

PARASHAS TOLDOS

Esau's Tears

Disappointment can be utterly devastating. When a person has high expectations, when he can practically taste the fulfillment of his passionate desire, and then it is snatched away, the sense of loss can be almost too much to bear.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the intense rivalry between Jacob and Esau, Isaac's two sons. In his advanced age, Isaac, who is blind, decides that it is time to bestow his blessings on his elder son Esau. Unbeknownst to him, however, Jacob had earlier purchased the elder rights from Esau. In a dramatic turn of events, Jacob poses as his elder brother and takes the blessings for himself.

When Esau discovers that his brother Jacob has surreptitiously taken the blessings intended for him, he is beside himself. He pleads with his father for another blessing, and he cries bitter tears. It is a sorry spectacle.

Why does the Torah go to such detail in describing Esau's utter collapse when he discovers he has lost Isaac's blessings? Why must we be told that he wept like a frustrated child?

The Zohar, the fundamental Kabbalistic work, addresses this question and concludes that the Jewish people will never break free from the power of Esau's crying until they shed tears that outweigh his.

These words are an enigma. What do they mean?

The commentators explain that weeping is the most powerful expression of the human soul. Words, no matter how eloquent, are no more than descriptions of the emotional storms that rage within us. They attempt to give intellectual form to the emotions. But emotions are not intellectual by nature, and therefore, they cannot be expressed adequately in intellectual terms. When a person bursts into tears, however, he is giving vent to his raw emotions. The pain, anguish and frustration all come pouring out in this primal outcry that emanates from the deepest recesses of the soul.

When Esau discovered that Jacob had taken Isaac's material blessings, which he recognized as an ironclad guarantee of great bounty, he was shaken to his very core. Gone was the prospect of unrestricted dominion over the physical world. Gone was the prospect of unbounded pleasure and indulgence. His whole world shattered, and his profound pain poured forth in the hot tears that coursed down his face.

Let us now shine the light of scrutiny upon ourselves. What brings us to the brink of tears? What deep frustrations wrench at our souls? All too often, our inability to achieve the material prizes for which we hunger drives us to distraction. Even if they are small luxuries we crave, we are frustrated when our aspirations are not fulfilled. But these are Esau's tears. They are not fitting for us.

When will we break free from Esau's cry which constantly insinuates itself into our lives? When we learn to weep over our spiritual frustrations, explains the Zohar. If we can shed tears when exalted spiritual goals elude our grasp, if we can rise above the petty diversions of the material world, only then will be worthy of redemption.

A father went for a walk with his young son on a cold winter day.

"I'm very pleased with your progress, son," he said, "and therefore, I have decided to give you a reward."

He drew a bright silver coin from his pocket and extended it to his son. The boy's eyes sparkled excitedly, and he reached for the coin.

Just then, his father slipped on a patch of ice. He fell to the ground, clutching his twisted ankle. The silver coin fell from his hand. It rolled away and fell into a drain.

The boy ran after the coin. He tried to retrieve it from the drain, but to no avail. "It's gone," he called out in a distraught voice. "Father, can you give me another coin?"

"No, I will not," replied his father. "Here I am lying on the ground in agony, and all you think about is the coin that rolled away. I see I was wrong about you. You have a long way to go before you deserve a reward."

In our own lives, we live in a society that measures people's worth by the glittering baubles they accumulate. But are these things really so essential? Does it really matter that much if the microwave oven goes on the blink or the cruise control consistently fail to catch? The amenities are nice, but are they really the air we breathe? Should the lack of these things bring us to frustration? Are we guilty of shedding Esau's tears? Only if we set our priorities on spiritual achievements, if we strive to draw closer to the Almighty, if we seek to deepen our relationships and friendships, only then will we find true happiness and fulfillment.