Beans and Birthrights

In this week’s parshah we read of the birth of twins to Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob and Esau are very different from the moment they leave the womb. As they grow older, their disparate personality traits become increasingly obvious. Jacob is the “dweller of tents,” a diligent Torah scholar, while Esau is a “skilled hunter” and a man of violence.

We also read how one day, when Esau returns from the hunt, exhausted and starving, he finds Jacob cooking a pot of lentils. Esau wants the beans; Jacob offers to give him the pottage in return for Esau’s birthright. As the first-born twin, Esau would have been the one chosen to minister in G‑d’s temple. Esau accepts the offer and the deal is done.

Fast-forward some 275 years. We’re in the Book of Exodus now (4:22), and G‑d is sending Moses to Pharaoh to redeem His people. He describes them as b’ni bechori yisrael -- “My son, My first born, Israel.” Rashi, quoting the Midrash, comments: “Here the Holy One Blessed is He affixed His seal to the sale of the birthright which Jacob purchased from Esau.”

Here? It took G‑d so long to put His stamp of approval on a deal that was entered into hundreds of years earlier? Why only now?

The late Israeli Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi M.Z. Neriyah, offered this explanation: You can sell your birthright for beans, but you can’t buy a birthright for beans. To throw away one’s holy heritage is easy, but to claim it takes years of effort and much hard work.

He used the analogy of a war hero who earned a row of medals for bravery and courage under fire. Sadly, in his old age he was forced to sell his medals in order to survive. So someone else walks into the pawnbroker’s and finds these war medals for sale, buys them and pins them to his chest. He might walk down the street, proud as a peacock. But does it have any meaning? We all know that this man is no hero. In fact, he is nothing more than a pathetic fool!

To wear the badge of “My firstborn Israel,” the Jewish people had to be worthy of the honor. It wasn’t enough that their father Jacob had purchased the birthright from an unworthy but willing seller. The children of Jacob needed to demonstrate that they understood what it meant to be Children of Israel.

When Jacob bought the birthright from Esau it was a legal deal. One wanted the beans, the other wanted the birthright. Fair and square. But did Jacob earn that hallowed title, or was he like the fellow who bought the war medals? Generations later, when his children had gone through the “smelting pit” of the Egyptian bondage and still, with amazing faith and tenacity, kept their heritage -- then they were deemed worthy of the honor of the birthright. Now, after the trial by fire, after the blood, sweat and tears of slavery, the great Notary on High, the heavenly Commissioner of Oaths, takes out that ancient document, the yellowed deed of sale that had been waiting for generations, and puts His official stamp and the wax seal on that document, and says, “Now now you are worthy of the birthright. Today you are My Son, My Firstborn, Israel.”

There’s a famous graffiti exchange that has much truth in it. Someone not too partial to our people had scrawled, “How odd of G‑d, to choose the Jews.” And one of our own responded, “Actually, the Jews chose G‑d.”

Being Jewish is indeed the birthright of every Jew. But it’s not enough that G‑d chose us, we must choose G‑d. We need to earn our birthright by living as Jews. Chosenness is not license to snicker or condescend to others. It is far more responsibility than privilege.
It’s not good enough that our parents and grandparents were good Jews, that my Zayde was a rabbi or a schochet and my Bobba made the world’s best blintzes. What are we doing to earn our stripes?

Indeed, you can sell your birthright for beans. But you can’t buy a birthright for beans.

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

Chanukah is coming
Please complete the “Chanukah Gelt Form”!
Please schedule Chanukah lighting times with your chaplain!

Getting Healthy

It has been said that the difference between a healthy person and an unhealthy person is that the former is working on his issues, while the latter is resigned to them.

How did Jacob and Esau end up so different? Same parents, same upbringing, same mother’s milk, and yet so drastically different from each other that they become the paradigm of all of literature’s accounts of “the evil twin.”

In fact, they provide a metaphor for the endless struggle within each of us: the G-dly Jacob and his desire for transcendence vs. the instinctual Esau, with his insatiable drive for self-satisfaction.

A look at their lives. Esau is born red and as hairy as an adult, and so he remains: Edom—red, intense, driven, violent. From the day of his birth, he sees himself as a static creation; that’s who he is, and that is who he will be until he dies. He sees no reason to work things out with his brother, to address the “other side.” He is simply Esau.

Jacob is born with his issues as well. Timid, a bookworm, Mama’s boy. Yet he is willing to acknowledge and confront Esau. He dresses up in Esau’s garb and tells his father he will hunt meat. Jacob stares Esau in the eye.

It’s scary. Can one dress up like Esau and not become Esau?

Jacob succeeds, impressing his father enough to secure the blessing, and then is left alone to deal with his newfound self, to bring it into the rough world outside the tent, where Esau is comfortable. He spends years as a shepherd in Laban’s house. He thrives, despite the bumps along the way. Eventually, he is sufficiently empowered to meet the brother he once feared.

We all have our issues, our places we’d rather not go. The easiest way is to let sleeping dogs lie, to just let them be. Uncovering wounds only seems to evoke painful feelings. Yet if we don’t address our issues, we simply drift along. If we don’t tackle Esau, we become Esau.

That was the difference between them. Jacob and Esau each had their “other side”; Jacob was willing to acknowledge his and deal with it, while Esau chose to ignore it.

We are given the choice. As Shem told Rebecca when she was pregnant with the twins, “Two ruling forces are within you; when one rises the other falls” (Rashi’s commentary, Genesis 25:23). If we choose to rock the boat, we can mature through our struggles, emerge stronger. If we sweep the opposing forces within us under the rug, they will pile up until we trip over them.

We’ve all been there—something is said, and there is an awkward silence. We have a choice: We can address it, like Jacob, or we can resign ourselves to it, like Esau.

When we go where we fear most to tread, we come out the other side as “Israel”—we have struggled and we have succeeded. As the defeated angel tells Jacob (ibid., 32:29): “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed.”

Let’s be Jacob, not Esau.

By Rabbi Boruch Epstein

In Jewish History

Thursday, 1 Kislev, 5777 - December 1, 2016

Winter
As per the Talmud, the month of Kislev marks the onset of the winter season in the Holy Land and is the third month of the “Season of the Rains.”

Lubavitcher Rebbe Returns Home after Heart Attack (1977)
For the first time since suffering a major heart attack five weeks earlier, on the eve of Shemini Atzeret, the Rebbe left his office in 770 Eastern Parkway and returned to his home, signaling his recovery. Chassidim all over rejoiced at the good news.

From that day on, the Rebbe redoubled his efforts on behalf of the Jewish nation and all of humanity, and for the dissemination of Torah and chassidism. From then on, the first of Kislev is celebrated as a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing.