

Parshat HaShavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT TOLDOT

Esav's Merit

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WAS YITZCHAK WRONG?

A straightforward reading of the Biblical text indicates that Yitzchak was mistaken in his identification of the chosen son. However, there is a problem with this reading. The blessing that Yitzchak sought to give his chosen son does not include the essentials of chosenness that were later bestowed explicitly upon Yaakov – and not as a result of any deception:

"May the Almighty God bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be a multitude of nations. And may He give you the blessing of Avraham – to you and your descendants with you, to possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Avraham." (28:3-4)

Only this blessing makes mention of the desirable land that God will give as a possession, while the blessing that Yitzchak meant to give Esav mentions only a good land and kingship.

We cannot maintain that Yitzchak saw Esav as the chosen son in every sense, for Yitzchak certainly must have known that Esav violated the holy covenant – the covenant of circumcision. By marrying Canaanite wives, daughters of the foreign peoples living in the land, Esav violated the oath that Avraham's servant swore by Avraham's own circumcision:

"I make you swear by the Lord God of the heavens and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell." (24:3)

We are told explicitly that Esav violated this covenant:

"Esav was forty years old when he took in marriage Yehudit the daughter of Be'er the Hittite, and Basmat the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a source of grief to Yitzchak and to Rivka." (26:24-25)

Hence we deduce that it was a conscious decision on Yitzchak's part to withhold from Esav the Avrahamic blessing mentioned above (28:3-4). This blessing, making mention of the name Almighty God (E-l Sha-dai), the blessing of being fruitful and multiplying, and Eretz Yisrael, is the continuation of the covenant of circumcision, which was based on consecrated offspring and a distinction from the Canaanites:

"Avram was ninety-nine years old when God appeared to Avram and said to him: 'I AM E-L SHA-DAI; walk before Me and be wholehearted. I shall place

My covenant between Myself and you AND I SHALL MULTIPLY YOU GREATLY... AND MAKE YOU EXCEEDINGLY FRUITFUL... And I shall give you and your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession..." (17:1-8).

This blessing was given knowingly and consciously to Yaakov, who was commanded by his father not to marry a Canaanite wife, but rather a woman from his family in Charan. It is Yaakov who received the land of Canaan – the holy land, God's inheritance.

What Yitzchak wanted to give Esav was the reign over the great land – between the Nile and the Euphrates, the land in which all the descendants of Avraham lived, the land of Yishmael and Yitzchak, of Yaakov and Esav, of the children of Ketura and the children of Lot, the land of Midian, Moav, Ammon, Edom, and the Land of Canaan also [1]:

"May the Lord give you of the dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth, and much corn and wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you; may you be a lord to your brethren and may your mother's children bow down to you; may those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you be blessed." (27:27-29)

The division of blessings between Yaakov and Esav was supposed to resemble the division of destiny between the tribe of Levi and the tribes of Yehuda and Yosef. The tribe of Levi received the "inheritance of God;" God [Divine service in the Sanctuary] was their inheritance. The tribes of Yosef received the blessings of the land and its fatness, while the tribe of Yehuda received the kingship and the subjugation of the other tribes. Yitzchak did not know that which Rivka knew: the prophecy that "two peoples will separate from your bowels." He wanted to distinguish between his children like two tribes of the same nation.

Rivka overturned this plan – and she did it by mistake! She adopted the path of deception because she believed – to her great surprise – that Yitzchak was about to turn Esav into the tribe favored before God. A closer look at the verses reveals her mistake:

"It happened, when Yitzchak was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called Esav, his elder son, and said to him: 'My son,' and he said to him, 'Here I am.'

He [Yitzchak] said: 'Behold, now, I have become old; I do not know the day of my death. And now, take up your weapons – your quiver and your bow – and go out to the field to hunt me some venison. And prepare me tasty food such as I like, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.'" (27:1-4)

From Rivka's words a different picture emerges:

"Rivka told her son Yaakov, saying: Behold, I heard your father speaking to Esav, your brother, saying: 'Bring me venison and prepare me tasty food and I will eat, and I will bless you BEFORE GOD before I die.'" (27:6-7)

Rivka believed that Yitzchak was referring to the blessing of chosenness, the blessing of being "before God." She had no idea that Yitzchak meant to give Esav only his own, personal blessing.

