

Deal or No Deal

By Kevin Phipps
Parashah Toldot

You are the eldest son. You have the birthright. You can keep the birthright and all the benefits that entitles, or you take my offer. My offer is a steaming hot bowl of my new beef stew. Deal or no deal. Deal? Seriously? Um...ok.

Life is about choices. Some of our choices are good, and some are bad. Either way, we reap what we sow. We either reap the benefits of our good choices or suffer the consequences of our bad ones. We see this demonstrated throughout the Bible, but in this week's parashah and the story of Ya'akov and Esav.

First, we see Esav coming in from the fields tired and hungry. Ya'akov has just made some soup and Esav asks him for some. Ya'akov tells him if he sells him his birthright, he will give him some soup. Esav claims he is so hungry if he doesn't get some food he will die, so he agrees. He promises Ya'akov his birthright and takes the soup. Later he would call this deception. In anger, he would accuse Ya'akov of stealing his birthright. Now I'm not going to say that what Ya'akov did was right, but all he did was present Esav with an option. He had to make a choice. It was a test to see how much he actually valued his birthright. Perhaps this had been an issue between the two brothers and Ya'akov decided to put his brother to a test. Perhaps Esav had been showing a complacency toward his status as Yitzchak's firstborn and Ya'akov saw an opportunity to take for himself what his brother didn't see as important. Perhaps Rivkah had something to do with it like she did with the blessing, which I will get to later. Perhaps the whole thing was God's plan as a way to bless Ya'akov whom He loved and further curse Esav whom he hated. Perhaps it was a combination of all or some of these possibilities. What I don't think is that Ya'akov was acting out of a heart of sin and deception with a deliberate attempt to harm his brother.

Esav on the other hand was given a choice. For most people, it would not be a difficult choice. He could not have been so hungry he actually would die if he didn't get something to eat. Ya'akov was most likely not his only source of food either. There was nothing forcing him to sell his birthright. The option was given to him and he chose of his own free will to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. It must have been pretty good soup, or I hope it was. That one choice affected the rest of Esav's life as well as that of his descendants. Such descendants, the Edomites would contend with Israel on several occasions after they entered the land, and each time they would lose. Herod the Great, who tried to kill Yeshua as a baby, was descended from these people. They were destroyed as a nation during the Jewish and Roman wars. The descendants of Ya'akov continue today as the Jewish people.

Later on in the parashah, Ya'akov uses deception to get the blessing Yitzchak intended for Esav. Here again, I'm not necessarily going to condone nor legitimize what Ya'akov did. However, it does not appear to me that he is stealing anything which is not already his. Esav sold his birthright, so Yitzchak's blessing is rightfully his anyway. Yitzchak would not have willingly given Ya'akov the blessing since Esav was his favorite, so Ya'akov had to deceive his father to get his blessing. What was done was done, and this was one more way Esav was going to suffer for his poor decision with the soup. Here we see how one bad choice can set off a series of events related to one another, that ties back to the original event. Deception or

not, God seems to be behind Ya'akov's actions and never chastises him for them. Esav had a heart that was not with God, which yielded a life of suffering and missing out on opportunities.

Does this mean that Esav's life was doomed from birth? Was he an enemy of God from before the time of his birth, by the choice of God Himself, and there was nothing Esav could have done to better his situation and have any kind of relationship with God? Different people will say different things about this. Proponents of predestination and election use this passage to show how some people are chosen by God before birth to be His and others are chosen to be His enemy. I have a hard time fitting that kind of theology with the teaching from Yochanan 3:16 that "whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." An important principle when reading and studying Scripture is that the Bible is written on both a physical level and a spiritual level. The physical level deals with blessings and cursings we experience in this world during this lifetime. The spiritual level deals with spiritual matters, which we experience now and after death. These concepts are eternal, where physical things are temporary, and are relocated by Shlomo as vanity. When I read that God loved Ya'akov and hated Esav, I understand that as relating to the nature of the physical life each would have during their lifetime on earth. The fact that Ya'akov would be blessed and Esav, though older, would serve his brother are physical, and have nothing necessarily to do with each of their spiritual relationships with God. However, despite the nature of their lives, each had equal responsibility to accept the life God had given them and love and serve Him regardless of life circumstances.

Some people seem to go from one difficulty in life to another and if they believe in God at all, they assume He must hate them, or has forgotten about them, and therefore assume it doesn't matter whether they live for Him or not. This is not true. God transcends our circumstances and our lives. God is God if we live in blessing or if we appear to be cursed. As Psalm 23 shows us, "He guides me in right paths for the sake of his own name. Even if I pass through death-dark ravines, I will fear no disaster; for you are with me; your rod and staff reassure me." God is there on the mountain peaks as much as He is in the dark ravines. Whichever place we find ourselves in, we have the spiritual responsibility to continually seek His face and walk in His ways. If Esav was seeking God's favor and living in obedience to Him, he most likely would have valued his birthright more than he did and avoided making a decision that he would regret later.

A principle that is good to remember is that God is always God no matter what our circumstances might be. Good is always good, and bad is always bad, regardless of the consequences. We learn too from Shlomo in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) that righteousness does not always yield goodness, and wickedness does not always yield disaster. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. We may not understand why this is, but it is a fact of life. However, right is always right, and wrong is always wrong, and no matter who you are, what your relationship with God is, or what your circumstances of life are, doing what is right because it is right is always better than doing what is wrong. Worshiping God and walking in His ways is always better than not doing so, because God is still God and always deserves our devotion, even if He is our enemy. If God was your executioner, He would still deserve your love and devotion until the moment He ends your life. 1 Yochanan tells us that if we do come to Him and confess our sins He is faithful and will forgive us our sins. So if we do turn to Him though he is our enemy, rather than slay us He will forgive us and heal us. Esav could have become a friend of God if He had changed

his heart and chose to serve God despite the life God had chosen for Him. Perhaps Ya'akov had an easier time serving God, since he was born blessed by Him, but Esav had a lifetime of opportunity to change his situation by turning to the God whose hand was against him.

Whether we are born in Beverly Hills or the ghetto, each of us have equal responsibility to seek God and live by His ways. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. No one is righteous not even one, on his or her own. We cannot blame our circumstances or even our apparent standing with God for our own decision not to live for Him. Good circumstances have been known to lead people away from God just as much as bad circumstances have been known to lead people closer to Him. The difference is how each person chooses to deal with their life. Righteousness is a choice. Serving God is a choice. Both are choices each of us has to make. We choose righteousness and service to God because it is the right choice to make. If you are in a difficult situation, God will not always bring you out of it because you turn to Him. Look a Job. He was blameless before God and man, and his good life became bad very fast. His situation had nothing to do with his past service to God. It was a test to see if he would continue his devotion to God if his blessings were turned to suffering. We do not know what is happening in the spiritual realm behind our circumstances. This is why we must always seek God and live in His ways, not because of what we expect God to do for us as a result, but because God is God and good is good. Period. The choice is up to you. The same choice was given to Esav. He sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Don't make the same mistake and sell your status as a child of God for the temporal blessings of the world. That's the deal.