you gonna do when a real Rabbi walks in?" To which he retorted, "Reb Label, I wasn't standing up for you! I was standing up for your potential! Zap! That hurt and felt great at the same time. It's like a good news and bad news joke. The good news is, "You have potential!" The bad news is, "You have potential!"

One might think that Yitzchok's trait of strict "Din" - judgment would cause him to look with

an extra critical eye at Eisav, and those faults would be more easily detectable. It's easy to build a case that Yitzchok was in fact painfully aware of his son's imperfections. How then was he able to be way was he bribed by a rib steak and/or a disingenuous display of righteousness?

Years ago I used to visit Jewish prisoners on a regular basis. There was one particular inmate whose father I knew somewhat. Occasionally I would report to him about his son. The father was a big scholar and he had this one boy from amongst many that was too frisky for any classroom seat. He had ambitions for big and quick money. He fell into a bad group, developed some aggressive and dangerous habits, but still maintained a soft, sweet, and almost too charming side to himself.

Even in prison it was recognizable that he was always trying to game the system and he was getting into frequent trouble with the authorities and his peers. His father would repeat to me again and again, as if blind to all else, "He's got a good head on his shoulders! He's got a good head on his shoulders!" I would walk away amazed. Is he in denial? Doesn't he see all the "shtik" this guy does? After a while, though, it dawned on me. (Maybe being a seasoned parent helped.) That's his son, and a father doesn't give up on his son, no matter what!

Yitzchok too was bribed by the hope that Eisav would someday "get it"! As long as his son was bringing him food and wished to please him albeit with inauthentic inquiries, there was still a heartbeat of hope. The Patriarchal attribute of "Din" does not glare with condemnation but gazes at expectantly. It's as if he rose up each day to the good news and bad, saying to his son, **"You have potential!"** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.