Why did Rivka make this mistake? Apparently, the situation was brought about by God. In fact, both parents had made a mistake. What transpired was not what either of them had intended, and ultimately what prevailed was the Divine plan.

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## WAS ESAV AN UNMITIGATED VILLAIN? [2]

### Part I

#### A.

Our parasha is somewhat opaque, offering no acceptable explanation for why God chose Yaakov while rejecting Esav. Is it possible that Esav lost a glorious destiny just because of his gluttony when it came to the meal of pottage and his momentary scorn for the birthright?

To some extent, it appears from the sources that the rejection of Esav was a Divine decree, unrelated to his behavior. In our haftara, the prophet Malakhi teaches:

"You say, 'In what [way] have You loved us?'

'Was not Esav a brother to Yaakov?' says God. 'Yet I loved Yaakov....'" (1:2)

God promises Rivka that, from the very womb, Yaakov has been chosen and Esav rejected:

"The one nation will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger." (25:23)

#### B.

Though the Biblical text does not clearly indicate the reason for the rejection of Esav, all the midrashim insist that Esav was rejected because of his evil actions. On the same day that he scorned the birthright, he also murdered, had relations with a girl who was betrothed, and served idols (according to Bereishit Rabba). Yet, one could question the midrash, the destinies of both were settled before their birth! This is solved by Chazal through a midrash teaching that even while still in the womb, Yaakov would become agitated and seek to emerge whenever his mother walked by a beit midrash, while Esav wanted to visit a temple of idolatry – and this was the reason for their unceasing agitation within the womb.

But despite their "hostility" towards Esav, Chazal zealously protect Esav's merit in connection with two mitzvot: settling Eretz Yisrael (while Yaakov lived in Padan-Aram) and honoring his father. I shall focus here on the second issue.

C.

Chazal mention Esav's merit in regard in many midrashim, and teach that the prohibitions against hating the Edomites and against conquering the land of Edom arise from this merit in Esav's favor [3]. One such midrash teaches:

"R. Nechunia taught in the name of R. Tanchum bar Yudan: Who caused Yaakov's honor to be withheld in this world? The great honor that Esav showed for his father... Esav said: 'My father is worthy of using royal garments.'" (Pesikta Rabbati 23)

For what reason did Chazal, who were so insistent as to Esav's many sins, elaborate in this way on his merit in honoring his father? Was the fact that he brought his father venison and prepared tasty food for him so great in their eyes? It may be so, but in light of current events we may suggest a different understanding.

D.

Our parasha reveals two outstanding characteristics of Esav:

1. Esav is determined to receive his father's blessing and the desirable land promised to Avraham and to Yitzchak. He is prepared to do anything to earn this, and weeps bitterly when he loses it.
2. Owing to his occupation and his personality ("admoni" – fiery, hot tempered), killing comes easily to Esav. The Torah calls him a "valiant hunter" (like Nimrod, who was certainly a man of war, hunting people and murdering them); he went about with a band of four hundred fighters who occupied themselves and made their living in this way. His father's blessing – "by your sword shall you live" – likewise reflects this trait.

We may add that Esav appears to have been unaware of the prophecy told to his mother concerning himself and his brother Yaakov, nor is there any sign that he ever found out that it was Rivka who had coaxed Yaakov into tricking Yitzchak. He believed that his brother had come deceitfully on his own initiative. If we add to this his two major character traits, his plan to kill Yaakov is quite natural and, in fact, almost obvious.

E.

Despite the obvious reasons for wanting to kill Yaakov, Esav conquers his murderous urges for one single reason: he does not want to cause anguish to his father.

"The days of mourning for my father will approach, and [afterwards] I will kill my brother Yaakov." (27:41)

He will do this only after his father's death, despite the spirit of vengeance that burns inside him.

F.

In order to understand Esav's greatness in this regard, and the strength that it took to suppress his vengeful, hateful and murderous inclination, let us compare his behavior with that of Yaakov's sons, several decades later.

The brothers hate Yosef and are jealous of him; to a large extent, their feelings are understandable and perhaps even excusable. After all, Yosef speaks badly of them to their father, causing Yaakov – in their (mistaken!) understanding – to love them less than he does Yosef.

