

Aaron Weinger's Senior Sermon
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The Jewish Theological Seminary

Esau's Cry

I received my first chumash, the Five Books of Moses, in third grade. Jumping in to read the stories of Genesis, I soon reached our parashah, Toledot. Disguised in the skins of his older brother Esau, Jacob deceives their dying father, Isaac, and receives the firstborn's blessing instead. We read in Genesis chapter 27, verse 34, *Kishmoah Esav et divrei aviv, vayitz'ak tz'akah gedolah u'marah...* "When Esau heard his father's words [regarding what Jacob had done], he burst into loud and bitter crying..." Despite such an act of deception, our tradition is quick to praise Jacob and vilify Esau. Being an older brother, I secretly sided with Esau.

But it came to be much more than that.

As I grew older, the tradition's treatment of Esau drew me in with urgency. I spent my college years hoping a rainbow might emerge from color-coded terror alerts and illuminate a black and white world in which you were "with us or against us." My faith and identity, meanwhile, became grounded in blessing found in struggle and nuance. Through the gray of fog I could discover what my teacher Rabbi Carie Carter calls "the many roads to the palace of Judaism." Out of a living faith that wrestled with centuries of precedent, a road could even take me to rabbinical school. So I began charting my way as a teacher and preacher of Torah. In learning how to become a lifelong learner, I came to

draw from my story and create space for those most vulnerable to discover theirs. Serving as a hospital chaplain for a patient who jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge, I learned what it meant to give and receive blessing on the margins. I could not close my eyes like Isaac to the reality in front of me. Nor could I condemn as many commentators do those on the margins like Esau. Becoming a rabbi meant traveling down a road with him—and others like him—and finding blessing.

How could I be a religious leader if I could not hear Esau’s loud and bitter cry?

Many of the classical commentators leave Esau on the margins, perhaps out of desperation to justify Jacob’s behavior as “good for the Jews.” When Isaac explains to Esau that his brother Jacob received the firstborn’s blessing *b’irmah*, only Ibn Ezra, the medieval Spanish commentator translates *b’irmah* as “coming with deception”- *she’lo diber emet*. “He did not speak the truth.” Seeking to portray Jacob’s deception in a positive light, the medieval French commentator Rashi translates *b’irmah* as an act of wisdom.¹

Aware of blessing borne from struggle earlier in my life, I began my project—searching for a text that might root Esau’s pain in the tradition. Now the stakes were higher. I could not leave Esau on the margins as I prepared to enter the world as a rabbi. The path of tearing him down would not help me pave the many roads to the palace of Judaism.

¹ Genesis 27:35

In Genesis Rabbah, a fifth-century collection of biblical commentary, Rabbi Haninah admonishes those who claim the Holy Blessed One doesn't pay attention to human suffering. He teaches that God ultimately collects what is due. *Tz'akah achat hizik Ya'akov l'Esav, dicitiv: Vayitzak tz'akah gedolah u'marah. V'heichan niphrah lo? B'Shushan habirah, she'ne'emar: Vayizak z'akah gedolah u'marah.* “Jacob made Esau break into one cry, as it is written: ‘And he burst into a loud and bitter cry.’ Where was he punished for it? In Shushan the capital, as it is written: ‘And he cried a loud and bitter cry.’”²

Esau's cry penetrates into the heart of the tradition and waits like a volcano to erupt again. His tears soak the conscience of Torah, and then breach the city walls of Shushan in the book of Esther. The loud and bitter cry of Esau—the one despised by many rabbis for being the symbol of Edom, the archetypal enemy of the Jewish people—is the cry echoed by Mordecai *Hayehudi*, the first biblical character identified as a Jew.³

When Mordecai finds out the Jewish people of Shushan are to be annihilated, he cries the same loud and bitter cry as Esau. *Vayizak z'akah gedolah u'marah.* “He cried a loud and bitter cry.”⁴

Edomite cries burst from Jewish lips. In a moment of dread, Mordecai is able to access his emotions from none other than Esau. Both of them encounter blindness from those in charge of shaping the future. King Ahasuerus is blind to Mordecai's loyalty and accepts

² Genesis Rabbah 67:4

³ Esther 2:5

⁴ Esther 4:1

Haman's decree to wipe out the Jewish people. And Esau's father Isaac is blind as he prepares to die. According to Rashi, Isaac is blinded by the tears of the angels who cried from heaven as they watched his near-sacrifice by Abraham on Mount Moriah.⁵ In both narratives, people who have the power to bless become trapped by not being able to see. King Ahasuerus and Isaac are spiritually absent to the reality in their midst. Why does Genesis Rabbah link Esau and Mordecai? Esau's tears give Mordecai a way to be real with his pain, and Mordecai's prominence gives visibility to Esau on the margins.

