

The Simple Truth

written by Yossi Katz
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Our Patriarch Jacob is referred to as “the perfect one.” He was so great that our nation took its name from him, Israel. He also fathered twelve sons who were each worthy enough to found his own “tribe of God.”

But according to our modern definition of perfectionism, perhaps Jacob should have been nicknamed “the average one.” The Torah calls him “*ish tam*” (Genesis 25:27), which can be translated not only as complete or wholesome, but also as simple and unassuming. Aren’t these contradictory terms? Doesn’t Western civilization teach us that sophistication and rigorous investigation are the true ingredients to success and perfection?

Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather, was the pillar of kindness. His tent was always open to guests; loving-kindness was his tool

in spreading monotheism. Nevertheless, Abraham fathered a son named Ishmael, whose descendants did not follow in his ways. Isaac, Jacob's father, excelled in the attributes of strength of character and sheer determination; he was able to willingly submit himself to be sacrificed on the altar. But he, too, bore an unworthy son named Esau.

Growing up in the righteous home of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau seemed pretty similar at first. Rashi exposes Esau's hidden flaw. Esau would ask, "Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?" (Rashi, *ibid.*). Isaac thought that Esau was being scrupulous in his observance of the commandments. Esau's tactics not only show him to be a cunning liar, but they also identify the source of his downfall.

Salt and straw are two items that are exempt from tithing. Just as Ishmael had inherited Abraham's excess kindness and allowed it to influence him to act in evil ways, so too, Esau had inherited Isaac's superfluous strength and harshness. He was not satisfied with humbly taking up his true calling as a partner with Jacob, but wanted to go above and beyond, to strive for something exceptional. His excessive personal demands led him to miss out entirely on both this world and the World to Come.

Esau's attitude is the precursor for the philosophy of his descendants and much of our "modern world," who claim that the Torah is too hard to keep. In fact, if one can't experience joy in the simple performance of the mitzvot, even when they are done without deep understanding or additional halakhic stringencies, then indeed, the Torah becomes too difficult to keep.

Rebbe Nachman tells us a story about a simpleton (*Rabbi Nachman's Stories* #9). The simpleton was a simple shoemaker; although he knew how to craft shoes, they looked downright embarrassing. Because of this, he was unable to earn the same living as his competitors. When his wife pointed this out to

him, he replied, "That is their business and this is my business."

Simplicity and perfection are not contradictory; they are actually one and the same. Every day when we say the *Shema*, we declare that God is One. Isn't one the simplest number? The key to wholesomeness and growth isn't questioning and doubting, but appreciating everything in life for what it is. Simplicity means learning to focus on the facts on the ground, not being sidelined by what we don't know. This is true genius.

Technology and information superhighways can be tremendous tools, but more often than not, they hijack our short-term memory. We tend to become paralyzed and unable to value what's right in front of us. May we merit focusing on counting our blessings and becoming aware of our existing abilities and opportunities, for then we will not only accomplish what we need to, but we will actually find true fulfillment in our lives. Amen!

Based on Likutey Halakhoh, Matanah 5