

# A ROLE OF HIS OWN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*When Yitzchok had become old...he summoned Esav and said to him, "...make me delicacies such as I love and bring it to me...so that my soul may bless you before I die."<sup>[1]</sup>*

What was Yitzchok thinking, in originally intending to give an elaborate *berachah* to Esav? Was he so out of touch that he did not recognize that Yaakov was so much more deserving? Also – if Esav attempted to win over his father through verbal cunning,<sup>[3]</sup> why would he pick tithing salt and straw to demonstrate how meticulous he was in his observance? Surely there are better and more conventional ways of demonstrating *frumkeit*!

It was never Yitzchok's intention to bless Esav alone, and not Yaakov. Nor did Yitzchok love Esav to the exclusion of his brother. (When the Torah states that Yitzchok loved Esav for keeping him supplied with fresh game,<sup>[4]</sup> it means in addition to Yaakov. This is why the Torah has to provide a reason for loving Esav. It doesn't do that for Yaakov, because everyone readily understands why his parents would love and cherish him.)

Yitzchok thought that he had produced two important archetypes in his two sons. Yaakov, he believed, was a preeminent Torah scholar who had no affinity for, and no contact with, the larger world. Esav, on the other hand, Yitzchok believed to be a model layperson. Wonderfully successful in negotiating the vicissitudes of life, Esav was also faithful to the faith and mission of his family, his father concluded.

Each of his sons should be encouraged and supported on his own journey. There was never any doubt that Yaakov would be the heir to the *berachah* of Avraham, as well as the Land he was promised. Esav, on the other hand, would use his acumen and success to sustain his brother in his more spiritual endeavors. Therefore, when Yitzchok guided and coached Esav, he doubled down on the mitzvah of *maaser* – giving a tenth of one's agricultural take to the *kohen* – the Torah teacher of ancient times. The mitzvah of *maaser* had Yitzchok's mission for Esav written all over it! With it, Yitzchok stressed the importance of using the significant means at Esav's disposal to bankroll his brother's spiritual endeavors. Esav picked his questions to his father well. There was no better virtue-signaling available to Esav than to appear extra-zealous about this mitzvah. Asking his father about taking *maaser* from salt was a brilliant tactic. It conveyed that he understood and accepted the role that his father envisioned for him.

One might argue that this approach is untenable. While we could imagine that Yitzchok believed Esav could be a suitable supporter of Yaakov, and play a role as a silent partner in Yaakov's spiritual pursuits, Yitzchok's *berachah* went far beyond that. It placed Esav in a superior position! "You will be a master to your brothers."<sup>[5]</sup>

Know that this is correct! Yosef did not object when his brothers prostrated themselves before him, although halacha requires that a younger brother honor his older siblings. This is the way it should be. Whoever provides support and sustenance to another should be treated and respected as a master! If Esav would have provided all his material support, Yaakov would have had to call him "my lord."

Having lost the role of provider to Yaakov, Esav stood horrified before his father! "Is there no other *berachah*? Can it be that the only ways of earning *olam habo* are by learning (in which I am not interested) or supporting learning (for which I am no longer needed)?"

Yitzchok responded that the future Jewish people would in fact chiefly require two kinds of people. *Talmidei chachamim*, leaders, *dayanim* – these would be required to oversee the spiritual life of the nation. They all belong to one category. Another group would be needed to provide support to those in the first category, so that they would not be preoccupied with earning a living, and would be free to devote themselves to the community. Together, the two groups would build an edifice of a nation.

Was there then nothing left for Esav to do, to achieve some merit of his own? Yitzchok indeed finds a role for him. At times, the first groups will not be able to accomplish their goals because of violent interference from others. There will be foreign armies, marauders, criminals who would wreak havoc upon the community. The third role that Yitzchok carves out is that of protector of the other two. Esav can find significance – and the gifts from Heaven that come with it – by stepping in to save and protect.

It seems strange that Yitzchok would punctuate his prophetic blessing with a strong pessimistic note: "You will serve your brother."<sup>[6]</sup> This service, however, is not a curse but the basis for the blessing! The only role remaining for Esav is that of service to his brother! In fact, if Yaakov becomes undeserving of that service, then Esav will escape Yaakov's dominion. As Onkelos paraphrases the continuation of the *pasuk*, "When the descendants will violate the laws of the Torah, you will cast off his yoke." In other words, if Klal Yisrael will undermine its national edifice by ignoring the Torah, there will be nothing worthy of protection. Esav will free himself, because his role will have disappeared. With that, however, he will have lost his opportunity for spiritual advancement as well.

1. Based on Meshivas Nafesh by R. Yochanan Luria, 15<sup>th</sup> century .
2. Bereishis 27:1,4 .
3. See Rashi, Bereishis 25:27 .

4. Bereishis 26:28
5. Bereishis 27:29
6. Bereishis 27:40