

WHAT YAAKOV AND ESAV HAVE IN COMMON

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

What Yaakov and Esav Have In Common¹

Two nations are in your womb, and two regimes shall separate from your insides.

Rashi: While we read "goyim"/nations, that is not what appears in the text. There, the word is "gayim", suggesting two proud, important, self-confident people. This alludes to Antoninus and Rebbi, from whose tables neither radishes nor lettuce ceased, whether in summer or winter[2].

This maamar Chazal that Rashi quotes does not mean that Rivka was merely foretold about two larger-than-life figures who would descend from them in the future. Klal Yisrael never lacked its gedolim, and Esav produced many kings. There would be nothing remarkable in showing Rivka these two personages. The prophecy she received was not about Rebbi and Antoninus as important individuals, but as exemplars of their two peoples. Antoninus and Rebbi somehow shared a trait that was held in common by their two nations, despite the animosity and tension between them that characterized millennia of their interaction. Because they lived at the same time and interacted with each other - like Yaakov and Esav - the sense of self-worth and importance that they shared was more pronounced and apparent than it was at other times. The close association between Rebbi and Antoninus was analogous to the relationship in utero between Yaakov and Esav. Rivka was shown that the two nations that would descend from her would share one important trait.

Rebbi and Antoninus insisted on the presence of certain menu items at their table, regardless of the season. Out-of-season lettuce and radishes were served not because the hosts were gluttonous, or because they wished to flaunt their power and stature. These food items of distinction bore testimony to a self-image of proud importance. For all their differences, the progeny of Yaakov and Esav alike would conduct their lives in a manner appropriate to people of stature.

Menu items might seem irrelevant to self-image, but this is not so. Compare competing cultures. Some see nothing more in eating than filling their stomachs. They make no attempt to distinguish their eating from that of animals. Yaakov and Esav, however, elevate eating to dining. They are fastidious about their food, preparing it in a way that reflects the elevation that they ascribe to themselves.

A famous passage in Avodah Zarah[3] builds on these cultural differences. It depicts the scene that will take place at the end of time, as groups of people all lay claim to some Divine reward for their contribution to the unfolding of history. Edom (Esav) proclaims, "We built many markets! We

provided bathhouses!" The gemara strikes down their argument of entitlement. None of their accomplishments were meant to be shared by Hashem's people; they acted to pamper their flesh.

Such self-centeredness may seem narrow and small, but it is better in a sense than one of the alternatives. Yishmael did not build organized marketplaces, roads, and bathhouses, because he did not care about them. His progeny would be happy to live in tents, rather than the palatial dwellings of Roman patricians. Yishmael would not bother with elaborate homes or clothes or food. Esav may have warped the concept in practice, but he did have a better sense of the specialness of the human race.

When Rebbi was about to leave this world, he proclaimed that he had not materially benefited from this world in all his days^[4]. The rishonim ask how this could be? Do we not here learn that his table was stocked with dainties? Our approach resolves the problem. Rebbi surrounded himself with fine things, including fine food. Yet, his intention in all of this was to publicly affirm the importance of his office as Nasi, the titular head of his people. When lavish meals were offered up on his dining room table, Rebbi did not participate to satisfy his desire for nourishment. He took part to proclaim the importance of Man.

He could indeed say that, for all the lavishness of his lifestyle, he never took any delight in any of it in the usual manner. He lived the way he did to underscore the specialness of human beings.

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1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 25:23*
 2. *Avodah Zarah 11A*
 3. *Avodah Zarah 2B*
 4. *Kesubos 104B*
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