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Esau, The Wicked Good Son

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At a critical moment in Parashat Toledot, Rebecca learns of Isaac's plan to pass God's blessing onto Esau. While Esau is out hunting food for his father, Rebecca and Jacob act quickly, disguising Jacob in Esau's garments to fool Isaac, who can no longer see. And so, Jacob receives the blessing in Esau's stead.

The first moment of this ruse particularly captured my childhood imagination. Since Esau is a hunter, I imagined that the clothes in which Rebecca dressed Jacob were bloody and dirty, smelling of the hunt, deceiving Isaac's senses of both touch and smell. But the fifth-century midrash Genesis Rabbah focuses on an important detail in Genesis 27:15: they are Esau's finest garments (*hamudot*). From this, Genesis Rabbah learns that Esau did not hunt in these clothes; he saved them only for serving his father. As observed by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the second-century patriarch: "All my days, I would serve my father, and I did not serve him one one-hundredth of how Esau served his father" (Gen. Rabbah 65:16).

From the earliest layers of rabbinic literature, two things seem to be true about Esau. First, he is defined by the rabbis as violent and wicked. Second, he is the exemplar for fulfilling the fifth commandment: honoring one's parents. What do we do with this contradiction?

That Esau is violent is explicit in the biblical text. In the lesser blessing he finally does receive from his father, Esau is told, "by your sword shall you live," (Gen. 27:40). In the next verse, Esau has the understandable urge to kill his brother after he has been cheated by him, although he insists he will not do so while his father is alive (Gen. 27:41). In contrast, Esau's consistent wickedness is less obvious in the Torah text, especially when compared to his wily younger brother. And yet, the adjective follows him. He is known in rabbinic literature as Esau the Wicked, perhaps understood as such because of his association with Rome, the Wicked Kingdom that caused so much destruction to the Jewish people. And so, a nuanced biblical portrayal is neatly flattened into a caricature of wickedness.

However, the rabbis cannot ignore Esau's commitment to honoring his father, which is evident throughout the biblical text. Returning to Esau's fine garments, Shimon ben Gamliel elaborates:

> *When I would serve my father, I served him in dirty garments, but when I would go out to the market, I would go out in clean garments.*
>
> *But Esau, when he would serve his father, he would serve him in royal garments. He said: 'Only royal garments befit my father's honor.'* (Gen. Rabbah 65:16)

What Shimon ben Gamliel identifies here is the way in which we tend to take loved ones for granted. When I come to class to teach my students, I wear slacks and a pressed shirt. When I go home to visit my parents, I wear jeans and a t-shirt. Familiarity leads to laxity. But not so for Esau, who reserved his best duds for when he was feeding his father a meal, which is why they were available to his younger brother while he was out on the hunt.

And Esau's attentiveness to his father goes beyond clothing and service. Even when not given explicit instruction, he notes and anticipates his father's preferences, acting upon them. As Toledot ends:

> *When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there … Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had…* (Gen. 28:6–9)

According to the rabbis, Esau's diligent performance of the fifth commandment earns significant rewards for his descendants. The Edomites are spared a war with Israel and allowed to keep the land they have inherited from their forefather, Esau (Deut. Rabbah 1:15). And Rome, which the rabbis associate with Esau, is so successful as an imperial power because of Esau's reverence for his father. As it says in an early midrash:

> *Esau, who had in hand only one commandment, that he honored his father, and kings and lords would run to cling to him…* (Sifre Deuteronomy 336)

This admiration for Esau from our Sages is all the more striking because they understand him to be especially wicked. In the fifth-century midrash, Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana (3:1), the midrashist ironically tracks the ways in which Esau's wickedness harmed his parents. We find that Isaac's loss of sight was a gift to protect him from seeing how wicked his favorite son had become, opening the door for the ruse that ruptures the family. And because of Esau, Rebecca was buried in secret. Her burial is not mentioned in the Torah, and our Sages understand this to mean she was buried in the dead of night. Why? Because the only person who remained after Jacob's departure who could have led the funeral procession was Esau. But if Esau the wicked led the funeral procession, then passersby would curse Rebecca for having raised such an evil man.

I am struck by an underlying assumption of this midrash: that despite the explicitly contentious relationship between Rebecca and Esau in the Torah, Esau would have insisted on serving his mother even in her death. And not only that, but that the only way to prevent him from performing that mitzvah was to hold her burial in secret, without including him. In this understanding, Esau saw his obligation to his mother as relational, rather than transactional. Even if she had deprived him of his blessing, he still owed her honor.

There is a tragic and telling irony in associating a paradigmatic bad guy with such an important mitzvah. In the rabbinic telling, Esau's honoring of his parents cannot be disentangled from his wickedness. He is unable to bury his mother for fear of what his wickedness will elicit. Even his virtue works against him: the royal clothing that he uses to honor his father leaves him vulnerable to the ruse that dispossesses him of his blessing. And yet, the rabbis not only make space for the good he does, they valorize it. He is Esau the Wicked and Esau the Very Good Son—not one or the other but always both.

In the tension between these two contradictory images, the rabbis move beyond caricature to the character of the individual underneath and the relationships that matter to him. They invite us to see an individual who is more than his worst deeds, while also showing us how he is trapped by them. In a media landscape that urges us to flatten others, to see them only in one dimension, Esau the Wicked Good Son might remind us to find the humility to look for other dimensions and to see where opposition might live in tension with admiration, allowing us each to hold the other's complexity just a little more fully than we did before.

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