The hatred of some of the brothers for Yosef is so great that they even find justifications for killing him – or at least for selling him. The commentaries of the Rishonim (especially the Ba'alei ha-Tosafot) are filled with the legal arguments that they used: Yosef was, to their view, a "pursuer" [i.e., he was a real threat to their lives]; he was trying to make himself into a god ("Behold – the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me"). Their conniving against and abuse of their brother was a most severe transgression, and it is interesting, therefore, that the textual criticism of them (excluding the specific criticism of Reuven) focuses largely on one single element:

"How shall I go up to my father, while the boy is not with me – lest I see the anguish that will befall my father." (33:31)

This anguished cry appears at the climax of the process of repentance undergone by Yehuda and his brothers. It concerns not the injustice caused to Yosef, or the injustice that was seemingly about to happen with the handing over of Binyamin. The anguish deals with a different injustice – that caused to their elderly father. The crux of the brothers' regret, and Yehuda's separation from the rest of the brothers, arises from the mourning of the elderly father who refuses to be consoled over the disappearance of his beloved son.

Esav succeeded in conquering his hatred in order not to break his father's heart, while Yaakov's sons were not successful in this test. Esav's merit in this regard exceeds that of Bnei Yisrael.

G.

When Yaakov returns to Canaan from Padan-Aram, he is afraid of Esav and prays broken-heartedly to God. He sends Esav an offering and bows seven times before him – for which he is criticized by Chazal (e.g., Bereishit Rabba 75:3). Chazal are certain that Esav did not intend to kill Yaakov. How do they know this?

When Yaakov returned, Yitzchak was still alive. Yaakov underestimated the power of Esav's honor for his father. Even Rivka underestimated it, sending Yaakov off – **WRONGFULLY** – to twenty years of hard exile with Lavan. They were not aware that **ESAV WOULD NOT BREAK HIS FATHER'S HEART**.

Yitzchak dies close to the time when Yosef ascends to greatness in Egypt, and a few years later Yaakov goes down to Egypt – under the patronage of the Egyptian viceroy. It is perhaps for this reason that Esav does not manage to fulfill his plan.

## Part II

### A.

Many people have questioned my above conclusion: Is it indeed praiseworthy that someone refrains from killing his brother – no matter how profound the animosity between them? Can a civilized and God-fearing person admire someone who, after losing his birthright, refrains (temporarily!) from such a barbaric act as murder in general – and of his brother, in particular? How can we justify a person who takes up a sword, whatever his reasons?

I maintain that the midrashim that discuss Esav's merit and his reward, weigh up his merit for honoring his father against his great liability for his acts of murder, demonstrating to us how the mitzva of honoring his father can prevent the transgression of "You shall not murder." For it is a fact: it was out of his respect and consideration for Yitzchak that Esav refrained from killing Yaakov – and this represents a situation of "one mitzva drawing another mitzva after it."

This does not mean to turn Esav into a tzaddik, a righteous man. Esav remains a wicked person because of his evil acts, which included much bloodshed, but it does award this evil person an important point in his merit, bringing about (according to the midrash) the burial of Esav's head in Me'arat ha-Makhpela. If his entire merit was based on serving food to his father, I do not believe that it would be awarded such weight in Chazal's teachings.

Let me emphasize once again: there was not a moment in Esav's life when his honor for his father was more likely to reach its lowest point than the moment when it became clear to him that he had lost the blessing – the reward for honoring his father, which he had so keenly awaited. On the other hand, in my view there was no moment when his lack of restraint and his inclination to murder were as powerful as they were when he sought revenge on Yaakov for stealing his blessing. This was a **MOMENT OF GENUINE TEST**, when our natural expectation from someone like Esav would be that he would follow the path of bloodshed, to which he was so accustomed, and trample the mitzva of honoring his father – to which he was likewise accustomed. Despite this, at the crucial moment, the mitzva prevailed over the sin, drawing in its wake the fulfillment of the mitzvah, "You shall not murder." Esav's honoring of his father led him to refrain from bloodshed. This was not a "mitzva that comes about by means of a transgression," but rather a mitzva that prevented a transgression. His reward for this is even greater!

