BS”D

*Parshas VaYishlach*

The Torah is portraying two approaches to life: that of Esav who is self-centered and not overly concerned with his progeny (who go on to lead immoral lives) and that of Yaakov who is concerned for the quality of his life and the values of his descendants.

The Families of Esav and of Yaakov

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

After Yaakov returns to the land of Canaan to his father Yitzchak, the Torah tells us that Esav decided to move. “Esav took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all members of his household, his flocks… He went to (another) land because of his brother Yaakov, for their possessions were too numerous to live together. The land where they lived could not support them because of their flocks. So Esav dwelt in Mount Seir; Esav is Edom.” (Breishis 36: 6 – 8)

The Midrash Rabba comments on the above passages. It calls Yaakov wise and Esav foolish. When Yaakov travelled to Canaan, he took his children first and then his wives, whereas Esav took his wives first and then his children.

Also, the Midrash explains why Esav left Canaan. Either because whoever wanted to inherit Canaan had to pay the price of enduring exile first. Or because Esav was embarrassed that he had sold the birthright to Yaakov. Although the Torah says the land couldn’t support both brothers, we need an explanation as to why it was Esav who chose to leave.

My first question concerns the criticism of Esav for putting his wives first. What exactly is so bad about that? Furthermore, as the Maharal poins out, we find on one occasion that Yaakov also put his wives first and then his children. That was when he forded the Yabok river. (32:23) We also find that Moshe took his wife first and then his children on the donkey when he returned to Egypt from Midian (Shmos 4:20) So why are we criticizing Esav for taking his wives first?

The truth is that the core of the passages about Esav’s leaving seems to contradict what we learned in the beginning of the Parsha.

As Yaakov came to the land of Canaan, he sent messengers to Esav to announce his coming and to effect reconciliation with him. He sent the messengers in “the land of Seir, the field of Edom.” (32:4) So Esav was already living in the land of Edom. After the brothers are reconciled, Esav invited Yaakov to visit him in the land of Seir. Yaakov excuses himself from the visit, and Esav heads back to Seir. At any rate, we see that Esav was already dwelling in Seir-Edom before Yaakov returned to the land of Canaan.

The Ramban deals with this seeming contradiction very well. He suggests that Esav went to Seir originally without his family. He acquired land not on “the mountain of Seir,” but rather in “the field of Edom.” Yaakov sent his messengers in the beginning of the Parsha to the *field* of Edom.

At that point, the local inhabitants of Mount Seir did not feel threatened by Esav. He was an individual, not a whole clan, and he was in the lowlands, not penetrating the hill country of Mount Seir.

After Yaakov returned, Esav decided to move his family and permanently settle in Seir. Now he needed more land, so he and his descendants conquered the *mountains* of Seir and drove out the original inhabitants, the Chorites.

What to me seems missing from Ramban’s explanation is why did Esav go to Seir in the first plae if he wasn’t planning to settle his family there?

I suggest the following possible explanation: When Yaakov was still at Lavan’s, the situation of who would eventually inherit Canaan was still fluid, at least in Esav’s mind. Yes, Yitzchak had given his blessing to Yaakov, but at this point Yaakov was in exile. Would he come back? If he did, might not Esav succeed in killing him and being rid of him forever? Or perhaps Yaakov would come back triumphantly, settle close by his father Yitzchak, and indeed become heir to the land.

Esav hedged his bet. He established a beachhead in Seir, a fallback position. Then he waited to see what would happen. When he learned of Yaakov’s imminent arrival, he went towards him with 400 warrirors. He was hostile and anticipated a fight. But after receiving Yaakov’s gifts and meeting with him, Esav’s heart turned and he was somewhat reconciled.

So Yaakov is back with Yitzchak. Esav realizes they both cannot stay in Canaan. So his wise decision to establish a base in Seir paid off. Now events dictated that he uproot his whole family and make Seir his new home, his new inheritance.

Now as far as Esav putting his wives first, followed by his children, I think this is how our sages understood it:

To Esav, the most important thing was the pleasure he had from his wives. Sure, they had children, sure he had a whole family, but family was secondary. The main thing to Esav was Esav and Esav enjoyed his wives.

But to Yaakov, wives were part of family. Of course, Yaakov loved his wives, particularly Rochel, but the point of marriage is not simply to be with a woman. It’s to raise a family, a family to whom Yaakov taught his values, a family that would be the nucleus of the people of Israel. Putting the children before the wives is not a denigration of his wives. It is rather a statement that Yaakov is concerned not merely with himself or his wives as individuals, but with the entire family as a unit.

The Akeidas Yitzchak makes a telling point about the genealogy of Esav listed at the end of the Parsha. A careful reading of the names leads to a conclusion that there were illegitimate relationships going on among Esav’s progeny. (See, for example, Rashi’s comment on the passage, “Oholivama, daughter of Ana, daughter of Tzivon, the Chivite.” (36:2) Rashi asks how can she be the daughter of both Ana and of Tzivon? See Rashi’s explanation there.)

The Torah is portraying two approaches to life. Esav’s is self-centered and not concerned overly much with his progeny. Indeed that progeny, in many cases, lead immoral lives.

But Yaakov is concerned for the quality of his life and values of his descendants. His children are first and foremost on his mind. He seeks to create a people worthy of the Divine blessing, worthy of inheriting the promised land, the land of Canaan.

So, after the list of Esav’s descendants, the next Parsha continues with the story of Yaakov’s descendants. They struggle with issues of morality. They struggle with issues of interpersonal relationships. The twelve become seventy, the seventy become six hundred thousand. The people of Israel are formed.