

Shabbat Parashat Toldot
Esau's Tears

This week's *parasha* is our clearest biblical episode of sibling rivalry and parental favoritism. Rebecca gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Esau is the firstborn who grows up to be a man of the earth, a hunter and gatherer, hairy and primitive. The Torah teaches that he is loved (i.e. preferred) by his father Isaac. Jacob is born immediately after Esau, his hand grasping on to his older brother's heel. He is more of a homebody, preferred by his mother Rebecca. The result of these opposing parental loyalties is the ruse that has an elderly, blind, and infirm Isaac being tricked into giving his younger son Jacob the blessing that he had intended for his beloved firstborn son Esau. There are so many questions that we can ask of this text and of its characters, who have been held up as heroes and role models for the many generations of future Israelites and Jews during the past four thousand years. Most often, these questions are asked about Isaac (Did he really know what was going on?), Rebecca (How could she be so conniving against her own flesh and blood child?), and Jacob (Why did he just go along with the plot and not question his mother? Why was he chosen as the patriarch of the twelve tribes with this deceitful act on his record?). However, Esau is a figure who has been painted as an evil enemy throughout Jewish history and, therefore, much maligned and ignored as one of our ancestors. He deserves to be brought out of the shadows of rabbinic vilification and used as a model from whom we can learn as well.

The Torah teaches that Esau, also known as Edom due to his reddish skin tone, is the progenitor of the Edomite people. In order fully to understand why Esau received the treatment he did by our tradition, his genealogy is of critical importance. The nations that surrounded the Israelites in the biblical period were all seen as enemies. However, Edom stood out above them all because it lasted as a power for a lengthy period of time and evolved into what we now know to be the Roman Empire. In the rabbinic period, there was no greater enemy to the Jewish people than the Romans, the destroyers of the Second Temple, oppressors of the Jewish people, and proselytizers of significant numbers of Jews by force or by choice to Christianity. As the ancestral father of the Roman Empire, then, Esau received oppressive treatment by the Rabbis of our *midrashic* tradition. However, when one reads the biblical text without the traditional rabbinic spin, one discovers a sympathetic victim who is sitting and sobbing before his father after he has learned that he can not receive the blessing promised to him, crying out to him,

“Have you not saved a blessing for me?!?”

My heart wrenches each and every time I come across this painful verse. It makes me think about all the times in this world when a victim is punished just for being the victim, made to feel guilty – either inside themselves or by others – for deeds done to them. It reminds me of the fact that victims often become anonymous and forgotten, while the perpetrators of hurtful acts get all the attention. In this story, Esau should be the one to whom we pay attention. He has been horribly wronged, supplanted by a seemingly unloving mother and treacherous younger twin brother. Yet, we give him no comfort and Jacob becomes the focus of our genealogy and story. Esau disappears into the genealogical abyss, recalled only with hate for being the father of an “Evil Empire.” In this new age, let us all be awakened to the cries of victims, not allowing them to be silenced by the boisterous attention paid to those who have done the wrong. They need and deserve our love and comfort in order to overcome their pain. It is when we act selflessly in this fashion that we become a true community.