### B.

In order to clarify my position, I shall take an example from a less sensitive sphere. Let us attribute to Esav's honor for his father not only the mitzva of "You shall not murder," but also the mitzva "You shall not commit adultery." In the midrash quoted previously, concerning Esav's five major transgressions committed on the day he sold

the birthright, we are told that Esav not only spilled blood but also had relations with a girl who was betrothed to another man. Indeed, taking this idea further, the midrash teaches: "Throughout forty years, Esav used to kidnap women from their husbands and rape them" (Bereishit Rabba 85, 1).

However, upon reaching the age of forty, he marries wives – just as Yitzchak was married at the age of forty. We may scorn Esav for cheap imitation of his father, and interpret his actions as hypocrisy. Indeed, this is the line adopted by the midrash, which compares Esav to a pig that stretches forth its hooves as if to say, "See – I am kosher!" The midrash perceives an absolute contradiction between Esav's licentiousness in his sexual relations and his imitation of his father, and Chazal condemn him for it.

But I believe that, at least in spirit, this particular midrash contradicts those midrashim that praise Esav for the honor he shows his father. If the midrash praises Esav for honoring his father, then it would not mock an external show of this behavior – such as marrying his wives at the age of forty.

Let us attempt, therefore, to analyze the facts of this midrash in a different way. Esav is a lawless kidnapper of women so long as he is a bachelor, free of any family responsibilities. But at the age of forty, he assumes family responsibilities, and from that time onwards his wives rein him in – at least partially – since it is the nature of married life to temper unrestrained licentiousness. And he assumes this yoke out of identification with his father.

At the end of the section, Esav sees that the Canaanite women are evil in Yitzchak's eyes, and he goes and takes a wife from among the Yishmaelite women. Again, Rashi and the midrash treat him with contempt: "'Because of his wives' – he added another evil deed onto his former evildoing," but Seforno praises him, because according to the text, here again Esav sought to honor his father.

Any evil inherent in this deed certainly cannot be greater than his merit. The women that he married in the beginning were Canaanite idolaters. They did not honor his mother. There is certainly room for doubt as to whether the Yishmaelite woman was a great saint. And Esav did not divorce his first wives. It would certainly be difficult to compare Esav to the great penitent Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya – but can we not detect some aspect of repair, some "tikkun," in the fact that he marries at the age of forty, and that he marries a Yishmaelite woman after Yaakov flees? Once again – if this represents any kind of merit, then we cannot ignore yet another aspect of Esav's "kibbud av" (honor for his father).

D.

Esav is definitely more evil than righteous, but he is not altogether devoid of merit and we cannot ignore the weight of his merits. Still, we are troubled by the question: how could the household of Avraham, the personification of kindness, give rise to a murderer?

The acuteness of this question arises, to my mind, from the exegetical approach prevalent in the Torah world, which perceives Avraham's tent as a *beit midrash*,

where Eliezer sits as the Rosh Yeshiva and passes on his master's teachings to the disciples. The tent is open on all four sides, and all wayfarers are invited to enter, to eat and drink, and to bless God's Name. At the same time, Avraham is calling God's name, praying for the rehabilitation of the evil Sedom: in his abundant love and kindness, he is unable to sit by and watch the destruction of even the most wicked people. How can a grandson like Esav, who has grown up in a home of Torah and prayer, kindness and boundless love, come to hate people and to spill their blood?

In other words, Yitzchak's home – which must clearly have been a beit midrash, like his father's home – a home that was filled with the holy fire of self-sacrifice and fear of heaven, a fire with its source in the flames upon the altar on Mount Moria, a home where the blind Yitzchak, cut off from reality, would sit and commune with His Creator and with His ministering angels – how could this background give rise to a murderer such as Esav?

E.

The above assumptions concerning the respective homes of Avraham and Yitzchak, and the concepts which, to my mind, form the basis of the biblical approach familiar to all of us, are certainly true. They represent a great and illuminating truth – but, to my mind, not the whole truth. The image of Avraham as welcoming guests and praying on behalf of the wicked men of Sedom is taken from a single day in his life. Although we may assume that this day is meant to teach us about his conduct in general, there is still room to examine other aspects of Avraham's life.

