

Jacob and Esau, Healing America Together, an Original Midrash

Shabbat Vayishlach 5785

December 13, 2024

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You remember Esau and Jacob; right? In fact, you know them. They are right here among us.

From the beginning, Jacob was the studious one. While Esau was out playing football, hunting, and fishing, Jacob joined the chess club, studied hard, and got straight A's. Esau got by in school, but it was never his thing. When time came for the twins' B'nai Mitzvah, Jacob could barely conceal his excitement, and not about the party. He quickly learned all the prayers and his portions. Esau wasn't dumb, but he also wasn't interested. Well, he looked forward to the party, but he was too busy—you know, with all those sports and outdoor activities, not to mention an active social life—so the tutor shortened his portions and assigned more of the service to Jacob. Just when Isaac and Rebekah were starting to worry about one twin publicly outshining the other, Esau opted out. He went to the nondenominational church with his friends, finding comfort and acceptance there.

Rebekah was embarrassed and irritated by Esau's choices, but Isaac urged acceptance. Esau was a hard worker, after all, just not at the same pursuits that Jacob and his mother valued.

People referred to Esau and Jacob "the twins," but the irony in their voices increased as they boys entered high school. Each had a host of friends, but there was no overlap. Esau hung out with the jocks and cheerleaders. Jacob's friends at school were the other kids on the debate team and in his advanced classes—and, outside of school, the Jewish kids in his youth group. Jacob considered Esau's friends to be shallow. Esau thought of Jacob and his friends as a self-important group of nerds.

Separate friends, though, didn't drive the brothers apart. Their treatment of one another did that.

One of Jacob's hobbies was cooking, and he used that to torture his brother. He would prepare Esau's favorite meals; then, when Esau would come in from practice, hot and sweaty and famished, Jacob wouldn't let him have even a bite. The only exception was the time that Esau came home with a handsome paycheck after helping one of his friend's dads with manual labor at his scrap yard. Esau was even hungrier than usual, and Jacob told him he could have the entire stew only if he would sign over the check.

In Jacob's mind, that was fair payback. Ever since they were young, Esau had taken advantage of his superior physical strength. The occasional brotherly beat-down enabled Esau to bully his brother into submission much of the time. Jacob lived in fear.

Unsurprisingly, then, the brothers went their separate ways after high school. Jacob went to an elite private college, while Esau enlisted in the Navy. Both excelled—Jacob, as an academic wunderkind, and Esau, as a Navy SEAL. They saw one another very rarely and never communicated when they were apart.

After Esau's successful military career, he and his wife Adah bought a home in a gated community in Spring, Texas, where some friends had settled. They joined a local church and raised a large family. They prospered, as Esau combined his military pension with substantial earnings from the successful roofing company he built from the ground, up. His Navy experience prepared him to lead in business, the lack of a college degree never being a factor. Trained to handle weapons skillfully and safely, Esau entrusted his family's security to himself.

Jacob, meanwhile, went to law school. His passion was helping low-income folks to challenge systems that exploit them. In his professional life, at the synagogue, and in his personal encounters, Jacob fought discrimination and supported government programs intended to level the playing field for all Americans. He married Rachel, whom he had known since Religious School kindergarten. They bought a home in a gentrified neighborhood near downtown Houston, where many of their Jewish friends lived. They would never have considered owning a gun. Jacob didn't even know that Esau lived a half-hour away in an exurb that Jacob had no occasion to visit.

Jacob and Rachel were proud of their diverse friend group. Well, most were Jewish and professional like they were, but some were gay—and, as they got older, it seemed like a majority had at least one kid who was gay, transgender, or nonbinary. The Jews of Color at Temple broadened the diversity of their social contacts. When pressed, Jacob had to admit that he didn't know many poor people, usually not even those his lawsuits were intended to help. He knew even fewer people who had prospered despite not having a college degree. Sure, they existed, but he didn't know them.

