

## THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION

### III

#### Lessons from Jacob and Esau

ויגדלו הנערים ויהי עשו איש ידע ציד איש שדה ויעקב איש חם יושב אהלים  
When the lads grew up, Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, and Jacob was a single-minded man, living in tents. (Genesis 25, 27)

ויגדלו הנערים—ר' לוי אמר משל להדס ועצבונית שהיו גדלים זה על גב זה וכיון שהגדילו הפריחו זה ריחו וזה חוהיו. כך כל י"ג שנה שניהם הולכים לבית הספר ולאחר י"ג שנה זה הולך לבתי מדרשות וזה הולך לבתי ע"ז (בראשית רבה פ' ס"ג)

Rabbi Levi said: They may be compared to a myrtle and a thistle that grew up intertwined. Only when they were fully grown did the one spread its fragrance while the other bared its thorns. So it was with Jacob and Esau. As long as they were children they went to the same school, but once they were grown the one moved into the house of study and the other into the house of idolatry.

If anything should draw our attention to the importance of the right education, it surely must be the history of the families whom Divine Providence chose to help determine the development of man-

kind in general and of the Jewish people in particular. Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau—these three pairs of brothers were each products of the same home and raised under the same influences. Jacob and Esau were, in fact, twins, carried together in the same womb and born at the same time. Each of these three pairs of brothers was nurtured with the same care and attention. And yet, in each case the two brothers grew up to be completely different from one another. In each instance we see that only one of the brothers followed the godly pursuits to which their home had been dedicated, while the other was utterly lost to them. Should these family histories not give us pause and spur us on to do everything within our power to raise our own children that not only the one or the other, but all of them should grow to follow their God-ordained spiritual and moral calling? Should we not make a careful study of these family histories so that, if possible, we may discover why the educational methods applied by fathers of the stature of Abraham and Isaac failed, so that we may learn the pitfalls that must pose an even greater threat to the educational efforts of ordinary people like ourselves? For surely, in every other respect, the influence of education cannot have been more successful anywhere else than it was at the home of Abraham and Sarah. Truly, in order to understand the power with which the Father of all mankind endowed parental education, and the results He expects from the influence of the proper upbringing, we need only, as the Prophet Isaiah puts it, “look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the pickhammer with which you were chiseled; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who should give birth to us all” (Isaiah 51, 1–2).

In the midst of a world addicted to idolatry and immorality, God wished to create a nation that would serve Him alone and walk only in His ways. For this purpose it was sufficient for Him to choose only one couple, namely, Abraham and Sarah, who would bear a child only in their extreme old age. All that was required for this plan was one son, whom Abraham and Sarah were to raise so that even in a world given to the most revolting forms of idolatry, that son would uphold the moral calling of the nation of God. For, as He expressly declared, God entrusted all of mankind’s future, all His plans for the salvation of humanity, to a nation of God that was to originate from one single home. He had chosen Abraham for this purpose only **למען אשר יצוה אה** “so that his children and **בניו ואה ביתו אחריו ושמו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט**

his house, even after he himself had long departed from this world, would be committed to keep the way of God, to practice dutiful benevolence and justice." Only through the influence of an education in the spirit of Abraham, which was to continue over all the ages to come, were the descendants of Abraham to become "a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed" ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום ונברכו בו כל גויי הארץ (Genesis 18, 18–19). And indeed, the impact of this Abrahamite education has proven its worth even through the harsh ordeals that have beset our people over so many centuries. The spiritual and moral character of the family begun by Abraham has endured every test, first in the crucible of Egyptian slavery and then through ages of exile and dispersion down to our present day. Through all these trials, and under a thousand conflicting pressures, it was the direction set by the tradition of Abraham and Sarah that has kept until today the descendants of Abraham—in varying degrees, to be sure, but basically—aware of his unique identity and true to the spiritual and moral character of the seed of Abraham.

And yet Abraham had to give up his son Ishmael and could keep only Isaac true to this vocation and this direction.

