

PARASHAS TOLDOS

A Question of Honor

How different can two brothers be? As different as black and white. The Torah describes how the twin brothers Jacob and Esau were already veering off in different directions from the time they were together in the womb. Eventually, Jacob developed into a man of accomplishment totally absorbed in spiritual and intellectual pursuits, while Esau became a lusty creature of the wilds, a predator indulging his every whim and desire. Esau is portrayed as one of the blackest figures in the Torah, known for all time as "Eisav Harasha," Esau the Wicked, the epitome of evil, the nemesis of the Jewish people.

And yet, there is an incongruous note in this portrayal. Esau honored his father Isaac to such an extraordinary extent that a great sage is quoted in the Midrash as saying, "I attended to my father all my life, but never did I do even one percent of what Esau did for his father." How can someone who so thoroughly honored his father be so thoroughly evil in all else?

The Talmud illustrates the extent of the *mitzvah* of honoring parents with the following story.

During the time of the Second Temple, it happened that certain gems of the breastplate of the High Priest needed to be replaced immediately, but where could such rare gems be found on such short notice? Someone suggested that a certain gentile named Dama bar Nesinah might have the required gems, and a delegation of the Sages went to his home to investigate the matter.

"We are told you have these gems," they said after explaining their predicament. "Is this true?"

"Oh yes, indeed, I have them," said Dama. "Come back tomorrow, and we will talk."

"Tomorrow is much too late," said the Sages. "We need them immediately. We are prepared to pay handsomely. Six hundred thousand shekels!"

Dama gasped at the mention of the exorbitant sum. Then he shook his head sadly.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," he said. "You see, the gems are in my strong room, under lock and key. And the key is in my father's room, under his pillow. My father is sleeping now, and I cannot possibly get

the key from under the pillow without waking him. I am sorry. There is nothing I can do.”

The following year, Dama was again visited by a delegation of the Sages.

“We need a parah adumah, a perfect red heifer to use in our purification ritual,” they said to Dama. “This is a very rare animal, and we are prepared to pay a fortune for it. Six hundred thousand shekels! We have heard that just such a red heifer was born in your herd. Is this true?”

“Indeed, it is,” he replied.

“Can you bring it to us without waking your father?”

“I certainly can.”

“Then the money is yours. Hashem has rewarded your righteousness.”

The commentaries take a closer look at this passage in the Talmud and find a subtle and very profound message. The importance of honoring parents is a fundamental value in every society and culture that ever existed, because it is so logical. A person owes his sustenance, his upbringing, his very existence to his parents. It is a debt that can never be repaid, and therefore there is no limit to the obligation to honor one’s parents. Dama, the worthy gentile, understood this and went to great lengths to honor his father. But the limits of his personal understanding were also the limits of his righteousness. If he did not understand it, he would not do it.

The Sages, on the other hand, also went to great lengths in this story. They paid an exorbitant sum for the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah*, the ultimate example of a divine decree that defies human understanding, a *chok*. They accepted the commands of Hashem that they did not understand with the same enthusiasm and devotion they accorded to the commands that they did understand.

Esau also honored his father simply because he considered it logical to do so. There was no connection to Hashem in his performance of this *mitzvah*, no elevation of the spirit, no transcendent expansion of the soul. By honoring his father, Esau did not rise above his ego, and he remained capable of indulging every one of his selfish whims and desires.

The *mitzvos* of the Torah enable us to connect to Hashem and rise to higher levels of spirituality. Although we cannot always understand the *mitzvos* fully, we can always be secure in the knowledge that they are meant for our own good.