In fact, we may question whether Avraham himself did not spill much blood. In his daring raid, at the head of his three hundred and eighteen men, on the camp of Kedarla'omer, Avraham slew all at once the armies of four great kings. We have previously discussed the obvious parallel between Avraham in this battle and Gidon: the elements that are similar include the size of the army (Gidon's force numbered three hundred), the strategy (splitting up into several parties at night and then launching a sudden attack on an enemy camp that is fast asleep), and the goals (one of Gidon's goals, as borne out at the end of the battle, was to save his brethren who had been captured by the Midianites, while Avraham intended to save his "brother" Lot). Gidon killed one hundred and twenty thousand men on the same night, and this number may give us some idea of how much blood was spilled by Esav's grandfather – none other than Avraham.

What was Avraham fighting for? For what purpose did he multiply the widows in Shinar and the orphans in Alsar? The answer provided by the text is extremely concise: he intended only to save Lot from captivity.

F.

Let us return to Esav. We could make our task easier and absolve ourselves of the need for profound thought and precise distinctions by casting Esav as a mobster - a person who kills for pleasure, or for the purposes of his personal business. The differences between himself and Avraham, his grandfather, will be great, and we will be faced not with the difficult question of what differentiates them from one another,



but rather with the (psychologically) easier question of how an Esav could arise from the home of an Avraham.

But if Esav was a rotten murderer from the start, how are we to explain Yitzchak's love for him? Was Yitzchak so completely cut off from his surroundings? Was he blind from the day that Esav was born? Can we imagine a blind father who is so acutely out of touch with his son? Why did Rivka not report Yitzchak's son's doings?

G.

To my mind, the red-haired Esav did not grow up as a MURDERER. He grew up as a WARRIOR. He took with him into battle the brave spirit and military heritage of his grandfather Avraham, and the band of fighters that he commanded was only slightly greater than that headed by Avraham: he had 400 men as opposed to Avraham's 318. Chazal connect Esav's bravery in hunting to that of Nimrod, the valiant hunter. The literal text regarding Nimrod would seem to refer to bravery in battle and hunting of men, and therefore Nimrod – the valiant hunter – became the king of Bavel. After all, a hunter of animals does not become king.

It is precisely for this reason that Yitzchak loves Esav. The blind Yitzchak, sitting in his tent and communing with the Shekhina, is not the only Yitzchak that we know. Yitzchak was a "man of the field," who held onto his land tenaciously, sowed it and reaped a hundred-fold. He achieved this in the Negev region during a drought (Rashi on 26:12)! Yitzchak owned much property and vast flocks – to the extent that the king of Gerar told him, "Go away from us, for you have become far greater than us." Owing to his extensive property and his stubborn attachment to the land [4], Yitzchak earned himself many enemies. In contrast to Avraham, Yitzchak's solitary nature did not allow him to lead an army of soldiers. It is for this reason that Yitzchak is pursued relentlessly on account of his first wells, and he is forced to withdraw and to move from place to place.

Yitzchak withdrew from Gerar, from Esek and from Sitna. When he came to Rechovot, he no longer suffered any harassment. We may attribute this to the distance between Rechovot and the inhabcenter of the land of the Philistines, or to some other explanation. Yet it is possible that between the time of his banishment from the original wells and Yitzchak's resettlement in Rechovot, Esav grew up and became a valiant warrior, who gathered a band of fighters around him, such that the Philistines no longer dared to torment him.

It is reasonable to assume that even after Yitzchak settled in Rechovot, in the Negev, he was open to raids by lawless desert bandits. It seems that here, too, Esav was required to rely on his sword and bow, and not just to hunt for food.

A covenant of blood was forged between Yitzchak – a man of the field, the land and hard labor – and his son Esav, who maintained his legion on Yitzchak's land, with its wells and the flocks grazing in the wilderness. It was a covenant between the scythe and the sword, between the farmer and the guard. Because of these qualities in Esav, Yitzchak wanted to eventually bestow the kingship upon him, since "a king is appointed in order to effect justice and to wage war." When the plan was thwarted, his blessing to Esav was, "You shall live by the sword, and you shall serve your brother."

Yaakov was to be the lord of the land, while Esav and his army would be the mercenaries who would protect it [5].

H.

