



Isaac's Blessing for Esau: A Journey to Wholeness
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Toldot*
Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

This week's Torah portion expresses in biting terms the deep inner pain of profound loss. Esau, after discovering that his blessing is stolen by Jacob, cries what is described as an *exceedingly bitter* cry (Genesis 27:34). Esau then begs to be blessed by his father Isaac with the blessing that was originally intended for the eldest son. Isaac is, however, unable to now give to Esau the same blessing he mistakenly gave to Jacob. Isaac then gives Esau an alternative blessing, which leaves Esau in a state of anger and disillusionment.

Like Esau we may, for our part, expect that life is going to unfold in a certain way. But when the destiny we anticipate for ourselves is overthrown we can be left thinking that this was not supposed to happen to me; that this is not me and this is not how I've defined myself. Esau encounters a similar sense of displacement when he expected to inherit a beautiful blessing regarding his future from his father. Now Esau despairs and is embittered by the prospect of a substantially different path ahead: instead of nations being subservient to him, he is to be subservient to Jacob.

Further, the tension between Jacob and Esau is not unlike the battle we may confront within ourselves when dispossessed by illness. It is our new selves, symbolized by the displaced Esau, that long to be that seemingly more fortunate Jacob. Our yearning to return to health or normalcy finds resonance within the exceedingly bitter cry of Esau.

Esau, however, shifts his perspective at some point. We don't know when or exactly how. Little is said in the Torah of Esau's adventures after he departs from Jacob but we can suppose that, based on Esau's nature as a man of the hunt and the fields and having been deprived of his rightful inheritance, he has gained a certain worldly experience not shared by Jacob. Jacob by contrast had conferred upon him the preferred blessing and a more privileged life. This disparity in experience may partly account for Jacob's fear of Esau before they meet again after many years.

In *parashat Vayishlah*, a few chapters after this week's Torah portion, we read that Esau actually has done well for himself. He states: *yesh-li rav* -- "I have plenty" (Gen. 33:9). *Rav* means abundance but it can also mean "knowledge". Thus when Jacob explains to Esau why he sent so many gifts in advance of their reunion we might read Esau's reply to Jacob as: "I (now) have knowledge, my brother. Let what you have remain yours." That is, Esau's life journey has taught him to be at peace with himself. Though apparently given the lesser blessing, Esau no longer desires what Jacob has.

We can also contrast Jacob's fear with Esau's apparent equanimity in anticipation of what could have been a potentially difficult reunion. Esau has come to acceptance while Jacob is still wrestling. The journey through illness can reflect a similar process. The meaning of our experience is not necessarily in returning to that person we were before we became ill, or envying the state of perfect health we perceived in ourselves or others, but in appreciating like Esau the person we've become through our struggles and new insights.

For many people Thanksgiving is a time when warm feelings of togetherness and seasonal harvest are tempered with personal stresses and sorrows. Planning for the holiday may bring additional anxiety when we are experiencing the complexities of illness and loss. If you are feeling sad or alone or unable to take part in celebration, now may be a good time to let someone else know, to think up some coping strategies with a companion, to seek support that will bring you a greater sense of wholeness during this time.

There are some healing-oriented resources for Thanksgiving on our website, www.jewishhealingcenter.org.

May you taste the blessing of shalom!

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Jon Sommer of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.

