

A New Look at Esau: Invisible No More
Toldot 5782
November 6, 2021

When Zack Purdy was two years old, he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. (I understand that today he would be simply diagnosed with Autism, but at the time, Asperger's was identified separately.) When he was growing up, he used to have violent tantrums. He had a one-to-one aide in school, which led other kids to think he was weird. His teachers tried to treat him like "everybody else," but he didn't respond like everybody else. He had frequent run-ins with his teachers, and in college people used to call him weird behind his back, and he lost friends over it. As an adult, he came to have a greater understanding of his diagnosis, and of what he needs in order to interact comfortably with other people. He asks the people around him to listen to him, and to give him a chance to prove that he is different from what they first assume. I found his story on the website for the Invisible Disability Project.¹

What is an "invisible disability"? Well, according to the association's website,

An "invisible," "non-visible," "hidden," "non-apparent," or "unseen" disability is any physical, mental, or emotional impairment that goes largely unnoticed. [It] can include, but is not limited to: **cognitive**

¹ <https://www.invisibledisabilityproject.org/this-is-me>

impairment and brain injury; the autism spectrum; chronic illnesses like **multiple sclerosis**, chronic fatigue, chronic pain, and **fibromyalgia**; d/Deaf and/or hard of hearing; **blindness and/or low vision; anxiety, depression, PTSD, and many more.**

The Invisible Disability Association has created a video archive of people like Zack Purdy who share how their lives have been impacted by conditions that other people don't see when they look at them.

In today's Torah portion, we are introduced to a character who struggled his entire life. He struggled in the womb of his mother, and he struggled as he was leaving the womb. His brother was holding onto his heel for dear life.

True, as he was growing up, his father appreciated him, but not his mother: she favored his younger brother.

He was impulsive, and foolhardy: after all, he was willing to sell his birthright, his legal privilege for a double portion of his father's estate, for a mere bowl of porridge! And that same brother who held onto his heel as they were coming out of the womb was more than happy enough to take advantage of his weaknesses. Years later, his mother and brother collude in tricking him out of the blessing that his father intended to give to him, compounding undoubtedly the sense of being unappreciated and unloved.

I'm speaking, of course, of Esau, who generations of Jewish Biblical interpreters saw as the embodiment of a "*pere adam*," a wild, uncivilized man (a term the Bible uses to describe his uncle, Ishmael; see Gen.16:12).

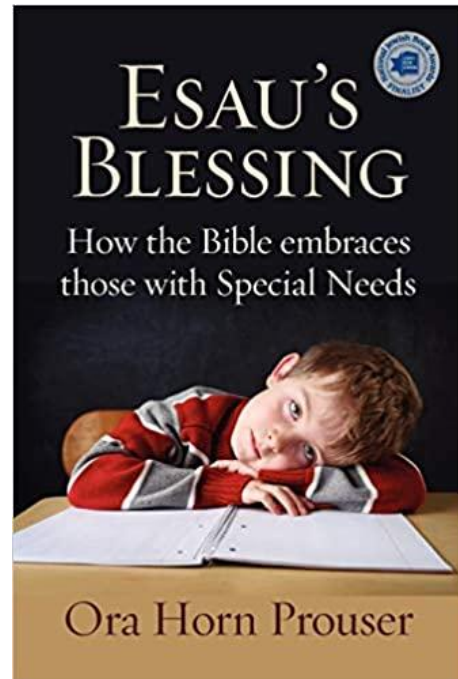


Esau, the child who is less favored by God, by his mother, and eventually even by his father as

well, is seen by the rabbis as disobedient and violent, with the wrong priorities. After all, in this week's portion, years after he grew up, he marries two Hittite women, a "source of bitterness to both his father and his mother," (Gen. 26:34-35) -- even though it had already been the custom in his family, going back to his grandfather, Abraham, to go back to Haran to find a member of the clan to marry. And after he discovered that his brother, Jacob, had tricked their father and purloined his blessing, he actually threatened to kill Jacob. The Bible understands Esau and his descendents to be the progenitors of Israel's enemies, the Edomites, and the Rabbis of the Talmud understand them to be the spiritual ancestors of their oppressors the Romans, who with their superior arms and cruelty, persecuted the Jews mercilessly.

