Dvar Torah Outline

Parashat Vayishlach: Esau's Wisdom and Jacob's Fear of Heaven

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explores Jacob's attempt to bring Esau to repentance and Rav Tzadok's account of Esau's genuine intellectual greatness. The central distinction is between wisdom possessed as a personal achievement and Torah received with humility and fear of Heaven. Jacob's encounter with Esau ultimately points toward the integration of intellectual brilliance with the reverence that allows wisdom to become true spiritual guidance.

I

Why did Jacob send messengers to Esau?

A. *The criticism: awakening a dormant threat*

- Rabbi Shulman opens with the criticism found in several midrashim:
  - Jacob's initiative resembled approaching a sleeping dog and pulling its ears.
  - Why provoke Esau rather than leave him alone?

B. *Rav Tzadok: an attempt to inspire repentance*

- Rav Tzadok cites another Midrash: Jacob sent messengers in the hope that **Esau would repent**.
- **Bereishit 32:4:** > וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל עֵשָׂו אָחִיו אַרְצָה שֵׂעִיר שְׂדֵה אֱדוֹם: > (Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to Esau his brother, to the land of Seir, the territory of Edom.)
- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes the description **"his brother"**:
  - Despite Esau's conduct, Jacob still regarded him as someone he might bring back.

C. *The spiritual root that makes return possible*

- Rabbi Shulman describes Esau as someone born within the covenant who subsequently rejected it.
- He invokes the principle that a Jew remains a Jew despite apostasy.
- Rav Tzadok connects the enduring possibility of repentance to Jacob's spiritual completeness:
  - All Jacob's children belonged to the covenant.
  - His descendants therefore retain a pure spiritual root, even when their conduct obscures it.
- Jacob hoped that a comparable possibility existed for **Isaac's son Esau**.

II

Esau's intellectual greatness: more than an act

2:30

A. *How could Esau deceive Isaac?*

- **Bereishit 25:28:** > וַיֶּאֱהַב יִצְחָק אֶת עֵשָׂו כִּי צַיִד בְּפִיו וְרִבְקָה אֹהֶבֶת אֶת יַעֲקֹב: > (Isaac loved Esau because game was in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob.)
- The Midrash understands Esau's "hunting" as including sophisticated religious questions and arguments with which he impressed his father.
- Rabbi Shulman asks:
  - Isaac was an accomplished Torah scholar who had learned from Abraham.
  - How could superficial jargon or a few clever questions deceive him?

B. *Rav Tzadok: Esau possessed genuine brilliance*

- Esau's intellectual ability was real; his failure was not a lack of intelligence.
- Rabbi Shulman contrasts two approaches to attaining understanding:
  - **Abraham:** independently intuited profound truths.
  - **Jacob:** attained understanding through sustained study in the houses of learning of Shem and Ever.
- **Bereishit 25:27:** > וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה וְיַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים: > (The boys grew up; Esau became a man skilled in hunting, a man of the field, while Jacob was a wholehearted man, dwelling in tents.)
- In Rav Tzadok's reading, Jacob's simplicity is associated with his need to acquire understanding through study.
- Esau, by contrast, inherited something of **Abraham's intuitive intellectual power**.

C. *Torah greatness concealed within Esau*

- Rabbi Shulman cites midrashic teachings that locate the future Torah of **Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Akiva** within Esau.
- These sages, associated with ancestry from converts, represent profound Torah potential emerging from that background.
- Esau's intellectual gifts were therefore not inherently worthless; they required the right spiritual direction.

III

The wisdom of Esau and its contribution at Sinai

5:00

A. *Revelation coming through Seir*

- **Devarim 33:2:** > וַיֹּאמַר ה׳ מִסִּינַי בָּא וְזָרַח מִשֵּׂעִיר לָמוֹ הוֹפִיעַ מֵהַר פָּארָן וְאָתָה מֵרִבְבֹת קֹדֶשׁ מִימִינוֹ אֵשׁ דָּת לָמוֹ׃ > (He said: The Lord came from Sinai and shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran and came from myriads of holiness; from His right hand came a fiery law for them.)
- Rabbi Shulman focuses on the reference to **Seir**, Esau's territory.
- He cites the Midrash that the heavenly representatives of Esau and Ishmael gave gifts to Israel at the giving of the Torah.
- **Esau's contribution was wisdom.**

