

# The Esau Fan Club

The rabbis of the Talmud set out to portray Esau as the archetypal baddie. I, on the other hand, have a really soft spot for him. Right from the start, just because he's born ruddy and hairy, the rabbis have it in for him. They obviously prefer the wan, pale, scholarly types who spend all day long at their books. Not for them the healthy outdoor type who feels close to God and nature in the field, the mystic who needs to get away from claustrophobic institutions. Oh no. Unless you're a boring yeshiva bochur, or you stay at home with Mummy in the tent, they don't want to know. Though to be fair, if Nimrod was the example of a hunter, it was not one the bible approved of.

Typical of the hatchet job on Esau is when the Torah says, "Esau came in from the field" (Genesis 25), they dredge up every negative association with "field" and say that he was a murderer, a rapist, an idolater, and an atheist. But when dear, goodie Jacob "comes in from the field" in Chapter 30, not a peep. Or when the text says that Isaac loved Esau because "the hunt was to his taste", instead of the obvious meaning that Isaac loved a bit of game, it is turned to mean that Esau used words deviously and pretended to be religious when he was not. Not only, but the questions they put into his mouth ("Daddy, how do you tithe salt?") show they really did think he was stupid as well.

I think it was most noble of Esau to reject the birthright. Just because of the accident of coming out of the womb first, why should one son get twice the inheritance of the other? His selling it for soup was not such a terrible thing. If the Torah says he "despised" the idea of the birthright, perhaps it was a good thing not to be so materialistic. Besides, imagine you have just come in from an exhausting game of soccer, bruised and tired, and all you want is a drink, but your , stay-at-home in front of the TV, mother's favorite, brother won't share his can of Coke with you. Who do you think is right? Yes, you might answer that Esau was the boss's son, so he could have gone into any one of the hundreds of tents in his father's compound and got a meal, and why did he just have to have Jacob's lunch? So he was the sort of fellow who lived for the moment, and maybe he was too impetuous to be a good leader, but we are talking character assassination here.

He is swindled out of the blessing. But consider, he is interested in the blessing, not in the money! Now doesn't that say something positive? And this supposedly brutish, tough guy bursts into tears when he hears his brother has stolen his blessing. Doesn't that show both his sensitivity and his spirituality? It is true he married the wrong girls first time round, but he is more than willing to make up for it when he realizes his mistake and try again (Genesis 28:9). That shows both flexibility of mind and respect for his parents.

It's true he said he hated his brother and wanted to kill him. But we all say extreme things under pressure. Years later, when Jacob comes back on his knees, he welcomes him and hugs him. Of course, some will say that it was only because God appeared to him in a dream and warned him off. And the text

which says he kissed his brother has dots on top (33:4) which they say proves he was not being straight and even that he bit him. Finally, Esau comes with Jacob to bury Isaac and do the right thing. It's the rabbis again who say there was a fight and Jacob's son knocked his head off and it rolled into the cave of Machpelah.

I know full well the reason why the rabbis go for him. After successive campaigns in which the Romans slaughtered, tortured, raped, or enslaved the population of Israel with abandon, whenever the rabbis wanted to attack Rome without getting into trouble with Roman spies, they used Esau or Edom as a code. But then when the threat finally passed you'd expect them to make amends. Instead the phrase, "Be it known as a fact that Esau hates Jacob", has entered Jewish folklore. But by then Christianity had replaced the Romans.

You might argue that Eau is also code for all those self-hating, assimilated Jews who seem to need to justify themselves by attacking the Jewish people, from Medieval converts to Christianity, like Pablo Christiani, through the Jews of the Enlightenment, and down to our own day when almost as many enemies of the Jews are born Jewish as not. But then why not make it clear that it's only symbolic and really he's a rather good-natured, crazy idealist? Can the answer be that in this pro-feminist era anyone who is preferred by his Daddy must be suspect?

I think is time to rehabilitate Esau. To me, he's the symbol of the nonconformist maverick. In this era of increasing conformity in Judaism, I think we need to welcome such people, not shut them out.