

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yechezkel Dov *ben* Nota Dovid *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

The Tragedy of Eisav’s Head

PARSHAS TOLDOS 5777

The venerable R’ Chaim Solovetchik of Brisk once witnessed a scene that left upon him an indelible impression.

Lopsided Match-up

At first glance, one might not have been so overwhelmed by the sight: it was simply a man driving a wagon pulled by a pair of horses. What was so striking, however, was the element of contrast. The wagon driver was not possessed of a particularly formidable build. His bearing was limp and stooped over; in fact, it appeared as if at any minute the man would simply keel over. But the horses – they were the picture of sheer power: sleek, healthy, and muscular. They seemed quite able and ready to flex their might at the slightest whim.

Which is exactly what so intrigued R’ Chaim. Why, in fact, wouldn’t they do just that? Here was this weak, slightly built driver holding the reigns, every so often giving a half-hearted tap with his whip or a barely perceptible tug to direct the horses one way or another. And yet, they responded to his feeble exertions. Surely, had they wanted, they could overpower the poor wretch in an instant, sending him flying and taking off on their own merry way. So why didn’t they?

Sharing his thoughts with his accompanying disciple, R’ Chaim explained the tremendous lesson he derived from this spectacle. “You know why they don’t assert themselves in this way?” he asked. “I will explain: it’s because, all in all, they are just horses, *and they don’t consider their own power*. Had they been cognizant of their true strength, they would surely not hesitate to use it. But in the meantime, they remain subservient to the man with the reigns.

“And so it is,” R’ Chaim concluded, “with so many people. Hashem has imbued each and every person with marvelous abilities and the capacity to attain true greatness. But unless they realize their worth and inherent potential, it will remain dormant and under-utilized, in the manner of the horses” (*R’ Yitzchak Zilberstein, Aleinu L’shabei’ach, parshas No’ach*).

This is, after all, a central tenet in *avodas Hashem* (service of Hashem). In his *sefer* devoted to this very subject – *Sha’arei Avodah* (Gates of Service) – Rabbeinu Yonah grants priority to this idea. He writes right in the beginning: “The first step for a person who strives to serve Hashem is to know his self-worth and recognize his attributes and those of his forefathers... and how beloved they were to the Creator. He should thus endeavor and strengthen himself constantly to live up to this elevated status...”

And, of course, the crucial exercise of recognizing one’s value and central role in Creation is highlighted by the Mishnah in Sanhedrin (4:5), which states:

כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד חַיֵּב לומר, בְּשִׁבְלֵי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם.

“Each and every person is obligated to proclaim: ‘The world was created on my account.’”

What Could Have Been

In any event, the notion of unused potential is exemplified by one of the principal figures of this week's *parshah*: Eisav. We tend to view him, especially as compared to his righteous brother, as just some unrestrained brute. Such seems to be the simple intimation of the *passuk*'s description of the two brothers: וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדַע צַיִד אִישׁ שְׂדֵה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֲהָלִים – “And Eisav was a man who knew hunting – an outdoorsman; and Ya’akov was a wholesome person, who dwelled in the tents (of learning)” (*Bereishis* 25:27). And this impression is certainly reinforced by his behavior, as recorded in the narrative of the birthright. He enters fatigued from his outdoor activities, demanding food and having it literally poured down his throat. These victuals he attained by ceding his most precious spiritual asset – his firstborn status. This he discarded in a most casual and disdainful manner, declaring: הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוּת וְלָמָּה זֶה לִי בְכֹרָה – “Behold I am going to die, so for what do I need this birthright?” (*ibid.* v. 32).

But Chazal reveal that there was a lot more to Eisav lurking beneath the surface. Such emerges from the well-known episode related about the burial of the two brothers years later. Following Ya’akov’s passing, his sons transported him from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael in order to inter him in the famed sepulcher of Me’aras Hamachpeilah, the resting place of the patriarchs. But there was a hold-up at the last minute. Eisav arrived, asserting that the last burial place was reserved for him and not Ya’akov. The matter was finally laid to rest when Chushim, the son of Dan, severed Eisav’s head – which rolled and ended up in the Me’aras Hamachpeilah. The remainder of his body was interred in the surrounding area (*Targum Yonasan ben Uziel, Bereishis* 50:13; *cf. also Sotah* 13a).

It is quite interesting to note who, in the end, is buried in Me’aras Hamachpeilah: Adam and Chavah, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivkah, Ya’akov and Le’ah – and Eisav’s head. R’ Aharon Kotler would often cite this phenomenon and highlight the poignant lesson to be learned from it. It is no small matter that Eisav’s head ended up buried in such a special and elevated environment. This is indicative of what was contained within. That is to say, Eisav was blessed with great inherent potential – his mind was capable of attainments of Divine wisdom of mammoth proportions. But like the horses seen by R’ Chaim, Eisav failed to properly utilize the great gifts and abilities with which he was imbued.

At the very least, then, Eisav should be an example to us of what can occur if one ignores his potential and squanders his capabilities. Rather, we should strive to fulfill the dictum contained in the Mishnah – to recognize our worth and great importance in the scheme of Creation. Hopefully, we may thereby aim to live up to this elevated stature and utilize the great strengths that Hashem has bestowed upon each individual.

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