

# Echoes of Eden

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## Parashat Toldot: Lessons of a Sale

Yitzchak and Rivka had two children, Esav and Yakov. As twins, it goes without saying that they were extremely close in age. However, in a society in which the older child would have more responsibilities as well as greater privileges, those few minutes made a huge difference. And while questions of inheritance are often the cause of family strife, in the case of Yitzchak and Rivka's sons, the division of the estate was far more complicated. In this particular family, the inheritance at stake was not only financial. The legacy passed down from their grandfather, the patriarch Avraham, included a Divine promise that one day they would inherit the Land of Israel. However, this was far from a "no strings attached" arrangement. The path to this inheritance would involve years of exile and slavery.

The two sons, though they shared the same DNA and were raised in the same household, had very different personalities and outlooks. Esav was a man of immediate gratification. He focused on the here and now. To him, the idea of waiting hundreds of years for the "payoff" was a painful absurdity. For him, the offer of hundreds of years of suffering and waiting for a reward sometime in the distant future was a cruel joke; he despised the birthright and the responsibility it entailed. Therefore when Yaakov offered him something

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tangible and immediate in lieu of the birthright, Esav was delighted with the 'bargain'. As far as he was concerned this was a "win-win" deal: he divested himself of an onerous burden and capitalized in the here-and now in return from some vague and distant future benefit that was of questionable value. It is no coincidence that this section of the narrative ends with the editorial comment, "Esav loathed the birthright."

Yaakov, on the other hand, was more of a long-term thinker. He was willing to sacrifice the here-and-now, to postpone gratification for hundreds of years and accept almost unimaginable suffering, in order to acquire what he knew to be the family's true treasure: The Land of Israel. He justified his behavior by reminding himself that he had struck a deal that satisfied both sides: Esav got his soup and freed himself from responsibilities that did not interest him, and Yaakov got the Land of Israel – along with the price to be paid to inherit it.

And yet, even when we factor in the centuries of slavery in Egypt, the deal seems inequitable. We cannot help but contrast this transaction with Avraham's purchase of the first parcel of land in Israel: Despite the offer to receive the land as a gift, free of charge, Avraham insisted on paying full price, perhaps even an exorbitant price. Avraham understood that this purchase would have repercussions in the future, and he therefore made a point of paying the full asking price, and completing the deal in a publicly witnessed and fully legal and binding transaction. Somehow, we sense that Yaakov's business with Esav was not conducted in the same fashion. Despite Esav's satisfaction at the time, Yaakov may not have "paid in full;" perhaps additional payment for this "windfall" was still due.

As the narrative progresses, Yaakov establishes the major relationships that shape the rest of his life: First, the relationship with his boss/father in law, and by extension his wives; and second, the relationship with his children. His relationships all seem somehow strained, convoluted, troubled – and we cannot help but postulate that his own unresolved relationship with his brother lies at the root of his troubles. Yaakov switched places with his brother in the birthright episode, and later went so far as to disguise himself as Esav and take his place in line for their father’s blessing. How surprised should he have been when his bride Rachel is replaced by her sister Leah? Even the most jaded reader who does not see the hand of God in history should appreciate the “karma” by which Yaakov is repaid with the very same behavior he himself used in his dealings with Esav.

Yaakov’s relationships with his sons are no less complicated by his own past: First, Yaakov effectively switches places among his sons. Despite the order of their birth, Yaakov singles Yosef out, favors him above all the other sons, and treats him as if he were the firstborn. When Yaakov later loses Yosef and believes that he is dead, it is the result of another inequitable transaction: The brothers sell Yosef in exchange for a pair of shoes. Again, both sides are happy. Again, the brothers divest themselves of an unwanted burden. Again, immediate gratification obscures long-term responsibility.

Both in Yaakov’s dealings with Esav and the brothers’ dealings with Yosef, balance must be restored, the full price paid. Yaakov eventually inherits the Land of Israel, but years of suffering, exile and slavery were required to settle the account. Yosef eventually inherited a double portion in the Land of Israel, but he was the first of the brothers to be thrust into slavery, and he, like Yaakov, endured tremendous suffering, exile and alienation.

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years later, in ways Yaakov had never imagined.

Man cannot shortchange God. Things we do to others come back to hurt and haunt us. Yaakov walked off with the birthright, and traded the Land of Israel for a bowl of soup. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a down-payment; the balance came due

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/10/audio-and-essays-parashat-toldot.html>