

Toldot 5781  
On Being Yaacov and Esav  
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This week, we brought in the new month of Kislev. At the end of the month, we will celebrate Hanukkah. Hanukkah is both a festival of lights and a time of rededication to our unique purposes and paths in this world.

Our *parashah* this week, Toldot, brings us the famous Yaacov and Esav conflict. Ya'acov, the spiritual one, is destined to receive his father's blessing of progeny and become Israel, the father of the Twelve Tribes of our People. As I explored our *parashah* over the past week, I kept trying to develop a muse about how we seek and discover our purpose in life, since unlike Yaacov, we don't have a Rivka to orchestrate our futures.

Yaacov is the brother whose spiritual purpose concerns our Torah, so I tried to identify with him this week. He's the good one, after all, right? But the truth is, I often felt more like Esau this week. Now, you know I daven and engage in Torah every day, so it's not like I chucked the spiritual aspect of myself, but something else was pulling me. I yearned to go out, cavort with the locals, sit in a coffee shop, enjoy a beer at a proper bar. I wanted to be vibrant and ruddy, not quarantined and pasty at home. I wanted to hug people I care about, to officiate in person, to plan for happy events. I did not want to talk through masks, plexiglass, and face shields to a health worker giving me a Covid test. Esau seemed to have a much better time. He didn't worry. I'm weary of worrying. It's not that I want to act immorally or abrogate my responsibility to preserve life, but I long for the ease of pre-pandemic, flesh-and-blood life.

Happily, I found a teaching by Jerusalem teacher Yiscah Smith, who helped me to make peace with my internal, Yaacov versus Esav struggle from the perspective of *Hasidut*. I give her credit for teaching me the sources I will share with you.

Here's the big idea: Like Rivka, we all carry Yaacov and Esav inside of us. Now, I will share some of our great rabbis and scholars think that works.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe (d. 1812) posits that each person possesses two souls, a "Divine soul" and a "vitalizing animal soul." The Divine soul is the Yaacov within us, and the animal soul is the Esav. The two souls constantly wrestle for control of our thoughts, speech, and behavior (*Tanya*, Chapter 9). Rabbi Adin Steinsalz (in *Opening the Tanya*, 2003), comments on the *Tanya*: Every person

senses that, like Rivka, there are two children struggling within them. The Esav in us wants to survive in this world. The Yaacov in us calls us beyond our own survival, toward ultimate meaning and purpose. Neither is good or bad. Both are Divine energies and both need our attention and our protection. Rather than try to subdue one or the other, we can accept them both.

Rav Kook also teaches about synergizing our inner Yaacov and our inner Esav. He believes that every person is part of the natural forces of the physical world, and part of the natural forces of the spiritual world as well (Sh'monah K'vatzim, file 4:28). According to Rav Kook, it's not that we have competing souls within us, but that our spiritual and our animal selves are part of all that is. Both aspects of our existence not only are Divinely given, but actually are part of the Divine energetic flow. We cannot thrive without both our earthly and our spiritual inclinations.

The Piaseczna Rebbe, also known as the Aish Kodesh, teaches, similarly, that our sensory existence lives in tension with our ability to see the Divine Presence in the physical world. But he sees a relationship. We are to use our senses as conduits for spiritual awareness (*B'nei Machshava Tovah*, Introduction). Others have written on this phenomenon, and I'm sure we've all experienced it as awe, or a moment of transcendence, when out in nature, hearing beautiful music, gazing at art, touching and being touched by a person or a pet, or eating a perfect hot fudge sundae on a brilliant, sunny day with just the right breeze. We can cultivate what the contemporary scholar Michael Fishbane calls it Sacred Attunement. When we do, we become more attuned to our own purpose in life, as part of a greater whole. This conception favors the Yaacov self over the Esav self, consistent with the plain text of our Biblical narrative. In summary, the Piaseczna believes that we can leverage our this-worldly experiences as invitations to Divine encounter, which then helps us direct our choices in the proper direction.

We have touched on three different, but related ways to conceptualize how aspects of both Yaacov and Esav dwell within each of us. The important question, is how it may help us to accept that idea about our duality.

Perhaps we can become more aware of which one has been doing most of the talking lately, and consider whether we might do better if we gave the other a little more breathing room. Maybe we've gotten so caught up in the day to day that we've lost sight of why we chose to do the work and activities we do and to be in relationship with those with whom we interact, that we need to let our inner Yaacov re-energize or inspire us. Perhaps we need to find creative ways to take care of our inner Esav and judge him less harshly for wanting what he wants and for becoming frustrated and irritable when

we know that we are lucky compared to the thousands who are sick and dying. And maybe we'll view others with more compassion, if we can imagine that they are doing the best they can and may struggle, as we all do, to find the most productive balance.

Kislev, the darkest month outside, shines with more light than any other month. We make it so by celebrating Hanukkah. Our Festival of Lights--*hag urim*--helps us to rekindle our inner flames and rededicate ourselves to constructing lives of meaning. For eight nights, we light up our homes, and we place the *hanukkiyah* by a window, thus sharing the glow and proclaiming the miracle of survival. Lighting the Hanukkah candles, we merge Esav's will to make it in this world with Yaacov's faith that we are part of something larger than ourselves. We thrive in the synergy. May this Shabbat help us to honor and cherish the totality of our being and thank the Source of Life for creating us as we are.