But then we must remember that Ishmael was the son of Abraham, not of Sarah. His mother was Hagar, an Egyptian slave. As a consequence, while Ishmael inherited that spirit of Abraham which enabled his descendants, the Ishmaelites, to develop and disseminate the lofty concept of monotheism, they lacked the temperament of Sarah, which would have made it possible for them to disseminate also the ideals of morality and lawfulness in daily life. Instead, the Ishmaelites inherited Hagar's strong tribal urge for freedom, which led them to adopt a nomadic way of life, free of all restraints.

Already in the case of the very first pair of brothers, with such contrasting personalities as those of Cain and Abel, their mother's expression קניתי איש את ה' (Genesis 4, 1) gives us a hint of the damage that can be done to a child's character by the influence of a mother who, in an excess of maternal triumph, fails to consider her son as a gift of God. Instead of considering him as the supreme blessing that should make her aware of the awesome *responsibilities* of motherhood, she sees him only as a symbol of her personal prowess, as a possession she purchased by her own devotion and self-sacrifice. We would suggest that

this unwarranted feeling of self-approbation, with which the first mother in the history of mankind carried and bore her first-born son, is at the very root of the character of קין (from קין-property, hence קונה-to acquire, and קנאה-to want to acquire). Her feeling caused Cain to forget that, even in her pride of personal ownership, his mother had noted קניתי איש את ה' "with God." As a result, Cain grew up as a man who looked at all other men with selfish envy and considered himself personally wronged if he was ever denied anything he wanted.

But what are we to make of Jacob and Esau? Their story is much more difficult to explain than that of either Cain and Abel or Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob and Esau were twins; they had not only the same father but also the same mother. They were carried together in the same womb and born at the same hour, reared and nurtured in the same home by the same parents. And yet the two grew up to become so unlike one another that even their remote descendants were separated by a gap that could never be bridged. But here, too, the Word of God seems to give us hints that would help explain the striking contrast between these two brothers.

“When the lads grew up,” the Biblical narrative reads, “Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, and Jacob was a single-minded man in his quest for moral perfection, living in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because hunting was in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob” (Genesis 25, 27–28). These two verses contain a lesson that warrants our closest attention.

ויגדלו הנערים—Our Sages interpret these words as follows: Only after the lads had grown up did Esau become a hunter and a man of the field while Jacob became a man bent on spiritual development and inner perfection. כל זמן שהיו קטנים לא היו ניכרים במעשיהם ואין אדם מדקדק בהם מה טיבם. כיון שנעשו בני י"ג שנה זה פירש לבתי מדרשות וזה פירש לע"ז (רש"י שם) “While they were lads, the differences in their behavior were not recognized. No one paid any attention to the differences in their tendencies. Then, when they reached the age of thirteen, the one devoted himself to the house of study and the other to idolatry.” משל להדם ועצבונית שהיו גדלים זה על גב זה וכיון שהגדילו הפריחו זה ריחו וזה חוהיו. כך כל י"ג שנה שניהם הולכים לבית הספר ולאחר י"ג שנה זה הולך לבתי מדרשות וזה הולך לבתי ע"ז (ב"ר פ' ס"ג) “They may be compared to a myrtle and a thistle that grew up intertwined. Only when they were fully grown did the one spread its fragrance while the other bared its thorns. So it was with Jacob and Esau.

As long as they were children they went to the same school, but once they were grown the one moved into the house of study and the other into the house of idolatry.”

