OUR BROTHER, EISAV

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Throughout the millennia, almost no single character has received such uniquely negative treatment as Eisav, the brother of Yaakov. Eisav, to a religious Jew, is the antithesis of everything holy and moralistic. Indeed, sefarim are replete with the metaphor that Eisav, in some sense, symbolizes the Yetzer Hara ("evil disposition") within every person.

In this vein, it is interesting to note that on numerous occasions in this week's sidrah, Eisav is referred to as, "your brother, Eisav." (32:4) "Then Yaakov sent angels ahead of him to Eisav, his brother..." (32:7) "The angels returned to Yaakov, saying, 'We came to your brother, to Eisav...'" And notably, Yaakov beseeches Hashem (32:12), "Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav, for I fear him... "

Evidently, Yaakov fears two different "Eisav's", one who is "Eisav," and one who is "my brother." What in fact are these two distinct aspects of Eisav?

There is no disputing that the Jew is unsurpassed as history's most prolific wanderer. Which section of the globe remains untouched by the Jew in exile? Which nation has not been affected by the presence of the Jew?

In his wanderings, the Jew has taken up residence in settings so numerous and diverse, that even to simply list the various countries which have played his host would prove a formidable task. In a more general sense, however, I think two distinct patterns, with one common thread, emerge. It has never been easy to remain a religious, devout Jew. Each societal backdrop has presented its own set of problems which have tested the Jew's commitment to his faith and to his G-d. From the Inquisition in Spain, to the pogroms of Eastern Europe, to the assimilation of Germany, life in exile has never been supportive of the Jew who desired to remain steadfast to his religion. This is the common thread.

The two distinct patterns relate to the way in which the Jew's faith was tested. At times, indeed probably most of the time, the Jew was hated and ostracized for being different. Beatings, death, and martyrdom are not uncommon themes in our history. No doubt, such treatment tests the fabric of the Jew's soul.

At other times, however, the Jew's faith has been tested and pressured not by sticks and stones, but by outstretched arms, saying, "Come - be like one of us." Perhaps, in its subtlety, this is indeed the more dangerous of the two tests. History bears out that while the nations of the earth made little headway trying to beat the Jew into submission, their ploy of enticing him to come and join them,

and do as they do, has met with noted success. What Poland and Lithuania never managed to accomplish with oppression - that is to break the Jew's steadfast adherence to his religion and the Torah - North America has accomplished quite admirably, without even (consciously) trying to do so. Some (treifah) Chinese food and a pair of tickets to the baseball game (on Shabbos) can become seductive enticements which slowly, subtly, undermine a Jew's commitment to his faith. Many a Jew has fallen by the wayside, lured by the "success" seemingly offered by Western materialism to those who embrace its doctrine.

It would be naive to think that only the borderline Jew, who grapples with the very foundation of his religion, is affected by assimilation. This "test" is present at every level of Judaism. The war is waged on every front - it's just a matter of how far the "enemy" has already infiltrated. True, the ultra-orthodox Jew is not usually in danger of throwing away his commitment to Torah Judaism, not even for the riches of Rockafeller, but still he must battle. Is his Shabbos table reminiscent of the "tisch" of his great-grandparents, replete with divrei Torah and zemiros and steeped in holiness? Or has his Shabbos in some way begun to resemble the "sabbath" of his neighbours, a day of R & R (rest and relaxation)? How important are money, and its perks, to him? How far would he stray from the Torah to enjoy financial success? Is it worth a lashon hara or two? What has the word "vacation" come to mean to the North American Jew? What connotations does it have? Did such a concept exist a hundred, or even fifty years ago?

These, and many, many others, are issues with which we all must grapple on a daily basis: How far do I allow my brother, Eisav, into my life?

Our forefather Yaakov prayed for all of us, "Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav, for I fear him... " Sometimes the yetzer hara appears to us as Eisav, standing ready with sticks and stones to beat us into submission. In our generation, he has made his mark by playing the role of kindly "older-brother," more than willing to teach the fledgling Yaakov the tricks of his trade. Let us be wary of his sly antics.

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