

Toldot **Generations** **Sowing and reaping: Esau's flawed Spirituality**

Torah: Gen. 25:19-28:9

(1) **25:16:** *"Then came out his brother whose hand gripped Esau's heel on he was given the name of Jacob (he takes by the heel or supplants)"* Jacob is given some unfair press due to his name. Our friend Louis Levinson correctly reminds us that it was Esau who twisted the meaning of Jacob's name to mean supplanter. He was born grabbing his brother's heel, thus the name. He did not supplant his brother, Esau sold his birthright and then did not inform his father about the arrangement and it was thus Esau who tried to steal the blessing which rightfully belonged to Jacob.

(2) **25:34:** *"Then Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau and he ate and drank, rose up and went his way. It was thus that Esau despised his birth right."* Birthright meant that the intact household of Isaac would go to Jacob upon Isaac's death, along with the generational blessing Isaac received from Abraham. What kind of character would sell something this precious for some stew? He was not really starving, just really hungry and when he fully realized this loss, it may have been the wakeup call he needed to begin to get his life in order – because he became a great nation. Note: after the Maccabees freed the land from the Greeks, they forcibly converted the Edomites and the Philistines, so the descendents of both brothers were finally united into one people.

(3) **26:4, 5:** *"I will multiply your posterity like the stars of the sky and I will give to your posterity all of these lands and all nations of the earth shall be blessed in your posterity, because Abraham obeyed my voice and observed my orders and my commandments, my statutes and my laws."* Even though Isaac lived longer than any other Patriarch and longer than his half brother, Ishmael, we are not told much about his life and apart from the side trip to the land of the Philistines, he did not appear to go anywhere or do anything. It was not because he was timid or that he lacked ambition. Messiah descends from him as much as He descends from Abraham and Jacob, but all that Isaac was told to do, he did – he dwelt in the land and waited on G-d. Abraham received a blessing based on a fivefold obedience mandate, which Isaac must also have followed (voice, orders, commandments, statutes and laws). We are not told which orders, commandments, statutes and laws that Abraham and Isaac followed, but from the context of their lives, they must have fallen into the two broad categories of Israel's generational holiness: no idolatry and no fornication. We are told that Abraham feared G-d and believed G-d, but we also need to understand that the Covenant which the nation entered into later was based on an inherited understanding of G-d and of obedience and when the people became a great nation, they formalized the faith and obedience they had inherited from the patriarchs and it is still Israel's greatest treasure, along with the land.

(4) **27:36:** *"Esau said, isn't it because that he is called by the name of Jacob that he has supplanted me twice? He took away my birthright and now he has stolen my blessing. And he said, have you not reserved a blessing for me?"* Here we see the spin Esau puts on things so that he appears to be the double victim, when in fact nothing was stolen from him – he sold his birthright and the blessing of Isaac should have been part of this and Esau tried to take that which should have gone to his brother and since he could no longer claim the blessing of the elder brother, he asks for the lesser blessing, which Isaac was going to bestow on the younger twin. It is a likely a modified version, more suited to Esau's more aggressive character but it is a blessing – however it lacks two features: his descendants shall not be a blessing to all mankind and they shall not inherit the land in perpetuity.

In the Torah portion we saw the example of the flawed spirituality of Esau, which wanted the best, but which was not prepared to give the best and we have to be careful not to follow the example of any who would advocate for a flawed spirituality. Now we have to be careful about judging people too quickly and according to our own preferences, and not according to the standards which the L-rd has set for us. All too frequently we will encounter more opposition from flawed believers than we will from unbelievers and in this passage Paul is indicating one specific kind of double trouble which we need to guard against: idle busy bodying.

What does this mean and how can we deal with it? Paul exhorts the people not to tire in well doing – which means being helpful and helping people who need help, but we have to be careful of those who are just looking for a free ride and who want people to do for them what they should be doing for themselves. Paul and his team showed the congregation an example of hard work and apparently some of the people thought that a congregation of believers should be divided into two distinct camps: those who worked and those who sat around and became busybodies.

What is a busybody? This term is not used in every translation, but I selected it because it describes a way of sidestepping work and making others responsible for our upkeep, while we try and run their lives so that our own benefit takes precedence over their valid needs. There will be those among us who are unable to find work, or who are unable to work, or who have retired and it is not to this group that Paul's corrective exhortation is addressed. It is to those who refuse to work and who work at not working and who want to obligate others, sort of a disguised, energetic laziness that becomes skilled at setting things up so that they are too busy being idle to work, and who obligate others to meet the needs they are too lazy to meet.