It is the Esav who plots to kill Yaakov, who gives rise to the midrashic image of Esav the murderer, the spiller of blood – an image that, to my mind, is as far removed from the literal text as a soldier from a murderer. And since we can neither abandon the literal text nor ignore the image depicted by the midrash, we seem to have no choice but to describe a character comprised of both sides of the sword: defensive war on the one hand, and murder on the other.

In practice, it is not at all difficult to describe such a character. A man who raises his sword in war will soon become accustomed to the smell of blood. He is likely even to become used to the terrible sight of a living person turning into a lifeless corpse as a result of his own blow; he may well habituate his ears to the weeping of widows and the cry of orphans – at that moment losing the distinction between good and evil; between cruel necessity and killing that is only ALMOST a necessity: **KILLING THAT AMOUNTS TO MURDER**. After all, so great a soldier as Yoav, who devoted his entire life to saving Israel and killing their enemies, ultimately stumbled and committed several acts of murder (Avner, Amassa, and perhaps Avshalom and Uria), for which he was held accountable.

I.

Esav was nothing like Yoav. The murders committed by Yoav were failures that resulted from his habituation to the sword, the battlefield, and the delicate line dividing life and death. He felt his acts of murder had viable legal justification. He paid their price in being put to death at Shelomo's command, but he died in God's house. In the Gemara in Sanhedrin and in all the midrashim, Chazal regard him as destined for life in the World to Come. Nowhere is he called "the wicked Yoav."

Esav, in contrast, is "the wicked Esav." Chazal do not regard him as a person who stumbles in isolated acts of killing based on halakhic justifications, but rather consider him a person who started out as a defending warrior and then deteriorated from killing desert bandits to killing personal adversaries and the husbands of women that he desired for himself, etc. Perhaps this moral decline took place only after Yitzchak lost his sight. This, then, was the dividing line between what Yitzchak knew – that Esav was a fighter who had inherited his traits from Avraham, and what Yitzchak did not know – that Esav had crossed the boundary between the permissible and the prohibited.

Esav probably asked Yitzchak questions concerning the laws of warfare – whom he was permitted to kill and whom he must refrain from killing – and it is perhaps to this that Chazal refer when they describe Esav asking about tithing straw and salt. But he eventually followed the path of other fighting bands, who deteriorated because of their might and their success in performing whatever deeds they chose, while their natural, moral sensitivity to blood gradually disappeared.

Still, we must ask: can we really judge a warrior, whose sensitivity to blood is dulled as a result of his occupation, by the same standards that we apply to a person who sits engaged in study in the beit midrash?

J.

The key to answering to our last question lies with Esav's biblical "double" – none other than King David.

Like Esav, he too was a red-haired hunter, who killed a lion and a bear with his bare hands. Like Esav, he gathered a band of four hundred embittered fighters under his leadership, and went off with them to the northern Negev in order to engage the desert bandits in battle. Like Esav, who managed to paint a deceptive picture of himself in the eyes of his father, David deceived Akhish, king of Gat, not telling him of the massacre that he had wrought among the Gizrites and Geshurites, inhabitants of the land. Like Esav, the man of the sword who protected his father, a man of the land – David, too, forged a covenant with the people of Yehuda who dwelled in the Kenite and Yerachmielite Negev, to protect their fields and their flocks. He lived by the sword, and that was how he made his living. Like Esav, picked out by his father for kingship ("You shall be a lord to your brethren..."), David was anointed for kingship by Shemuel. Like Esav, who lost his right to rule when he exchanged the sword of defensive battle for the sword of the murderer, David ALMOST lost his right to rule – but only "almost."

Here we come to that most common mistake in the beit midrash: judging biblical characters as though they were students in a beit midrash all their lives. David was engaged in warfare his whole life. On two occasions, he nearly crossed the line to murder, but turned back at the last moment. David fully intended to murder Shaul in the cave at Ein Gedi; he crawled over to Shaul in the dark and lifted his sword against him. Only after he lifted the sword, did he decide to lower it and to limit himself to cutting off a corner of his cloak (and even for this he suffered remorse). He did not reproach his men initially for their advice that he kill Shaul; he rebuked them only after listening to their advice and then reconsidering. He decisively rejected murder, but only after coming perilously close to committing it.