We see, then, how our Sages interpret the implications of the Torah's words. They tell us that Jacob and Esau alike could have been preserved for their Divinely-ordained destiny as descendants of Abraham *if their parents would have noticed the difference between them at an early age. They could then have reared and educated both lads for the same goal by following a different approach in each case, taking into account the fact that these two brothers were basically different from one another.* Because, unfortunately, an identical approach was followed in the rearing and education of these two boys, even though they were two totally different personalities, Jacob and Esau in manhood developed attitudes toward life that were fundamentally opposed to one another. *Had a different approach been adopted, with due consideration for the differences between them, the two contrasting personalities could both have been trained to develop the same loyalty to one and the same goal.* But this is not what happened. As long as Jacob and Esau were lads, they were treated as twins. It did not occur to anyone that, even though they were twins, Jacob and Esau might be completely different from one another in their inborn character traits. Both were sent to the same school, both received the same instruction, both were given the same course of studies to pursue. They were educated as if both of them possessed the same abilities and personalities. But, in fact, these two brothers were simply not suited for the same studies. In view of the basic differences in their skills and inclinations, they should not have been expected to engage in the same activities or held to the same requirements. When Jacob was still a lad, there was already latent within him the **איש תם**, the man who would strive after spiritual and moral perfection. It was therefore only natural that he should have appreciated the Abrahamite heritage, the quest for knowledge and moral self-refinement, translated into practical reality within the peace and happiness of the home and the family: **יושב אהלים**. Hence the spiritual legacy of Abraham occupied Jacob's thoughts and emotions from a very early age and inspired him to work toward its fulfillment within the structure of all the families of man: **\*יעקב קראו בית**.

\* Referring to the site of the future Temple, the Talmud (פסחים פח.) comments: לא כאברהם שכחוב בו הר ולא כיצחק שכחוב בו שדה אלא כיעקב שקראו בית (Ed.)

By contrast, Esau, already in early boyhood, was driven by the latent impulses of the *ידוע ציד*, the *איש שדה*, the future hunter who delighted in challenging the forces of nature, in confronting the perils and hazards of life, and in using his physical and mental skills to overcome anything or anyone that stood in his way. He had neither the taste nor the talent for making conquests in the realm of knowledge or in the quest for moral self-refinement; he had no appreciation for the joys or the problems of domestic life.

Unfortunately, the manner in which he was educated could only fill him with loathing for the Abrahamite tradition. He grew up under the impression that the acceptance and practical observance of the Abrahamite way of life required a completely one-sided existence centered around study and the duties of domestic life—all things that were completely foreign to his personality. Such a one-sided view, which made the lad Esau believe that the Abrahamite tradition could be carried on only within the narrow confines of the intellect, the spirit and the home, could only make Esau decide, when he was still a boy, that he was not suited for the Abrahamite heritage. Conversely, the Abrahamite way of life had nothing to offer to someone like himself. The type of education he received could have only one effect: to make him yearn for the moment when he would be free to escape from the confines of the Abrahamite house of study, rush out into the freedom of the hunter's life and, along with the bonds of the house of study, also break for all time his bond with the covenant of Abraham which, he thought, was meant for a different sort of person than himself.

A more thoughtful approach by parents of an Esau might have pondered how a person such as the young Esau could learn to appreciate the significance of the covenant of Abraham, what tasks the covenant of Abraham might have in store for men of such talents and tendencies as his own, and how such traits as physical and mental agility could be employed in the service of that covenant. Had this been done, even an Esau type could have come to understand that his particular skills and talents could play an important role in the attainment of the goals set by the covenant of Abraham. Esau could then have been helped to develop his talents for these Divinely-set goals, his particular traits could have been refined and ennobled as they worked for the covenant. As a result, even an Esau could have been

won and inspired for the great work of the Abrahamite covenant among men, and he could have been saved from moral ruin. But, as we know, the one-sided education given to Esau bore bitter fruit.

The tasks set by the Abrahamite covenant for its adherents are as complex and variegated as life itself; they require the talents of every nuance in the multicolored spectrum of individual personalities and abilities. The basic task is the same for everyone, but it can be accomplished by each individual in the context of his own strengths and abilities and of his own particular station in life. Any strength and ability that is utilized in the service of the universally binding Will of God has equal standing in the great household of God's Kingdom on earth. For the establishment of that Kingdom requires Jewish farmers and artisans no less than Jewish scholars and sages, Jewish merchants and soldiers no less than Jewish priests and teachers. The Will of God can and must be done in field and forest, on the sea, in hovels and palaces, in workshops and at offices, in lecture halls and classrooms, in courtrooms and factories, in council chambers and at stock exchanges—everywhere and at all times with the same loyalty and devotion for the realization of God's Kingdom on earth.