B. *Edom as a representative of worldly wisdom*

- Rabbi Shulman connects Esau's intellectual strength with the recognition that wisdom exists among the nations.
- Edom is a particularly significant example:
  - The prophetic warning that its wisdom will be destroyed itself testifies that such wisdom exists.
- **Ovadiah 1:8:** > הֲלוֹא בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נְאֻם ה׳ וְהַאֲבַדְתִּי חֲכָמִים מֵאֱדוֹם וּתְבוּנָה מֵהַר עֵשָׂו׃ > (Surely on that day, declares the Lord, I will destroy the wise from Edom and understanding from the mountain of Esau.)

IV

What distinguishes wisdom from Torah?

6:30

A. *Wisdom needs fear of Heaven to endure*

- Intellectual accomplishment alone does not guarantee sound judgment or spiritual integrity.
- Rabbi Shulman cites the Gemara's comparison to storing grain:
  - A small measure of preservative protects a large quantity of wheat.
  - Without it, the grain will spoil.
- **Fear of Heaven plays that preserving role for wisdom.**
  - Without it, intellectual greatness may become spiritually destructive.

B. *The distinction reflected in the blessings over scholars*

- Rabbi Shulman highlights the different language used for scholars of the nations and Torah scholars:
  - **"שנתן מחכמתו"** — "Who has given of His wisdom."
  - **"שחלק מחכמתו"** — "Who has shared of His wisdom."

- In his explanation, Torah wisdom is approached with:
  - Humility before God.
  - Submission to His authority.
  - Recognition that wisdom is entrusted to a person rather than independently owned.

C. *Torah as guidance*

- With fear of Heaven, wisdom becomes **Torah: instruction that directs one's life**.
- Without that submission, a person may use intelligence to justify whatever he wants.
- Esau's wisdom therefore did not protect him from going astray; it could become an instrument of his spiritual failure.

V

Jacob's gift: exposing wisdom's vulnerability and enabling its transformation

8:00

A. *The gift as a form of bribery*

- The Midrash describes Jacob's substantial gift to Esau as intended to blind his eyes.
- **Devarim 16:19:** > לֹא תַטֶּה מִשְׁפָּט לֹא תַכִּיר פָּנִים וְלֹא תִקַּח שֹׁחַד כִּי הַשֹּׁחַד יְעַוֵּר עֵינֵי חֲכָמִים וְיסַלֵּף דִּבְרֵי צַדִּיקִם: > (You shall not pervert justice, show favoritism, or take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous.)
- The Midrash identifies the "wise" in this application with Edom.

B. *Rav Tzadok: why Edom is especially relevant*

- The Midrash does not mean that no one outside Edom possesses wisdom.
- Rather, Edom represents **wisdom detached from fear of Heaven**, leaving it vulnerable to corruption.
- Rabbi Shulman asks how wisdom can be "destroyed," as Ovadiah foretells:
  - Physical force does not directly erase intellectual ability.
  - Bribery, however, can blind judgment while leaving intelligence intact.

C. *Ownership versus stewardship*

- The spiritually dangerous attitude is: **"This wisdom is mine; I may use it however I choose."**
- The Torah attitude is: **"God entrusted this wisdom to me; I am responsible for how I use it."**
- The difference is not merely how much one knows, but whether knowledge remains accountable to God.

D. *The ultimate integration*

- Rabbi Shulman concludes that Esau's tremendous intellectual potential ultimately comes to Israel as Torah.

- What transforms it is its combination with **Jacob's wholeheartedness, commitment to study, and fear of Heaven**.
- The closing aspiration is to receive wisdom as a share in God's wisdom—not merely as intellectual achievement.

VI

In Summary

- **Jacob's outreach:** He sent messengers hoping to awaken Esau's capacity for repentance.
- **Esau's genuine gifts:** His ability to impress Isaac reflected real intellectual greatness, not merely superficial deception.
- **Wisdom becoming Torah:** Esau's intellectual potential could contribute to Israel, but only when joined to Jacob's spiritual qualities.
- **The indispensable safeguard:** Fear of Heaven preserves wisdom and makes it a source of guidance rather than self-justification.
- **The lesson of bribery:** Intelligence can remain powerful while judgment becomes corrupt; wisdom must be treated as a divine trust.