



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Toldot: Two Children, Two Paths

Our *parsha* this week narrates the story of two very different twins: Esau and Jacob. They appear very different at birth. As adults, they adopt divergent lifestyles:

וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדָע
 וַיִּהְיֶה אִישׁ שָׂדֵה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם
 יוֹשֵׁב אֹהֳלִים: And the youths grew up, and Esau was a man who
 understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas
 Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents (Gen
 25:27)

Rashi notes that their full nature emerged only *after* they “grew up” beyond the years of their youth. He comments:

ויגדלו הנערים ויהי עשו: כל זמן שהיו
 קטנים לא היו נכרים במעשיהם ואין
 אדם מדקדק בהם מה טיבם, כיון
 שנעשו בני שלש עשרה שנה זה
 פירש לבתי מדרשות וזה פירש
 לעבודה זרה: As long as they were small, they were
 indistinguishable in their actions, and no one
 scrutinized them to determine their characters.
 As soon as they became 13 years old, this one
 parted to the houses of study, and that one
 parted to idol worship.

Based on this Rashi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch makes an insightful educational comment:

ויגדלו הנערים – As long as they were little, no attention was paid to the slumbering differences in their natures (see on V.24), both had exactly the same teaching and educational treatment, and the great law of education חנוך
 לנער על פי דרכו "bring up each child in accordance with its own way" was forgotten...

...When Father Jacob visualized the tribes of our nation in the sons standing around his death-bed, he saw not only future priests and teachers. He saw around him the tribe of Levites, the tribes of royalty, of merchants, of farmers, of soldiers. Before his mental eye he saw the nation in all its most manifold characteristics and diverse paths of life, and he blessed all of them...

... But just because of that, must each one be brought לפי דרכו according to the presumed path of life to which his tendencies lead, each one differently to the one great goal [of divine service]. To try to bring up a Jacob and an Esau in the same college, make them have the same habits and hobbies, want to teach and educate them the same ... is the surest way to court disaster.

... Had Isaac and Rebecca studied Esau's nature and character early enough, and asked themselves, how can even an Esau, how can all the strength and energy, agility and courage that lies slumbering in this child be won over to be used in the service of God ... then Jacob and Esau, with their totally different natures could still have remained twin brothers in spirit and life; quite early in life Esau's "sword" and Jacob's "spirit" could have worked hand in hand, and who can say what a different aspect the whole history of the ages might have presented. But, as it was, only when the boys had grown into men, one was surprised to see that, out of one and the same womb, having had exactly the same care, training and schooling, two such contrasting persons emerge.

Rav Hirsch's words are critical for successful parenting and an important reminder for all educators. We cannot educate or raise children in automatic fashion, with one final product in mind. We have to look carefully at each of our children, each and every one of our students and spend time thinking how their needs can be met, how each might be stimulated, challenged, supported, so that they may each reach their personal potential. Of course, this is easier said than done.

I am intrigued by Rav Hirsch's forward-thinking here. Was it common in the 19th century to assume that each child needed individualized education? Was the suggestion that each person bring his or her strengths to the fore and choose an occupation that would allow service of God in accordance with one's personality a prevalent view? Furthermore, I sense that Hirsch is highly open-minded and unconventional when he imagines that with a different educational path, Esau might have become *Esav Hatzaddik* – a full partner in the family tradition. This is a powerful commentary.

So here is a discussion around the Shabbat table that should engage young and old alike:

- Do you agree with Rav Hirsch that if Isaac and Rebecca had implemented a different educational approach, Esau might have turned out differently? (Why didn't they?)

- Is it all about the parenting, or do we find that people develop independently *despite* their parents' best intentions?
- Is it easy to identify a child's traits?
- How can one identify which characteristics to enhance and amplify and which other behaviors need to be curbed?
- In short, is it fair to blame the parents?
- Does our Jewish world encourage diversity of this sort? Yes/no? Why?
- Can you identify a feature of the way your parents raised you which you would have wished be different?

Shabbat Shalom!