

How a Jacob and Esau Encounter Is the Secret to Advancing Faith

The battle for the definition of marriage and family and the control over the education of our children is as current now as it was in biblical times.

I particularly love the book of Genesis for it is full with specific episodes of our family tree. Nothing is whitewashed. Our dirty laundry is displayed for all to read and learn from. After the flood of Noah, God rarely interjects into the unfolding dramatic events of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The issues that our biblical forefathers faced are no different than what we are challenged with today.

The background to Genesis 33 is a vow of Esau to kill his brother Jacob for stealing the blessings (27:41). Fraternal revenge would be taken after Isaac's death. However, Jacob does not stick around and is urged by his mother, Rebecca, to leave home.

More than 20 years have passed and now Jacob must face his brother. In preparing for his encounter with Esau and ensuring the survival of his family, Jacob divides up the household into two camps, prays to God to save him and sends gifts of appeasement to his brother (32:7-22). This is no ordinary household welcome and the stakes are very high.

Jacob is prepared to have half of his family wiped out. Esau, with an army of 400, is prepared to make good on his vow of revenge. This type of drama is what Hollywood movies thrive on. One can cut the tension with a knife.

Expecting an epic battle to take place, the story takes an unexpected turn. Allow me to paraphrase:

Esau: "Who are all these people?"

Jacob: "My kids."

Jacob: "Here, please take this gift."

Esau: "No thanks."

Jacob: "Please take it."

Esau: "Oh, alright."

Esau: "Can I accompany you on your way?"

Jacob: "No thanks."

Esau: "Can I give you some men for protection?"

Jacob: "No, really. We'll be fine. Thank you."

Esau: "Alright. Goodbye!"

In fact, Esau runs to his brother, hugs and kisses Jacob and they both wept (33:4).

Imagine you are one of Jacob's children. You have grown up hearing all the horror stories of your uncle Esau and now seeing these displays of affection, you would think Dad is a bit nuts. What was all the fuss about? Uncle Esau seems like a great guy! Also, there seems to be a family reunion moment that could heal old wounds and bring everybody together and Jacob decides to move on.

Another oddity of Jacob's behavior is that *he travels to Succoth, builds a house for his family and a shack (Sukka) for the cattle and calls the place Succoth* (33:17). The name Succoth should be familiar to us since it is the Hebrew name of a biblical holiday—Feast of Tabernacles—where Jews are commanded to live in a temporary booth for seven days. Why is Jacob traveling to a place named "Makeshift Hut," builds one theses contraptions and renames the place the very same name

it was given in the first place?

Not only is this odd act of Jacob the encryption key as to why Jacob walks away from his brother, but it is also the secret to advancing biblical faith. Unfortunately, most of the English translations of the dialogue encounter between Jacob and Esau do not capture the Hebrew text.

When Jacob offers presents to his brother, Esau responds, “I have a lot” (v.9) Urging Esau to take the gifts, Jacob declares “I have everything” (). Both Esau and Jacob were wealthy people, but they both viewed wealth from opposite sides of the spectrum. Esau saw wealth as an end to itself. He has a *lot*, but could always accumulate more. Jacob, on the other hand has “*everything*”. In other words, he viewed wealth as a means.

A means is by definition secondary. The priority—the real importance in Jacob’s life—was family, not possessions. Jacob wanted his family to hear the message loud and clear. This is why he builds a *house* for his family and only a makeshift shack for the material possessions.

Jacob understood that Esau’s materialistic attitude is a dangerous threat precisely because it came with “hugs” and “kisses.” When the dominant culture of materialism is inviting, pleasant, and charming, we are at risk. Our children are at risk. Not of getting killed, but of being influenced by a set of values that is contrary to what we believe in.

Esau’s influence fashioned both Greek and Roman cultures. Their aesthetic and philosophical contributions to the world are undeniable, but they are rooted in valuing materialism and the human being above all. Their culture is about self-gratification. Taken to its extreme, Book Five of Plato’s Republic, arguably the greatest work of Greek Philosophy, states:

“The law, I said, ... is to the following effect ... ‘that the

wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent."

Wives to be common and shared? No parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent? Contrast these beliefs with "Honor thy Father and Mother" (Exodus 20:12) and "You shall teach these words to *your children* and speak of them when you sit in *your home*" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

In the story of Hanukkah, the Greek Empire wanted Jews to keep their religious beliefs, but also pay homage to dominant pagan culture. When Jews refused to bow down, it led to severe persecution.

The miracle of Hanukkah was not the military victory of the Maccabees, but rededication of the temple and the oil lasting for eight nights. In celebrating Hanukkah, one would think that the festivities should take place in the synagogue. However, the entire celebration is in the home—lighting the candles at doorway entrance into the house opposite of the Mezuzah (a parchment hung on the doorpost that contains Deuteronomy 6:4-9 & 11:8-21, biblical passages that ask of us to accept God's kingdom, commit to studying His Word and faithfully transmit the Bible to one's children). With dominant forces that are contrary to biblical values, both Jacob and Chanukah teach us the need to rededicate the home to God.

While I write this biblical message during Hanukkah, I believe this teaching is apropos to my Christian friends in their preparations for the Christmas holiday. As a rabbi involved in Jewish-Christian relations, the biblical values we hold so dear are at risk due to the secular culture of materialism and fleeting cultural fads. Christianity was birthed from the womb of Judaism. It is imperative that both of our faith communities work together to battle the hedonistic dominant culture of our era that is rooted in the Esau view of life.

However, this cannot be done without illuminating our homes. We must raise our families in a covenantal lifestyle. It is time to rededicate our “houses” to God by studying His Word and having a “shack” view of our material possessions.

Then we can truly say, as Jacob did, “I have everything.”
Merry Christmas!

Rabbi Pesach Wolicki *is the Associate Director for the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation (CJCUC) in Israel. All comments should be directed to info@.*