Now, Paul is not saying that poor people or people on welfare or disability are all lazy people, what Paul saying is that there are some believers who do not want to work, and who specialize at making others responsible for their upkeep, when they are quite capable of looking after themselves and he is quite strict about our double need to both do good and to deal with those who are doing no good.

Dealing with difficult believers means that how we help people needs to be geared to both meeting peoples legitimate needs and to showing them how to meet their own needs and empowering them to make this happen. It is the same with children – we do not want to build in permanent dependency or to encourage idleness or manipulative behaviour – we want to show by example so that they can become as independent as they are capable of – part of a team and not permanent spectators.

One of the challenges of ministry is for people to see that rabbis and pastors are hard workers and that we do not sit around all day, doing our nails and staring out the window and when we began this congregation, I worked up to eight part time jobs until we reached the point where the congregational finances would allow me to dedicate most of my time to the affairs of the congregation.

I am still tutoring and counseling in addition to my ministry duties and my returning health is a blessing that will allow my activity level to increase, because for a while I was too sick to do very much.

When we avoid the flawed spirituality of Esau and determine to do our best and to give our best to the L-rd, our example becomes one of our most effective outreach and that is what Paul is encouraging the congregation at Thessalonica to work on.

We when have difficult people in our midst, we are to be firm and definite; as well as kind and compassionate. When the economy is weak, we need to avoid condemning the unemployed or the under employed and we need to help out as much as we can until things improve. When there are people who refuse to look after themselves and want to obligate us to meet needs they should be meeting on their own, we need to warn them and deal with them, as far as they will be dealt with.

When people refuse to be dealt with, we need to pull the Amish imperative and have nothing to do with them. This does not mean we do not talk to them and that we refuse to meet with them – it means we refuse to let them talk us into looking after them and we refuse to give them access to our resources while they try and run our lives so that their needs are met by our efforts as they obligate us into helping them when they do not need help.

I will help anyone who is in need and who is going through rough times. We received a donation for Sylvester this week and I sent it so he can help Sarah and her family. He is not a lazy man, sitting around so that he will be always dependent upon our help. It is just that after his business burned down and after his home was demolished, there was no help and he could have joined the ranks of the thousands of destitute people who are kept poor by government corruption, which is the curse of Africa – instead we reached out and helped him so that he can help himself.

The victims of natural or economic disasters are not lazy people – anymore than the crowds of unemployed hungry people in the depression were lazy people. They needed help to pull themselves out of difficulty and we will continue to do our best to be helpful and also to receive help when we need it.

Those who want to become permanently dependant and who refuse to help themselves need to be dealt with so that they understand that we will not work for them and will not let them run things to their advantage. They are not our enemies, it is just their lifestyle and values which are their enemies and we have to warn them and deal with them and help them to help themselves.

There are depressed, sick people and those who cannot find good work, no matter how hard they try. It is only those who are not trying and who want a free ride that we have to deal strongly with. We are a helpful shul of people who want to pitch in to maintain our community and the members of this community.

We will get tough with those who refuse to work without beating them up and without constantly being on their case. We will warn them like brothers and help them abandon their enforced idleness. It is not wrong to need a break or to take a break – it is wrong to build a life that becomes one big break and to allow people on this kind of break to blame us for not continuing to bankroll their busybody idleness.

Esau had a flawed spirituality which was outlined further by Malachi and just as we have to take charge of our own spirituality and learn to live by faith and obedience and to avoid all forms of idolatry and fornication, so we have to allow our faithful obedience to translate into peacefully working with our hands to meet our own needs to the best of our ability AND to lend a hand and to receive a hand. Hurt, sick or tired is not lazy, but when laziness and idleness try to make us responsible for other people's irresponsibility, it is time to act and to prevent people from becoming their own worst enemy. As we come to the L-rd's table may we learn the subtle difference between doing good for those in need and indulging the idleness which perpetuates dependence.

This is not an easy task, but there is always a positive strategy for dealing with negative problems and we should not feel bad when we call people to task, we just have to be careful how we do it and why we do it. Difficult people should not be allowed to make our lives difficult so that theirs are made easier. Let's pray.