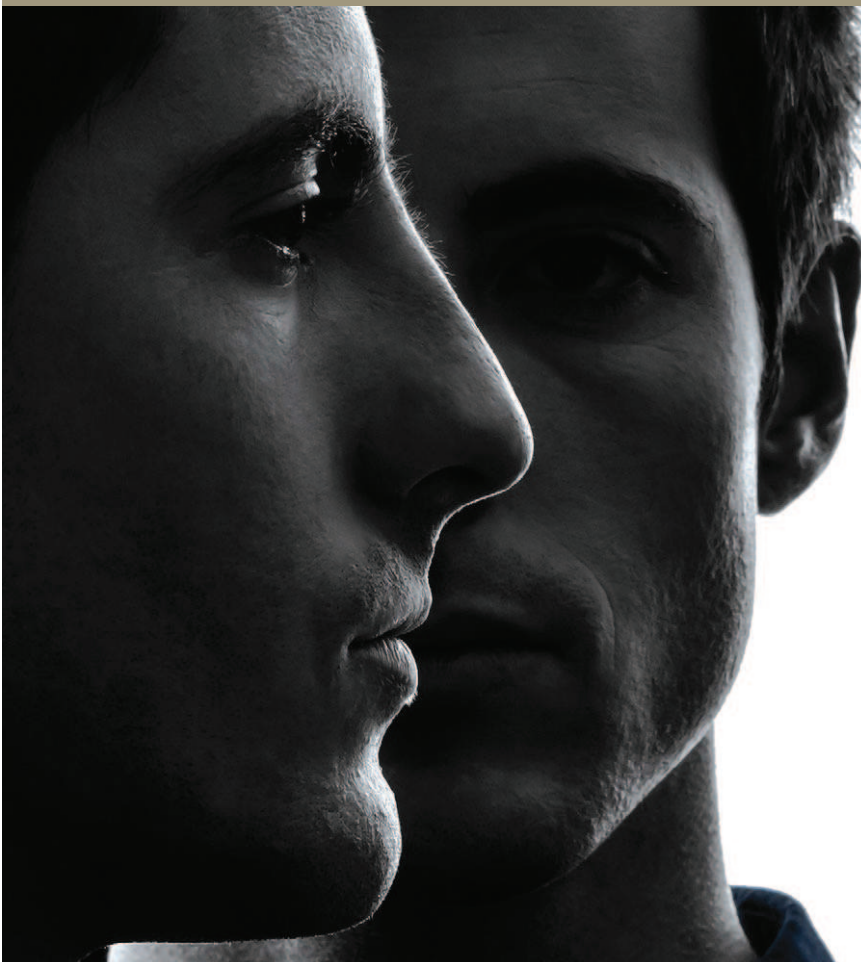


SOMETIMES A MITZVAH IS ONLY A GOOD DEED

WHAT PARENTS AND CHILDREN CAN LEARN FROM IDENTICAL TWINS YAAKOV AND EISAV
BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



ACCORDING TO OUR SAGES, YAAKOV AVINU (our patriarch) and his brother Eisav (aka Esau) were not merely twins, but identical twins, who, at least from the outside, were nearly indistinguishable. When Yaakov and Eisav were young children, not only did they look alike, but any differences that existed in their behaviour were indiscernible, thus making it impossible to perceive their true nature. Accordingly, the twin brothers were

given the same upbringing and education by their parents, Yitzchak Avinu (our patriarch) and Rivkah Imeinu (our matriarch).

Once Yaakov and Eisav reached barmitzvah (the age of maturity), however, the radical differences in their personalities began suddenly, albeit surreptitiously, to emerge, as Yaakov withdrew to the Beis HaMedrash (the study hall) and Eisav withdrew to avodah zarah (worshipping idols). Despite hav-

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ing been raised by two tzadikim (righteous people), Eisav failed to internalise anything from their influence and behaviour. Our sages teach that Avraham Avinu (our patriarch) was spared from witnessing the public degeneration of his grandson, Eisav, who came to be known ever after as Eisav HaRasha (Esau the wicked).