When Jacob lay dying, surrounded by his sons, the ancestors of the tribes of the future nation of Abraham, he saw them all standing together around his bedside, including: Levi, driven by the rash impulse to avenge the honor of his brothers, side by side with Judah, brave and courageous like a lion; Zevulun, who looked out upon a sea studded with the sails of his merchant fleet, side by side with Issachar, who devoted all his energies to the pursuit of activities closer to home; Dan and Gad, skillful and adept in the arts of war, side by side with Asher and Naphtali, who could make the soil bear abundant fruit; and finally Joseph, in all the splendor of his unique moral qualities. Each was so different from the other, and yet **כל אלה שבטי ישראל שנים עשר חזא** **אשר דבר להם אביהם ויברך אותם, איש אשר כבדו בך אתם** (Genesis 49, 28). They were all equal in rank as the forebears of the tribes of Israel, and their father bestowed on each one of them the blessing most appropriate to his individuality. "But you must not think," our Sages tell us, "that because he assigned to Judah the strength of a lion, to Benjamin the ferocity of a wolf or to Naphtali the swiftness of a gazelle, Jacob did not give them all an equal share in his blessing. For this reason it is

written ברך אותם, he blessed them each separately according to their individual personalities, but each of these separate blessings was a blessing intended to benefit all of them together" (תחומא פ' רח"ט ט"ז).

Down to our present day we have been able to observe the disastrous consequences of a one-sided approach to the unique task of being a Jew. Many a son of a pious *talmid chacham* has been totally lost to Judaism because his father insisted on training him to become a *talmid chacham* without considering whether his personality and inclinations truly lay in that direction. Thus he is exposed to Jewish life in only one context: that of a quiet existence of study and meditation for which he has neither talent nor desire. What attracts him instead is the busy, colorful life of the world outside. But as a result of the narrow view of life in which he has been trained he gets the impression that in order to participate in the active, variegated life for which he yearns, he must give up his mission as a Jew. He consequently abandons his Judaism in order to fling himself into the maelstrom of excitement and temptations offered by the world outside.

The story of such an individual might end quite differently if only, instead of forcing him into the mold of a *talmid chacham*, his father would raise him from the very beginning to become a man of the world who, at the same time, is faithful to his duties as a Jew; if only that father would teach this son that the activities of the world outside, too, have their place in God's plan, that it is possible to preserve and to demonstrate one's complete loyalty to Judaism even as a sophisticated man of the world. He should make his son understand that, as a matter of fact, many, if not perhaps the most important, aspects of Jewish living are intended primarily to be practiced amidst the conditions and aspirations of everyday life, in the midst of the world and not in isolation from it. He should make his son understand that the *חרי"ג מצוה* are not meant to be observed in the *klaus*\* or in the *beth hamidrash* but precisely in the practical life of the farmer or the public-spirited citizen. If only that father would make it clear to his son that the spirit and the happiness of Judaism are just as accessible to a Zevulun "in the world outside" as they are to an Issachar "in the tents,"—שמה זבולון— who knows whether that son might not stand by

\* Judeo-German equivalent for a small synagogue. (Ed.)



his father's deathbed and gently close his father's eyes as a loyal, pious Jew?

It is quite true, of course, that הקול קול יעקב והידים ידי עשו, by virtue of its very nature and purpose, Judaism was not intended to conquer the world by the sword or some other physical or material weapon. The task of Judaism is to bring about the moral rebirth of mankind by planting and scattering the seeds of the only true conception of the world and of the meaning of life. It is true that the acquisition and maintenance of this attitude requires, above all, לימוד התורה. The study of the Torah is a task that must be performed by every son of the Jewish covenant as long as he lives. Judaism would fail in its mission if, instead of leading all its sons to the wellsprings of the Jewish spirit and teaching all of them to drink of the refreshing waters of the Torah on their own, it would permit the "study" of Torah to become the private preserve of an exclusive caste of scholars. And that is why every son of the house of Jacob should be led to the Book of Judaism's covenant with God; the Book of the Law of God must not remain a ספר חתום to any Jew.