Likewise, in a later incident, David set off in great anger intending to slaying every male in the house of Naval the Carmelite – all because of food that he had been refused. Because of a broth of pottage, David was prepared to kill. But while his sword was still raised in the air, Avigayil succeeded in rebuking him over needless bloodshed – and David returned his sword to its sheath.

My heart tells me that it is precisely David's standing up to these difficult tests that gave him the merit to prevent a future slaughter. During the terrible plague when David saw the angel of God at the threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite, standing between earth and the heavens, his sword in his hand outstretched towards Jerusalem, God heard David's prayer. There we are told, "God commanded the angel – and he returned his sword to its sheath" (Divrei ha-Yamim I 21:27).

K.

Let us return to our question: are we to judge the killing perpetrated by a warrior by the same moral standards that we apply to a civilian? The answer is dual: certainly we do not, and certainly we do.

There is no doubt that the fighter's habituation to the sword and his lack of sensitivity to bloodshed may bring him very quickly to lift up his sword. In modern terms, he may place his opponent in his sights, insert a magazine, ready his weapon – and even open the safety catch. But it is specifically the awareness and responsibility that he is supposed to have, because he bears arms, that should serve as the brakes, telling him at the last moment – "Do not put forth your hand towards the boy and do not do anything to him." Or, in our terms – although you have opened the safety catch, don't pull the trigger.

A peaceful civilian, a person engaged in Torah st, will loathe, from the very outset, the idea of inserting a magazine into the weapon. Not so David and Esav. Both are red-headed. Both are hardened, embittered fighters. Both command bands of fighters who live by their swords, who require a cruel and decisive leader. Both lift their sword against people who are borderline candidates for halakhic justification to be put to death. David returns his sword to its sheath and is rewarded with kingship. Esav uses his sword to kill his opponents. From here he descends to killings that are not borderline cases for a justified death sentence, and instead of kingship he is told, "You will live by your sword – and you will serve your brother."

It is a very fine line that separates the sword of a mitzva from the sword of a murderer. But woe to the person who crosses this line.

L.

On one occasion, Esav the red-head did have the merit of resembling King David. The valiant fighter indeed became, for just one moment, a true hero, who conquered his evil inclination. The "conqueror of the city" became the master of his own spirit. The man whose hand never let go of his sword discovered the secret of its boundaries. FOR ONE MOMENT, the murderer once again – RIGHTFULLY – assumed the features of a fighter in defense. This was when Esav lifted his sword against his competitor, the one who stole his blessing, his birthright and his future – Yaakov – but returned it to its sheath out of honor for his father.

No moral consideration, in my eyes, can take this merit away from Esav. This merit was greater than that of the brothers, the tribes of God, in their conflict with Yosef. It was a moment in which Esav was truly worthy of the kingship that his father had wanted to bestow upon him.

Esav was indeed awarded this kingship when the king of Yehuda, Yehoram ben Yehoshafat, the eldest son, killed all his brothers in order to become king (Divrei ha-Yamim II 21). Then Edom revolted, and appointed themselves a king.

He was awarded kingship again when the two sons of Shlomtzion – Hyrkanus and Aristobulus – fought over the kingdom and were ready to kill one another. At that time, the merit of Esav – who had refrained from killing his brother, in similar circumstances - stood firm for his descendants. And it was then that Antipater and

Herod inherited the royal throne of Israel – may it be rebuilt and restored speedily in our days, Amen.

NOTES:

This shiur is abridged from the Hebrew original. The full shiur can be accessed in the original at:

<http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/parsha.php>.

[1] See last week's shiur on the children of Ketura.

[2] What appears here is my part in a written debate that took place several years ago. To read the entire debate, see "Daf Keshet," vols. 522, 525, 526 and 528, archived online at <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/522daf.htm> (follow the links at the end of the article).

[3] See, for example, Bereishit Rabba 76, Devarim Rabba 1, Tanchuma Kedoshim 15, and many other sources. In short – search the Bar-Ilan Responsa project CD.

[4] Avraham, in contrast, was a wandering shepherd who did not hold any land. Yaakov was similar to Avraham in this respect.

[5] I first heard the idea of a covenant between Yitzchak and Esav on this basis from Rav Yoel bin-Nun. In the years following his original article, Rav bin-Nun wrote about it at greater length in his book, "Pirkei ha-Avot."

Translated by Kaeren Fish