After informing us of their birth, the Torah proceeds to jump years ahead and to tell us about Yaakov and Eisav as young men. We are told that Eisav grew up to become a hunter, who was skilled at trapping wild animals and birds with his bow, as well as a smooth talker, who was skilled at ‘trapping’ and deceiving his father with his mouth. Such a skilled hunter was Eisav that he succeeded in killing Nimrod along with Nimrod’s son, Chavir, and taking from Nimrod the special clothing belonging to Adam

HaRishon, which had come into Nimrod's hands. When Eisav wore these clothes, they gave him special strength. Such a skilled 'trapper' was Eisav that he succeeded in feigning piety and giving the impression, at least to his father, that he was quite meticulous in observing mitzvos.

Yitzchak loved Eisav because of Eisav's 'trappings', both literally (ie, due to the animals that Eisav would trap) and figuratively (ie, due to the words that Eisav would use to deceive Yitzchak).

On the day Avraham died, however, it was like a dam burst, as the true nature of the then 15-year-old Eisav was suddenly and viciously revealed in all of its profound ugliness. Our sages teach that, immediately upon Avraham's passing, Eisav committed five aveiros (sins): (1) He raped a girl who was engaged to be married; (2) He killed a man; (3) He was kofer b'ikur (denied the existence of Hashem); (4) He denied t'chias ha'meisim (the resurrection of the dead); and (5) He mocked and regarded with contempt his status as the bachor [the first born – which, prior to the designation of the Kohanim as being the exclu-

sive performers of the avodah (service) to Hashem, was the exclusive privilege of the first born], which he sold to his brother, Yaakov, in exchange for a few beans. Our sages add to this list that Eisav also practised idolatry and committed theft on that day. And the rape that Eisav committed that day would only be the first of many, as he continued until the age of 40 to 'trap' (as a hunter traps his prey) married women and rape them. Although he later regretted his negative feelings towards the bechora, Eisav generally practised a philosophy of living entirely for the moment and not worrying about tomorrow.

At the age of 40, Eisav decided to emulate his father and get married, choosing not one, but two women, who were idol worshipers from the nation of Chas, descendants from Canaan. Even when it became evident to Eisav that his father, like his fa-

ther before him, forbade his brother, Yaakov, from choosing a wife from among the daughters of Canaan, did Eisav separate himself from his Canaanite wives, who had so upset his parents? No, he just sought out another wife, this time being careful to choose one from his father's and his grandfather's own family – albeit, the wrong side of the family, the side that his grandmother, Sarah Imeinu (our matriarch), had insisted that they distance themselves from due to their negative influence: Machalas, the daughter of his uncle, Yishmael.

So, is there anything that we can possibly learn from a person such as Eisav?

Our sages tell us that Eisav had to his credit a single mitzvah: kibud av, honouring his father. The honour with which Eisav accorded Yitzchak was, in fact, exemplary. Eisav would even get specially dressed in royal robes (the special clothing of Adam

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HaRishon that he had taken from Nimrod) in order to serve his father, as he believed that nothing less than such elegant clothing was befitting the honour of Yitzchak!

Our sages teach that the mitzvah of kibud av v'eim (honouring father and mother) is counted among those mitzvos that are logical and obvious to all of the nations of the world. Moreover, they tell us that even those who are kofrim (deniers of Hashem's existence) are careful with honouring their father and mother, because it is logical and natural to do. We, the nation of Israel, are commanded regarding all such mitzvos that are logical that we not perform these mitzvos because of their inherent logic, but solely because Hashem commands us to do them. And this is true for all mishpatim (mitzvos that are discernible via our logic, eg, not stealing, not murdering, etc).

Accordingly, what appears to others as merely falling under the category of 'secular' or 'civil' law becomes elevated for the Jew into something 'kodesh' (holy), laws that were commanded by G-d. Our sages teach that the second set of luchos (tablets), which were given to Moshe, stated: "Honour your father and your mother *because Hashem, your G-d, commands you.*" In other words, do not honour them because logic dictates that a person should do so; rather honour them because Hashem commands you in this action! With the first set of luchos, it was unnecessary to add this phrase, as the Jewish people were holding on an extremely elevated level, and it was obvious that everything they did at that time, they only did because Hashem commanded them to do. But with the second set of luchos, which were given after the cheit haeigel (sin of the golden calf) when the Jewish people suffered a significant decline from the lofty level on which they had been, they needed to be cautioned to fulfil the mitzvah because Hashem commanded it and not for any other reason.

And we see this also with regard to the commandment to keep Shabbos – as it says: "Guard the day of Shabbos to keep it holy (*because I have commanded you,*)" and not because logic dictates, as it does to the other nations of the world, that a person should take one day out to rest every week.

