

## A Brief Note on Esau

*Parsha VaYishluch* continues telling the story of Jacob and his family as they travel to the Promised Land. Jacob is anxious about confronting his brother; no doubt, the grave threats uttered by Esau after Jacob had stolen his blessing, resounded still. Yet, for all of Jacob's fear, the meeting between the estranged twins, appeared to have gone well. Esau was forgiving and friendly and repeatedly offered Jacob the hospitality of his encampment. Jacob continued to retain doubts about Esau's sincerity and long term ambitions, and he sidestepped Esau's invitation and fled his camp. Jacob eventually found his way to Shechem (Nablus), where he purchased some land and settled down.

Jacob's personal life, which seemed full of bounty and blessing, suddenly became ridden with strife and controversy. Jacob's safety was jeopardized by the conduct of his sons in Shechem; there, they had massacred an entire city and shamelessly stole the property of the hapless inhabitants. Jacob naturally feared that his legacy had been forever tarnished by the deceitful behaviour of his children. He was forced to leave Shechem.

Jacob's subsequent sojourn is tumultuous. First, his beloved Rachel died giving birth to his twelfth son, Benjamin. Then, he suffered the indignity of being cuckolded by his son Reuben, who lay with Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant and mother of Jacob's sons, Dan and Naphtali. Jacob then returned to his father's tent at Kiryat Arba (Hebron). Isaac died. He was one hundred and eighty-eight years old when he died.

The *parsha* contains one of the most enigmatic narratives in the Torah – Jacob's encounter with a heavenly being. The Torah describes how Jacob wrestled a "man" all night long, until the break of dawn. As first light broke, the "man" dislocated Jacob's hip and sought to leave. Jacob would not let him go until he received a blessing. It was then that the "man" renamed Jacob; "*you shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed*". This encounter is considered the most crucial incident in Jacob's life, yet the identity of the divine being is never revealed. The reader is left to imagine the identity of the divine being – was it an angel of God, or perhaps it was God who wrestled with Jacob. Or, perhaps, Jacob's adversary was a river demon.

Like many other characters and incidents found in the Torah, Jacob's struggle took on a far different interpretation. In the rabbinical viewpoint, Esau epitomized evil. *Rashi* cited rabbinical literature to identify the "man" as "*the ministering angel of Esau*". Jacob's encounter with the divine being became only the first act "*in the eternal struggle between good and evil, between man's capacity to perfect himself and Satan's determination to destroy him spiritually*". [1] In a later commentary, *Sforno* explained that Jacob's encounter with this angel was "*symbolic of the constant conflict between the forces of Israel and Esau, which will harm and damage Israel over the centuries*". Esau stood demonized for eternity – one of the "enemies of Israel".

The Torah does not depict Esau in dark tones; rather, Esau was described in an unflattering way: "*that of a big, athletic, not –too-discerning young man*". [2] True, Esau had threatened Jacob after being cheated of his father's blessing; but Esau appeared to have outgrown this childish pique. He had welcomed Jacob as his brother, and made no threats.

Kugel suggests that Esau's vilification was promoted by events that occurred much later in Israel's history. There were a number of historical connections: Amalek, a grandson of Esau was the founder of the tribe that attacked the Children of Israel, and his descendants included Haman, the villain of Purim. As well, Esau's nation, called Edom, was identified with Rome, the nation that had destroyed the Second Temple and enslaved Israel. These associations did not go unnoticed by early interpreters of the Torah, and by the Mishnaic period, Esau had been recast as "*utterly wicked, a crafty, bloodthirsty embodiment of evil*"; the eternal enemy of Jacob and his descendants. [3]

***Parsha VaYishluch, Shabbath December 17, 2005***

1. Stone Chumash
2. Kugel "Traditions of the Bible" at p. 354
3. *ibid.*