

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Toldot 20 “Action!”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. As we saw during the recent election, there is a tendency among human beings to take extreme positions about complex issues, especially on topics that touch a nerve, without acknowledging the nuances involved. It can also be tempting to look at life in general that way, because simplistic thinking makes it easier to make decisions and justify our decisions to ourselves as well as other people.

This kind of black and white thinking seems to be exemplified in our parsha, where we learn about the birth of Yaakov and Eisav. Our sages portray Esav as the root of all evil, and Jacob as the source of all goodness. However, these characterizations are troubling, because it's the first time in the progression of Jewish history when we have two children of the same parents, twins no less, and so it's difficult to understand how they could be so different. Even more perplexing is why Yitzchak would favor the son who was supposedly the root of all evil, with no redeeming characteristics. I think it is wise to look closer and find the subtleties in their personalities – ostensibly unimportant characteristics that had far-reaching consequences.

Like a rocket ship that's off just an inch, when that error can make it go hundreds of miles off course.

We can find one clue in Eisav's name, which is rooted in the word *asui, completed*. He was a man of action – Eisav, the penultimate *ish sadeh, a man of the field* – he would get things done. *Sadeh, a field*, is also the word for *career*, an aspect of life that can only be based on accomplishment. When Jacob presented himself to Yitzchak, his father was amazed; he said to himself, *hakol kol Yaakov vihayadayim yedei Eisav*, here's a person with the voice of Jacob but the hairy hands of Eisav. That verse is fundamental to Jewish philosophy because it reflects the virtue in Eisav's approach to life, not just Jacob's. Jacob focused on voice - prayer and study, while Eisav's priority was being productive.

We are reminded that the Torah is not just about thought; it teaches that action must play a prominent role in our lives as well. During the High Holidays, we recognize the value of devoting ourselves to contemplation. This year in particular, because our mobility was restricted due to Covid, we discussed how this period has given us an opportunity to slow down, be less frenetic and more mindful. But it is equally important that we avoid stagnation, even when we are stuck at home.

Simple things like getting stuff done around the house, exercising, and making a checklist of things we can accomplish remotely. Covid is spreading again, and we certainly need to take that seriously. But the message of this week's parsha is that being productive is vital to our existence, and so no matter how restricted we feel, we must persevere in finding ways to create a sense of accomplishment. Shabbat shalom.