

JACOB: SIMPLE OR CUNNING?

The majority of people we know are pretty straight forward. Although they possess both strengths and weakness in varying forms, we can roughly ascertain who they are. It is those people who are more complex, both in character and motive, with whom we are most intrigued.

Which leads us to the most complex and ambiguous character in the biblical historical narrative. On the one hand he is described as "a simple man", yet he manages to deceive his father and also to outwit his brother. He then goes to a foreign and hostile land and enters into a business venture with a most untrustworthy partner. Although he is being deceived at every turn, he still manages to walk away with a vast fortune.

It is precisely for this reason that we have such strong feelings about Jacob. Rarely does a biblical character provoke such mixed and passionate views. Yet it is precisely Jacob, who more than the other patriarch, is considered the father of the Jewish people. After all, we are called the "children of Israel", (Jacob's second name). For it is Jacob's life that most accurately sums up the story of our people throughout its history, particularly in challenging times.

The Jewish people have had to deal with adversity more than any other nation. Not only in its simple appearance but more often than not, in its most highly complex form. It is in responding to these challenges that we need to be most vigilant, for sometimes they do not even appear to be a threat.

Jacob was a simple man with a good training by his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. He was "a simple man, dweller of the tent", yet he also possessed a unique edge. He had a brother called Esau. From the early stages in his life he was exposed to cunning and deception and as a result had the special ability, both to be aware and to deal with these challenges accordingly.

It is this discerning ability to know the correct application for an appropriate response and which takes into consideration all factors of all parties concerned that Jacob possessed to perfection. In the words of King Solomon, "A time to weep, and a time to laugh; A time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; A time of war, and a time of peace.

It is this unique strength that best characterises Jacob our Patriarch, father to the children of Israel. It is this trait that has helped us survive as a people and which will ensure our continuity for eternity.

One of the most intriguing stories we heard as children, is the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. It is a story that contains one of the great Jewish paradigms of our lives as a people. It is also a story that remains ambiguous as to the personalities of the main characters and the legacy they leave over to their descendants.

8th November 2013

Sedra: **Vayetzei**

Shabbat Begins: 16.07pm

Shabbat Ends: 17.10pm

The simple and great question that has puzzled commentators for centuries is that if Esau is evil why does our patriarch Isaac love him? How, with a father like Isaac and a grandfather like Abraham, does one end up with an "Esau"? Why as the story unfolds do both parties at particular junctions seek reconciliation?

We all spend most of our time and energy in various professions and occupations trying making a living. There are many types of people that inhabit these roles; however they could all be divided into two general categories.

There are those on the one hand who are seeking a more secure occupation or profession where the exposure to risk is limited. On the other hand there is the entrepreneur who not only is more risk inclined but seeks to transform all challenges they face into opportunities which will be directed to their advantage. A person can seek to invest in a blue chip property where the risk is low but with only a limited yield. Or one can choose to transform a vacant site into something which ultimately can produce a far greater return than his original investment.

So too in our spiritual and religious lives is there the tendency to move in these two very different directions. There are those on the one hand, who seek to play it safe and not expose themselves or their children to anything that is hostile or foreign to their innate values and traditions for fear of the risk of being influenced. On the other hand there are those with greater courage, strength and sense of purpose who are willing to interact with outside negative influences with a view of trying to transform them into powerful positive force.

It is these two types of personalities that characterise Jacob and Esau, which are inherent inside each and every one of us. Our mission in life as Jews is not only to strive for a secure and limited return on our investment in life but to learn how to both embrace and manage risk. The ultimate goal is reached when we can create reconciliation between these two tendencies in our own lives, which in the macro world will bring reconciliation between Jacob and Esau.

Warm Regards,
Yosef Vogel

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