Esau and Adah, too, were happy with their friends. They weren't focused on the crowd's diversity, but their group of successful military retirees and spouses included folks of various ethnicities and religions. Some had been to college, and others hadn't; nobody cared. They would go into Houston for a football game or maybe a fancy dinner, but they were concerned about their safety when they went

downtown. They embraced hard work and Christian values, and they took pride in being American. Esau had served to preserve their way of life, which he and Adah increasingly saw threatened by an influx of foreign people, ideas, and lifestyles. Esau was particularly suspicious of so-called “experts.” Just like his brother, they always knew better and were all too eager to tell everybody else how to live. He and Adah wanted to be left alone to raise their family as they saw fit.

Meanwhile, Jacob and Rachel were increasingly concerned that their values were under assault from an uninformed, unintelligent, and even bigoted electorate. Hostility to immigrants was troubling, as was the relentless expansion of gun rights, but they were most troubled by attenuation of reproductive freedom and by threats to their gay and transgender friends and family. Jacob rarely thought about Esau, but when he did, he mused that, wherever he was, Esau must be loving it.

And then it happened. Back in Little Rock, Rebekah and Isaac had aged. Each son visited a couple times a year, never at the same time. Now, though, Isaac faced a devastating diagnosis. Rebekah called each of her sons, communicating their father’s dying wish: He wanted them both at the Thanksgiving table, together, with their families.

Each brother groaned. Audibly. Rachel saw her confident, successful husband transform into a terrified kid, afraid that his brother would give him another beat-down. Esau complained to Adah, “Jacob will tell us exactly how to live **our** lives.” Still, both brothers knew that they were trapped. They could not deny their father’s dying wish.

The first night, during dinner, Esau discussed what he perceived to be the grave injustice of transgender women participating in women’s athletics, except that he didn’t call them “transgender women.” Jacob made a comment about the dangerous proliferation of gun violence, rooted in the American obsession with gun ownership, despite all the evidence that having a gun in the house increases the likelihood that a family member will die from a fatal shooting there. The atmosphere was tense.

After dinner, though, as Esau relaxed with a beer—and Jacob, with a glass of chardonnay—they surprised themselves. Jacob was impressed that his brother had made something of himself, even without a college education. Esau, meanwhile, rather liked Rachel and the kids. He didn’t understand Jacob’s work, but he knew success when he saw it. The brother had little in common, so they talked about their kids. Each increasingly realized that his brother’s hopes and dreams for his children’s future were not all that different from his own. Each wanted his children

to have the same opportunities they had and to grow up to be kind, moral, upstanding citizens.

Instinctively, each assumed that they had voted for opposite candidates in the recent presidential election. They weren't wrong. Jacob listened quietly while Esau talked about how he looked forward to declining inflation and increasing American prosperity under President Trump. Esau didn't let himself be triggered by Jacob's concerns about the well-being of women and LGBTQ Americans.

Each brother was surprised to find that he liked his brother more than expected, their differences notwithstanding. The next few days went smoothly. The kids played together. Isaac and Rebecca were happy to have their family together and not fighting, even if just this once

Packing to leave, Esau turned to Jacob, drunk not with beer but exuberance. He suggested that they have family dinner every Sunday night back in Houston. Jacob understood that Esau's proposal came from a generous place of openness, but carrying out his plan would risk the brothers' falling into old patterns of rivalry and even hatred. He suggested that they take it more slowly, at least at first. Maybe get the families together on New Year's Day and go from there.

Jacob was mindful of the limits of the family reunion. He could not be sure that Adah and Esau would not say something bigoted. If that happened in front of the kids, Jacob would have to speak up. If it persisted, they could not continue to be together, except for emergencies in the lives of his parents. The more he thought about it, Jacob realized that his brother might have equal and corresponding concerns, though he could not imagine what those might be.

What Jacob did know was that his rabbi had nicknamed him Yisrael. She said, "Like that Jacob from Genesis, you're a fighter, always standing up for Torah values. Even when you struggle, you prevail." So, Jacob and Esau went, each his separate way, cautiously optimistic that they might be take some first steps that would heal their own lifelong history of mistrust and mutual mistreatment. They might even heal America.

Amen.