Speaking of Esau's tears, Rabbi Sarra Lev writes,

It is a response of inward pain, rather than of outward rage. Esau's is not the macho response of biblical men who experience injustice and respond with rage and revenge... Never do we hear that Esau tries to carry out this internalized threat [of killing his brother Jacob], even when his chance does arrive...⁶

Sounded by none other than Mordecai, Esau's cry forces us to take a closer look, to listen, and to learn on the margins.

Each morning in the preliminary blessings known as Birkhot HaShahar, we praise the Holy Blessed One for giving sight to the blind. I thank God for opening my eyes at different points in my life-- the eyes of a third grader and now the eyes of a teacher and preacher of Torah. When I recite this blessing, I thank God for opening my eyes each day to see precisely those who are rendered invisible by narrow vision, to meet the challenge of Esau who asks, *Are you willing to see and bless those like me who might otherwise be left as scraps on the rabbinic cutting room floor?*

⁵ Genesis 27:1

⁶ Sarra Lev, "Esau's Gender Crossing" in *Torah Queeries*, eds. Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser, and David Shneer (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 40.

As I prepare to graduate, I may not look much older than the third grader who received his first chumash. But my vision of a redeemed world includes Esau coming to transform us. His cry catapults us into the deeper recesses of pain—the moments when we cry a loud and bitter cry. Like Esau we wonder if somebody will witness our despair. “Have you but one blessing?” Esau asks Isaac.⁷ Esau repeats his question today when his story is in my hands to teach. I knew I had to continue searching for Esau’s blessing.

Psalm 126 holds out our hope: “Restore us, Eternal One, as you return streams to the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.” During my first summer as a chaplain at Bellevue Hospital, I shared this Psalm with the patient who tried to take her life by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. I journeyed with her for eight weeks-- from the emergency room, to the trauma unit, and eventually to a psychiatric floor. She shared with me a collection of poems she composed years before as she struggled on the margins with depression. In her desert of despair, tears flowed like the streams of the Negev. We imagined the possibility of healing through poetry and of reconciliation with her family. Previously estranged, her mother visited and heard her daughter’s loud and bitter cry for help. We blessed one another with the words we knew and the silence we held. A young rabbinical student sitting with an older Christian woman of color, we prayed those who sow in tears would reap in joy.

What does it mean to hear Esau’s cry, a cry that pierces through our tents and rattles us? What does it mean to make Esau’s cry our cry, his pain our pain? To see Esau’s tears streaming down the seventy faces of Torah. To hear the words of Genesis Rabbah and my

⁷ Genesis 27:38

patient at Bellevue, reminding us of those who sow in tears. To say yes, there is a blessing for you—and your blessing will bring joy.

Esau eventually receives a blessing from his dying father Isaac, and Esau blesses his own brother, Jacob. Twenty years later, as recorded in Genesis chapter 32, Jacob wrestles with Esau’s ministering angel in the middle of the night.⁸ Jacob—like his older brother Esau before him—begs to receive a blessing. At the break of dawn the ministering angel of Esau blesses Jacob with the name Israel, and Jacob names the place Peniel. He declares, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”⁹ In opening his eyes to his brother Esau, Jacob sees God and the possibility for reconciliation. Wrestling with the ministering angel of Esau, Jacob discovers his road to the palace of Judaism as a patriarch of Israel. Transformation is possible in giving blessing to and receiving blessing from Esau.

I know the power of blessing in holding me these last five years. For that I am so grateful to you—my family, friends, mentors, congregants, colleagues, and teachers. Thank you. You have sustained me with your blessings on this road and trusted in the blessings I might be able to offer as a rabbi.

I received my first chumash almost twenty years ago. Its stories still brim with wisdom. Not because the words mean the same to me now as they did then. They don’t. The Torah, like me, has changed. Its seventy faces include many new shades of color. In those

⁸ Genesis Rabbah 77:3

⁹ Genesis 32:31

faces I catch a glimpse of the rainbow I struggled to see many years ago through the fog. The Torah expands to witness the tears of Esau, the Edomite enemy, streaming down the face of Mordecai, the Jewish hero. It shatters the binary in which Jacob is good and Esau is bad. The beauty of the Torah is found in its complexity. The same God who opens our eyes each morning can help us recognize blessing as we travel the many roads to the palace of Judaism. May we be blessed on our journey.