YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Toldot**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Esav and David**

Summarized by Itai Weiss

Translated by David Strauss

Once when Yaakov was cooking a stew, Esav came in exhausted from the field. (*Bereishit* 25:29)

*Chazal* examine this verse closely and tell us about the heinous offenses that Esav had committed that day:

For Esav committed two transgressions: ["Esav came in from the field"… this alludes to the fact] that he had relations with a betrothed young woman, as it is stated: "For he found her in the field" (*Devarim* 22:27); "exhausted" – that he killed a person, just as it is stated: "For my soul is exhausted by the killers” (*Yirmeyahu* 4:31). Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] said, he also stole…. (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Toldot*, 63)

Is this really the plain meaning of the Biblical text? Why do *Chazal* trouble themselves to find so many sins committed by Esav on that day? One could, of course, argue that in the wake of the selection of Yaakov to be the successor of Yitzchak and Avraham, and the fact that the verses do not sufficiently clarify the reason for this, *Chazal* tried to find offenses that could be attributed to Esav. We will not pursue this line of inquiry, but rather will try to understand Esav’s personality as it is depicted in the Torah.

**Where did Esav go wrong?**

Four factors came together in Yitzchak's house that turned Esav into who he was.

The first factor is the famine in Yitzchak's house. A person who is willing to sell his birthright in exchange for lentil stew, which is the food of the poor – a person who testifies about himself: "Look I am about to die; what use to me is a birthright?" – is a person who has no food in his refrigerator, as was already noted by the Ibn Ezra. It is true that there was a period during which the house of Yitzchak had plenty: "And Yitzchak sowed in that land, and found in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him" (*Bereishit* 26:12); "Go from us; for you are much mightier than we are" (ibid. 16). However, we have no choice but to read these verses in light of the rule that the verses of the Torah are not necessarily written in chronological order: There was a heavy famine in the land, Yitzchak went down to Gerar, but his efforts did not prosper.

In a house where food is in short supply, the entire moral framework, the entire conceptual world, can start to look very different.

The second factor is the wanderings and the sense of humiliation that Esav must have felt in response to the Philistines' treatment of Yitzchak. We have seen in our times that one of the results of the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 was the proliferation of the phenomenon of *na'arei ha-geva'ot*, "hilltop youth," which was predicted by experts even before that process was carried out (and which, thankfully, has been decreasing in recent years). A person who sees his father defeated, beaten, and evicted from his home, a person who sees his father wandering from place to place – such a person is likely to develop aggressive behavior, and a worldview according to which only the strong survive and "might makes right." Esav was forced to wander with his family from place to place, and he saw Yitzchak reach a state where: "One of the people might easily have slept with your wife" (*Bereishit* 26:10). The humiliation that his father experienced while digging the wells would also have strengthened Esav’s sense that force alone can solve all problems.

The third factor is Esav's geographical location. Yitzchak's family lived in the western Negev, a place made up of many clans, a place without a stable regime, a place where conflicts were resolved by the fist. It was a place whose sense of morality resembled the pre-flood world: “And the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomever they chose," with all that this implies.

The fourth factor is Esav’s strength. For the most part, Esav used his power for the good. I am convinced that Esav watched over his father's flocks and other possessions. This is why Avimelekh, together with the commander of his army, pleaded with Yitzchak: “That you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you" (*Bereishit* 26:29). They feared Yitzchak's power, which expressed itself in the power of Esav, along with his troops. However, Esav deteriorated into unjustified killing. When he returned that day, it is possible that he had killed thirty men with good reason – but just one additional, unjustified killing turned him into a murderer. *Chazal* noted that "the worthiest of butchers is Amalek's partner" (*Kiddushin* 4:14), because it is naturally difficult to draw the line between slaughter that is justified, for a true need, and unnecessary slaughter.

Esav, who was accustomed to resolving his conflicts with the Philistines by way of force, a man who gathered around him four hundred men, a feat which testifies to his leadership skills, is a man of great strength.

**Another Mighty Leader of Hundreds**

*Chazal* noted a connection between Esav and David; like Esav, David was *admoni* (red-haired; compare *Bereishit* 25:25 and I *Shmuel* 16:12), a feature associated with an aggressive nature (*Bereishit Rabba* 63:8). We also see that hundreds of men gathered around David as well; he too protected flocks from plunderers; he also experienced many wanderings as an unloved son (of Shaul); and he too was a man of great physical strength.

The story in our *parasha* has echoes in the story of David and Naval. David and his men had protected Naval and his flocks from invasions, and all they requested was a small gift to restore their strength. Naval rudely refused, and David responded with equal harshness:

And David said to his men: Gird you on every man his sword. And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword; and they went up after David, about four hundred men; and two hundred stayed with the baggage. (I *Shmuel* 25:13)

The comparison between David and Esav is striking, and it is not for nothing that the number of soldiers that David took with him is four hundred.

Beyond this, *Chazal* also made a point of connecting the story of David and Naval to the sins attributed to Esav:

"And blessed is your sense of reason, and blessed are you, who restrained me from being tainted with blood [*damim*]." The word *damim* [is plural,] implying two [kinds of blood]! The passage teaches that [Avigayil] revealed her thigh, and he went three parasangs by its light; he said to her, “Listen to me [to engage in a relationship]!”[[1]](#footnote-2) (*Megilla* 14b)

The story of David and Naval had the potential to become the story of Esav, but here we see the great difference. On one level, David was justified in his severe reaction to Naval because he had already been anointed as king and Naval’s disrespect was punishable by death. However, Avigayil argued before David as follows:

She replied: Shaul is still alive, and your fame is not yet spread abroad in the world. (Ibid.)

David could have responded to Avigayil's claim by arguing that he was already king in the territory of Yehuda, since Shaul did not bother to protect the inhabitants of the region and David did protect them. However, on the brink of the abyss of bloodshed, David made the decision to restrain his power and choose justice.

The famous classic *Don Quixote* deals with precisely this issue. Don Quixote imagines that he has two qualities: great power and an uncompromising sense of justice. The literary role of his servant is to present the reality, in which the two qualities fail to go together.

Where Esav fell, David rose. David manages to join his power to a sense of justice (of course, with falls, like every person).

Even today, when we pray: "Speedily cause the scion of David Your servant to flourish," when we look forward to the restoration of the kingdom of the house of David, this is our goal: to succeed in combining power with the aspiration for justice.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Toldot* 5778.]

(Translation edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. Editor’s note: At least according to some, the Gemara is explaining that David thanks Avigayil for talking him out of two acts involving blood – Naval’s blood, and Avigayil’s menstrual blood. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)