But is that the only way we might see him?

Dr. Ora Horn Prouser is a Bible scholar and the CEO and Academic Dean at the **Academy for Jewish Religion**, a rabbinical school in New York. In her book, *Esau's Blessing*, she suggests that many of the characters in today's Torah portion, and many of us, might benefit by re-framing the way we look at Esau.



What do we know about Esau from the biblical story? We know that he is impulsive and a poor long-term planner. He prefers to be physically active. Not only that, but we also know that he loves to hunt and is presumably pretty good at it.

What skills do you need to have to be a good hunter? Well, on the one hand you need to be able to focus intently. But you also need to be able to, well, be distracted: you need to see things on the periphery. You need to be able to realize, for example, that something -- maybe something very, very small, like a blade of grass -- is moving. We can guess that like many other good hunters, Esau may have had the combined traits of being able to focus intently, and yet also to be distractible. In Dr. Horn Prouser's

book, she points out that this combination of impulsivity, intense focus, and distractibility sounds very much like a classic description of individuals with ADHD.

If we imagine that Esau might have had ADHD, a different narrative emerges about what happened at the beginning of this week's reading.

Esau found a vocation, hunting, that played to his strengths. Because he doesn't plan ahead well, and because he tends to be very focused on the moment, he returned hungry from a hunting expedition. Seeing and smelling that stew that his brother was cooking, he said whatever his

brother needed him to say in order to get some of it. At that moment, his birthright seemed abstract and far away, and a lot less significant than the physical need he had in the moment. He tends to act on impulse, which, later in life, leads him to threaten his brother when Jacob steals his



blending, but he lets go of those emotions easily too. After all, during his reconciliation with Jacob (in next week's parashah), Prouser points out that Esau seems honestly surprised that Jacob might think there would be

enmity between them. It's not a surprise, I would think, to most of us -- but to Esau it was.

There are some signs that, when the people around Esau recognize how he thinks and responds to stimuli, they are able to set him up for success. Esau, like many people with ADHD, does well when given step-by-step instructions, as his father did when sending him off to hunt for him before giving him a blessing. His father knew that about him, and therefore gave him what he needed in this case. Esau does less well when he is expected to pick up on hints. His parents, after all, never actually told him not to marry a Hittite. They simply, we might think, expected him to understand that that is what their family does. But at the end of today's parashah, Esau eventually actually comes to realize that he has disappointed his parents with his choice, and so he goes ahead and marries a relative, one of Ishmael's daughters, to be his third wife. But Ishmael?? That's not the side of the family that lives in Haran, that's considered part of the clan! Poor Esau, he doesn't seem to realize that he would have been better off marrying a relative on his mother's side. From this perspective, we see a figure who, when he keeps trying to get it right, just can't manage to quite understand the expectations and hopes that his parents have for him!

We all know people like Esau, and my guess is that many of us have been in his shoes as well. I'm not talking about ADHD in particular, although we all know people with ADHD. I'm talking about being misunderstood because the way you think is just a little bit different than the people around you. I'm talking about someone who would do so well in a particular situation if only they are given the right accommodations or the right setup. This applies to so many people who have invisible disabilities, but also to people who don't have diagnosed conditions. So many of us have particular ways that we do well, if only the people around us can be attuned to it!

Let's try to give Esau the benefit of the doubt; and let's try to do that with others we encounter who may look just fine on the outside, but who may have challenges we don't know about. It may take extra effort for us to figure out what the people around us need in order to put their best foot forward, but Esau's story is a call to try to make that effort. Let's work towards a world where we can all be our best selves. The connections we may make to those around us will be worth it.

Shabbat Shalom.