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JEWISH
CONTINUITY

Toldos: Trading Places

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“Now Jacob cooked a pottage, and Esau came from the field, and he was faint. And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Pour into [me] some of this red, red [pottage], for I am faint’; he was therefore named Edom.” (Genesis 25:29-30)

Esav returned from a long day of hunting and found his brother Yaakov preparing lentils. He was overwhelmed by hunger and agreed to sell his birthright for a bowl of “pottage.” This episode is apparently so important and pivotal that it solidified Esav’s identity. *“Al keyn kara shemo Edom* (he Esav was therefore named Edom)” and therefore, his offspring become known as *Edom* (red) as well. How are we to understand this? Why is Esav’s identity forged by this episode? What is the significance of these lentils?

The *Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 63:13)* explains that mourners would customarily consume lentils as part of their meal during the mourning period. Rashi elaborates and explains that the roundness of the lentil represents the cycle of life, of which death is a part. Avraham had passed away. Yaakov was preparing the mourner’s meal of lentils for his father, Yitzchak. The Midrash relates that when Esav came home and saw Yaakov cooking lentils, he asked Yaakov, “What is the meaning of this food (i.e. why are you cooking this particular item)?” He (Yaakov) responded, ‘The Elder (Avraham) has died.’ He (Esav) responded, ‘If strict justice has been visited upon the Elder, there is no justice, there is no judge.’”

It appears from this Midrash that Esav was outraged over Avraham’s death. Esav felt that Avraham’s righteousness and dedication to God should have allowed him to escape this final decree.

The *Beis HaLevi* (Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, 1820-1892) finds this Midrash difficult. Did Esav expect that his grandfather would live forever? Avraham was 175 years old and had led a good, meaningful and full life. How are we to understand Esav’s indignation over Avraham’s death?

The *Beis HaLevi* explains that Avraham had passed down many important ideas and ideals to his family. He shared with them his vision for spreading monotheism, love of God and respect for the other. He explained that God’s blessing would accompany them throughout life and their small family would blossom into a great and magnificent nation. But it would not be all blessing, bliss and happiness. Avraham shared with them the difficulties and turbulent times that his children and descendants would have to face and endure. He explained that God had told him how his descendants would be “strangers in a strange land and they will be worked and afflicted for four hundred years.” Avraham knew (and shared with his children) that the years ahead would be filled with much grief and challenge. Esav understood that as the first born, he stood to inherit the Abrahamitic mantle. With this mantle would come all the blessings, but he and his descendants would have to shoulder all the challenges as well. Esav did not want this burden, Esav did not want this responsibility, Esav did not want this destiny. But he couldn’t just say, “I’m not interested” as that would look cowardly and show a lack of commitment. Instead, he used Avraham’s death as a pretext to claim that there is no order or justice in this universe and therefore, he wanted no part of this tradition. Esav was willing to part with his birthright for a bowl of lentils, not out of a love for lentils or because he was famished. He was willing to give up his destiny for a bowl of lentils because he was looking for an out; he was looking for some way to escape responsibility. The death of Avraham and the bowl of lentils gave him his excuse to throw off the yoke of destiny and free himself of Abrahamitic responsibility.

Esav is known as *Edom*, after the redness of the lentils for which he sold his destiny. This was his fundamental flaw – he created a fictional reality that would allow him to escape responsibility.

It is normal to be overwhelmed and sometimes even frightened when taking on new responsibilities. There are times when we know what we want to do, we know what we want to be, but when we see all the work and effort it entails, when we see the potential for failure, we want to run the other way. All too often, we run from our



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destiny, we avoid taking responsibility and in order to justify these decisions we create alternate realities for ourselves. We tell ourselves that certain accomplishments are beyond reach, because this exempts us from trying. We tell ourselves that we cannot change, because then we feel no pressure to become more. We convince ourselves that the aspirations, goals and dreams we once held so dear aren't really that beautiful and noble. We give up beautiful life opportunities for mere bowls of lentils. Many of us consume the lentils of life excuses at regular intervals. The lentils may fill your stomach, but they leave your soul empty and wanting.

We have an awesome responsibility as individuals and as a people to accomplish great things. Our futures are a combination of beautiful blessings and incredible challenges. If we retreat because of the challenges, we will never experience the blessing. We must remember that we are the descendants of Yaakov. We embrace the holiness, destiny and opportunities that others so quickly discard.