

## A Muse: Toledot

“But the children struggled in her womb...and the Lord answered her ‘two nations are in your womb / two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.’...The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle...so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob.”  
(Genesis 25:23-26)

Jewish history and literature hasn't been kind to Esau, Jacob's twin brother. In fact however, the little we know of Esau from the text, presents a man who although is common is magnanimous in his later relationship with Jacob, in spite of the manner in which he was treated by his brother. (See Vayishlach) He is a man who is perhaps cunning, but not necessarily dishonest in his business dealings. He may be vulgar and not schooled, but isn't necessarily greedy and selfish. Yet, it is Esau, the father of Edom, who is presented in Rabbinic literature as the symbol of corrupt Rome; the personification of moral degeneration. Why?

The typological characterization and vilification of Esau begins late, relative to our history. Prior to the Common Era there are no negative associations with Esau. However by the first and second centuries the vilification of Esau proliferates in rabbinic literature. Current events contributed to the tenor of the midrashic literature especially when seen on the backdrop of defining historical trends and events such as the destruction of the Temple, the Bar Cochba rebellion and all the death and destruction that accompanied these seminal events. In addition the rise of Christianity and the threat it posed certainly contributed to the demonization of Esau.

Throughout these defining periods of history scaling hundreds of years, the Roman Empire cast a giant, ominous shadow over Judea. Hatred of Rome was translated and given expression by a hatred and demonization of Esau. Antipathy towards Rome and the dismissal of Christianity was typified through the prism of Esau. Negative characterization of Esau such as lying, stealing, bloodshed, promiscuity, infidelity and

godlessness was attributed to Esau. The negative picture of Esau as portrayed in rabbinic text can be seen at the three stages of Esau's development and relationship with Jacob: Esau and Jacob in the womb; Esau and Jacob developing as youngsters; and Esau forfeiting his birthright to Jacob.

In discussing the gesticulation period of Jacob and Esau, midrashic sources site R' Yochanan and Resh Lachish's jostling as to what is to be understood by the biblical description of Jacob and Esau's fighting. R' Yochanan saw it as symbolic of a fight to the death between Jews and Gentiles while Resh Lachish saw it more as a kulturkampf – a cultural struggle that would continue “ad infinitum”, without resulting in a decisive outcome.

In their second phase, as they are growing into young men midrashic sources compare them to plant life, where initially it is difficult to distinguish between the shoots of the same plant until they are ready to flower. Either they will give off a pleasant scent and a flower or they will be thorny with no scent or one that is disagreeable. So, the midrash say was it destined to be with Jacob and Esau. One would think that two sons coming from the same home, identical parents and shared values would be similar. Only after maturation could the distinctions between them be understood. Esau characterized as an “ish sadeh” isn't understood to be a noble man in harmony with nature. Sadeh, is understood by the midrash to represent chaos, dysfunction, lacking moral clarity, promiscuity, homosexuality equating all of this to Rome.

The last stage is when Esau comes in from the field famished, demanding the lentil soup and says “haleiteini”, signifying vulgarity and uncouth behavior more appropriate for a Roman. Here again R' Yochanan comments on the word “haadom” which is repeated. According to R' Yochanan the first “haadom” references the soup but the repeat usage symbolizes Edom or Rome.