Our sages question why don't we make a brocha (blessing) on the performance of



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the mitzvah of kibud av v'eim? One answer given by our sages is that we don't make a brocha because every nation does this thing (ie, honours father and mother), and granted that they do it because of logic, nevertheless since the external actions themselves are equal, and the only difference comes from the machshava sh'b'leiv (the intentions of the heart) – that these do it because they are commanded by Hashem and these do it because it is logical – therefore our sages did not enact a brocha on it.

So we see that when it comes to fulfilling the mishpatim, those mitzvos that are discernible to us via our intellect, we lack the ability to determine the motivation that lies behind a person's actions. Is the person doing the mitzvah because it makes sense to him or because G-d commanded him to do it? Did Eisav honour his father because G-d commanded it or because it

was logical? As we have seen, Eisav was a master of deception, offering the external appearance of someone pious, but at the same time being a kofer b'ikur – a person who denies the very existence of G-d.

When things didn't go Eisav's way, when his father was 'tricked' into giving away his blessing, he revealed just how much honour he really had for his father – and, more importantly, he revealed his true motivation, his machshava sh'b'leiv, for honouring Yitzchak. When logic dictated that honouring his father would no longer benefit him as much as the opposite, Eisav spared no time in plotting to kill Yitzchak, reasoning that since Cain had gotten away with murder then why couldn't he do the same, or, even better, plotting to have Yitzchak killed by someone else. When Eisav sought out Yishmael's daughter, he wasn't just exercising some sort of newfound concern for his parents' feelings re-

garding his choice of wife. Instead, it was outright premeditation, as Eisav's real plan was to bring about the death of his father by opening up old family wounds, causing his uncle, Yishmael, to come and dispute the birth right with Yitzchak. And after Yishmael had killed Yitzchak, Eisav planned to avenge his father's death with the result being that he would wind up inheriting from two families!

And yet, in spite of the fact that Eisav was a complete and utter rasha, when he and Yaakov eventually met up again, Yaakov was terribly afraid of facing his brother. Why should this be the case? Because, Yaakov reasoned, Eisav had two 'strengths' (note that the Midrash uses the word "koach", meaning "strength", and not the word "mitzvah") that Yaakov lacked: (1) Dwelling in Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel) all of the years that Yaakov had been away, as well as (2) Honouring their parents during that same time period. As noted, Eisav was a kofer b'ikur from the time that he was a young man. Accordingly, Eisav didn't live in Eretz Yisrael because G-d had made it a mitzvah to live there, and he didn't honour

his parents because G-d had commanded him to do so. Eisav's actions were dictated solely by his own logic – by his head. And, even so, we see that for the relatively small amount of good that Eisav did in the world, Hashem still rewarded him accordingly: the head of Eisav, the seat of the logic which drove him and which was behind the little good that he did, merited to be buried in Eretz Yisrael, in the burial spot reserved for our forefathers, the Cave of Machpelah.

Yaakov Avinu, one of the pillars of the Jewish people, who spent years learning and living by Hashem's Torah, who merited fathering the 12 shevatim (tribes) and whose mitzvos and zechuyos (merits) almost certainly exceed our ability to count, literally trembled with fear at encountering his twin brother, a person so evil that the name "the evil one", HaRasha, was actually appended to his brother's name. Yaakov and Eisav were polar opposites – as different as people, especially brothers, can be. And yet, in spite of everything bad that Eisav had done – murder, rape, theft, etc. – he had to his credit a couple of good deeds (not even mitzvos!) and at just the thought of the merit due to Eisav for

these good deeds, Yaakov recoiled in terror regarding how Yaakov's own countless merits would stand up to the merits possessed by his wicked brother.

Although we, as Jews, must strive to do mitzvos because G-d commanded us to do them, we see that even when a person fulfils mitzvos solely because his own logic dictates that such things are the right thing to do, there is still a tremendous, inestimable koach (strength) that comes from doing such things, regardless of the motivation behind them, as well as a merit that comes with them. In other words, good deeds are good in and of themselves, regardless of why they were done, and such actions contain within them tremendous power, even if they could have been made better and improved upon simply by changing the intention behind them, and thereby, elevating them, where possible, into mitzvos. We frequently hear people erroneously refer to mitzvos as "good deeds", and now we see that sometimes a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and sometimes it really is only a "good deed" – it all depends on the motivation behind it. **■**

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