**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

Rabbi Evan Hoffman – Congregation Anshe Sholom

evanhoffman@gmail.com

Parshat Toldot – פרשת תולדת

November 18, 2017 – כט מרחשון תשעח

This essay is sponsored by Janet & Gary Waller in memory of Gussie Pessin גיטל בת שלמה.

**The Plot to Kill Jacob**

Esau seethed in anger over Jacob’s theft of their father’s blessings.  He said to himself, “Let the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother, Jacob (Genesis 27:41).”  Esau’s violent intentions were somehow made known to his mother, Rebekah.  She swiftly alerted Jacob to the danger and ordered him immediately to flee the country and find safe haven in Haran with his uncle Laban.  Ramban explained that although the danger was not imminent, as Esau did not plan to act on his grudge during his father’s lifetime, Rebekah feared that the elderly Isaac might die suddenly or that Esau might soon act impulsively and kill Jacob.

Why did Esau want his father to die first before taking vengeance against his brother?

Rashi obliquely noted the existence of fantastical midrashim on the subject, but himself preferred a plain interpretation: Esau did not want to cause his father pain.  Esau and Isaac had a sincerely loving relationship.  Scripture acknowledges Isaac’s love and preference for his older son: “Isaac loved Esau for the game that he brought him 25:28).”  When Esau became aware of his father’s objection to Canaanite women, he quickly married Ishmael’s daughter – a more suitable choice and more likely to please Isaac.  Esau’s decision to postpone, until after Isaac’s death, an act of murder likely to devastate his beloved father makes sense and is consistent with the Scriptural (as opposed to Aggadic) depiction and characterization of Esau.

Ramban cited Rashi’s interpretation that Esau did want to aggrieve his father, but also suggested that Esau refrained from killing Jacob while Isaac lived out of fear that an infuriated Isaac would transform into curses those blessings that he had previously bestowed upon Esau.

Kli Yakar posited a specific connection between the period of mourning for Isaac and the opportunity for Esau to kill Jacob.  Torah study protects one from harm.  Esau could not successfully kill Jacob so long as the latter was continuously engrossed in learning.  During the observance of shiva, mourners are forbidden to study Torah.  With this protection temporarily removed upon Isaac’s passing, Jacob would be exposed to danger.  In this view, Esau eagerly anticipated his father’s death not so much to spare Isaac the emotional toll of losing a child to fratricidal homicide but because Isaac’s death itself created a situation where Jacob was a far more vulnerable target.

The Esau of the Bible is a gruff, impulsive, and hot-headed man of the field.  He is not, however, a degenerate criminal.  There is no pasuk in the Torah that even hints at such a characterization.  In contrast, the Esau of Targumic and Midrashic literature is a fiend.  This is most clearly demonstrated in the bizarre conspiracy theories spun by the homilists in connection with Genesis 27:41.

Pseudo-Jonathan explained that Esau wanted to succeed where Cain had failed.  Cain killed Abel in Adam’s lifetime, allowing Adam to sire another child who would inherit the earth.  Esau would wait to kill Jacob until after Isaac had died, thereby precluding the possibility of the birth of a competitor/brother and guaranteeing that only he would inherit the family’s wealth and be the beneficiary of Isaac’s blessings.  A more extreme version of this sinister plot appears in the Midrash:  Esau planned to kill both Isaac and Jacob.  Only Divine interference prevented him from carrying out that plan (Genesis Rabbah 75).

In another Aggadic embellishment, Esau considered killing Jacob, but thought better of it upon realizing that Shem and Eber would judge him harshly.  Instead, he married into the family of Ishmael and poisoned Ishmael’s mind against Jacob by noting that, once again, a younger brother had undercut the principle of primogeniture.  Ishmael would then kill Jacob, allowing Esau to inherit Isaac’s legacy.  Subsequently, Esau would kill Ishmael as a gleeful – rather than truly vengeful – avenger of Jacob’s blood.  With all other family members being dead, Esau would inherit the entire Abrahamic legacy (Genesis Rabbah 67).  In a different iteration of this scheme, Esau fleetingly considered killing Isaac but quickly recognized that he should not personally do so.  Instead, he entered into a pact with Ishmael for Ishmael to kill Isaac and Esau to kill Jacob and for the two of them to divide the broader family’s spoils.  But Esau never intended to share the inheritance with Ishmael.  After Isaac and Jacob had been eliminated, Esau planned to kill Ishmael, too, and take everything for himself (Midrash Tehillim 14:2).

I offer my own interpretation of the phrase “let the mourning period of my father come.”  Most people -- even the wicked -- have respectable authority figures in their lives whom they revere.  When the evil inclination pushes a person to commit a sinful act, sometimes the awareness that one’s hero will be dismayed by news of the transgression is enough to give the would-be criminal pause.  But when that authority figure dies, all psychological restraints are removed and the soon-to-be sinner need overcome only his own minimal moral scruples.  Esau was so angry that he was ready to kill his own brother (and twin), but not if he subsequently had to look Isaac in the eye.

The Talmud mentions the importance of living in close proximity to one’s teacher.  Ulla noted that so long as King Solomon’s teacher, Shimi ben Gera, was alive, Solomon refrained from taking foreign brides.  After Shimi’s execution for violating his virtual house arrest, Solomon entered into multiple diplomatic-matrimonial alliances, most famously marrying Pharaoh’s daughter (Berakhot 8a).  Citing the prophetic prediction “your eyes will watch your Guide (Isaiah 30:20),” the Talmud asserts that merely seeing one’s teacher is spiritually beneficial (Eruvin 13b).  When the teacher can no longer literally be seen because he has gone to his Eternal Portion, the chances increase dramatically that a morally compromised disciple will do something of which the late teacher would have disapproved.

[L’havdil,] A recent example of this phenomenon occurred in 1983.  Elements within the Conservative Movement put pressure on the Jewish Theological Seminary to ordain women rabbis.  The Seminary administration, under the chancellorship of Gerson Cohen, had resisted that same pressure for over a decade.  At the end of the Spring 1983 academic term, the faculty was notified that a vote on the matter would take place during the fall term.  On October 24, 1983, by a tally of 34-8, the Seminary faculty voted to ordain women.  Those who opposed female ordination were motivated by a range of halakhic, sociological, professional, and personal considerations.  Possibly the greatest obstacle to the emergence of an egalitarian Conservative rabbinate was the staunch opposition of Professor Saul Lieberman.  It would have been nearly impossible for the institution to implement such a controversial change over the objections of its leading scholar and the 20th century’s most outstanding Talmudist.  But Lieberman died on March 23, 1983, while on a flight to Israel.  Within weeks thereafter, Gerson Cohen ceased stonewalling and scheduled the vote.

A Jew is bidden to develop his or her own spiritual resolve and overcome the temptation to sin.  Sometimes, the presence of a virtuous father, teacher, or other authority figure is the last line of defense against iniquity.  But, inevitably, our revered mentors die.  How will we behave when our righteous role models are no longer alive to observe how we conduct ourselves?  Will we indulge in grievous sin, as Esau planned to do, or will we act so that our mentors, were they still alive, would be proud of us?