However, the spirit of the Jewish Law of God is not one of mere theory and speculation; the object of the spiritual activity of Torah study is nothing less than practical life in all its many varied aspects. The sole purpose of the knowledge of Torah is that it should mold every phase of practical life, גדול לימוד שמביא לידי מעשה, (קידושין מ:).

The success of קול יעקב is measured by the extent to which it is able to overcome and control the ידי עשו, the extent to which it can guide that hand to serve God.

In view of all the foregoing, we see that the training of farmers, merchants, artisans, artists, jurists and physicians who are truly Jewish in attitude and practice is just as great a *mitzvah* as the training of Jewish *talmidei chachamim*. And that is why parents should give careful consideration to the talents and inclinations of their sons at an early age to see for what vocation they are best suited. They should teach their sons that all the infinite variety of occupations and professions in this world can be utilized to accomplish the task that all Jews have in common.

Consider what might have been, what a different course the development of our nation toward the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth might have taken, if only the family of Abraham could have won

the "hand of Esau" to serve God side by side with the "voice of Jacob." Consider what might have been if, from the very beginning, not only the weak but also the strong could have been taught to bow down before God and to regard it as their crowning glory to serve God, each according to his own abilities. If this had been the case, who knows whether it would ever have been true, to this very day, that **יאה** (**עניותא לישראל (חגיגה ט)**) "poverty is conducive to the spiritual welfare of the Jew." Who knows whether every era of power and splendor, of greatness and freedom, would have deflected us from our Divinely-set goal as it still does so often today? Who knows whether affluence would have led us inevitably to apostasy so that the sword of Esau has had to strike us time and time again in order to restore Jacob to his "voice" and to teach him, through the impact of harsh trials, to appreciate the power of his spiritual destiny which he had forgotten and disdained in times of prosperity? Who really knows? Who could ever tell?

There is a second, no less important lesson that the Torah has to teach us in the next verse of the Biblical narrative: **ויאהב יצחק את עשו כי יצד בפיו ורבה אוהבת את יעקב** "Isaac loved Esau . . . while Rebecca loved Jacob." We can interpret the expression **יצד בפיו** according to one of two explanations. We can accept the interpretation of the **תרגום**, according to which Isaac loved Esau more because Esau could get him venison to eat, or because Esau was able to keep him entertained with tales of his exploits as a hunter. Or we can follow **רש"י** (the more plausible explanation), according to whom Isaac loved Esau more because Esau could practice the hunter's skills even with his mouth, i.e., because he knew how to "capture" his father's love by clever turns of speech. But regardless of which interpretation we accept, the Biblical text tells us clearly that Esau was the favorite of Isaac while Jacob was the favorite of Rebecca. And this in itself would be enough, even in the case of quite ordinary personalities, to ruin not just one of the sons but both of them.

No one child should be the favorite of his father or his mother. All children should be equally the favorites of their fathers and mothers and receive their parents' love in equal measure. And if, alas, the feelings of the parents are divided so that one child knows that he is his father's favorite while the other knows that his mother loves him best, then may the all-merciful God send His special angels to protect His

children lest their lives be blighted because of foolish love or indifference on the part of their fathers or mothers.

The attitude of parents toward their children should not be influenced by personal likes or dislikes. It should be guided solely by a clear, intelligent sense of parental responsibility. Parents should appreciate and cherish their children not for what they already are, or for the qualities and virtues they already possess, but for what they should eventually become under the guidance of their parents, and for the importance of children as pledges entrusted by God Himself to their care.

Woe to us all if this is not the case! Alas for both parents and children if the feelings of the parents are influenced by blind, irrational emotions so that, instead of being outraged at idle gossip about one child or the other being the parents' favorite, the parents would have to acknowledge that the gossip is based on fact. We need not dwell on the damaging effect that favoritism, true or imagined, can have upon the future of the "favorite." It is all too obvious. We will only point to the untold harm that rejection, real or imagined, can inflict upon a child, and to the heavy responsibility that rests upon the parents, especially if a child truly gives them cause to reject him.

Let us look at ordinary, average families. Which of the children, as a rule, will be the "Cinderella" at home? It is not always the "naughtiest" or the worst of the children. Indeed, most often it may be the one who is actually the finest and the best among all the others but who may be less beautiful, less clever or less articulate than the rest. The rejected child may be a Cordelia among the daughters of King Lear or a David among the sons of Yishai, gifted with a sensitivity that goes deeper than the superficialities of glib speech and that is often not recognized by parents who do not understand. Such children may be humble to the point of self-denial, ready to do anything that is asked of them, and therefore they are exploited by their parents.

A father's or a mother's likes and dislikes may be based on any one of a thousand peculiarities. In many instances it is the attraction of opposites. Thus, a father like Isaac may love a son like Esau precisely because that son has qualities the father lacks, so that the father sees his son's traits as complementing a trait that he is missing. A mother like Rebecca may love a son like Jacob because he has begun to repre-

sent a way of life that she never saw in the home of her own parents, to whom it would have been totally foreign and unknown.

But what about the child who is really less intelligent than the others? He may have learning difficulties, he may not easily understand what he is taught, he may have trouble formulating thoughts on his own. He may be left back in school and his parents may also not be able to do very much with him at home. Or, even worse, the child may show character traits or inclinations that could jeopardize his future development as a moral human being. Even at an early age he may exhibit signs of untruthfulness, dishonesty, insolence, lack of self-control or disobedience—in other words, he may seem very far removed from the virtues that enable a child to grow into a fine and decent adult. The father or mother may then be moved to call that child “stupid” or “bad.” Do such parents really love their children? And if so, how should they show their love?

Love? It is self-understood that every child is entitled to an equal measure of love from both parents simply for himself. But what concerns us here is the way in which parents demonstrate that love. If they understand what their attitude toward their children should be and if they appreciate the value and the importance of their children, should they give more attention to the gifted or to the slow, to the one that has good character traits or to the one with character defects? Which child is most badly in need of love? For which child is love, especially his parents' love, virtually the only influence or anchor that can rescue him, raising him from stultification to spiritual light, from a stunted morality to purity and perfection? With which child has Divine Providence bestowed a more complex task, a clearer sign of Its trust, upon a father and a mother? Is it not precisely with the child that lacks intellectual prowess or moral strength? The bright, clever child will eventually attain brilliance and knowledge even without your help, and a child whose goodness is inborn will eventually mature into a fine and decent adult even without too much attention from you. But consider the child of scant intellectual gifts, or especially one whose moral character is in danger. Do you not see how utterly dependent a mentally or morally underprivileged child is on your love, your most devoted, unceasing love? He is the one with whom you should accomplish your greatest task as a parent. Is it not a true triumph of parental love if you can guide a child that seems dull to develop a keen, intelli-

gent mind, and even more, much, much more, if you know that you have rescued a soul that was in danger of going astray and have saved it for a life of purity and morality so that it can serve God and benefit other people?

If a child is physically frail or ailing, are the parents not happy to devote themselves to his care, centering all their tender concern upon nursing him and attending to his needs? What greater happiness is there for a mother than the knowledge that, without her care, without her constant attention and devotion, this child would be long dead and buried, but that solely thanks to her selfless care that same child is now in radiant health, with every promise of a happy future? Well, is the child who is frail not in body but in mind or spirit any less unhappy, or less worthy of pity and compassion? Might he not be totally lost if his father or his mother were to withhold their love from him? For a child that is physically ill, love acts only as a nurse, but for a child that is mentally frail or morally sick, parental love is the only real cure. In such cases the absence of parental love will be poison to the child, so that a father or a mother who withholds his or her love from a child that shows moral weakness actually withholds from him the one medicine that could cure him. Indeed, by such an attitude toward him, the parents themselves will force him into a hate-laden atmosphere in which the tendency toward moral sickness will inevitably degenerate into moral decay.

But to return to what Scripture tells us. If Isaac loves Esau more, while Rebecca has a greater love for Jacob, if a father and a mother differ in their attitude toward their children, if they cannot be totally *one* when it comes to the upbringing of their children, then these differences between the parents are already in themselves such grave obstacles to the proper rearing of their children that they would be worthy of our special attention in a future discussion.