

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## A BOY NAMED ESU

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

A perfect parody is indistinguishable from the thing itself. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Put those two principles together, and you understand why people who can't laugh at themselves will mistake parody for flattery and satire for agreement.

Almost all of us have points of ego and sensitivity and commitment that make us vulnerable to this kind of error. It's ok to consciously decide that some things about oneself and one's life are not tolerable subjects of humor. We can walk away if someone disrespects those boundaries.

Walking away, or not finding it funny, is not the same thing as failing to recognize humorous intent. Treating satire as serious can be incredibly dangerous: imagine if Swift's "A Modest Proposal" became legal precedent for colonialist cannibalism! And this sort of error is self-reinforcing, and cascades. Once you take "A Modest Proposal" seriously, how can you rule any policy suggestion out of moral bounds?

I suspect the same dynamic is true of traditions. That's one reason that Purim humor is so important – some of us need the annual reminder that reasonable people could find many things about our community and its practices absurd, even morally absurd, and that they might well be right. (I'll leave you to think of your own favorite examples, and to consider what it means if you have none.)

Stodgy traditions that can't laugh at themselves are vulnerable to missing the jokes. This means that they end up incorporating parodies that they mistook for agreement. Again, this is often dangerous.

But so long as the parody doesn't gain too much authority, it can also provide a desperately needed breath of fresh air for people within the tradition who get the joke and need to know that their imperfect reverence also has revered precedents.

At the same time, parodists also need to exercise responsibility. Deborah Klapper would hold Swift accountable if even one Irish baby was eaten, regardless of his intent. (I'll

leave you to decide what if any of this applies to Dave Chappelle.)

A prime source for parody incorporated unawares into halakhic tradition is *Shu"t Besamim Rosb*, attributed to the medieval Rabbeinu Asher but first published and at least partially written by Rabbi Saul Berlin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (see <https://seforimblog.com/2005/10/besamim-ros/> and subsequent posts there). The work includes an auto-commentary labelled *Kasa Debarsena* that Rabbi Berlin acknowledged authoring.

*Shu"t Besamim Rosb* #190 reads as follows:

And regarding the young man who asked you:

'Why are Rabbi Yishmaels found in the Talmud, but no Rabbi Esavs?'

You wrote that from his gestures it was evident that he was mocking<sup>1</sup>,

and also that several previous times, when he learned of Talmudic aggadot, he would make fun<sup>2</sup>,

but you are nonetheless in doubt whether this is a spirit of apostasy rising in him, or rather mere immaturity.

(Answer:)

Let this (single doubt) be considered only equal to a double doubt –

(nonetheless,) eject him from your yeshivah! In such cases we are concerned even about a minority risk (so eject him even if there is a double-doubt as to whether he is unfit). G-d forbid that he draw other students after him. Do not be excessively meek (=anav), lest they say of you what they said of R. Zekharyah of Avkulus<sup>3</sup>!. Let Hashem preserve us and turn toward our prayers, and let our following not be like the following of Elisha<sup>4</sup>.

But as to the core question of how rabbis could have been named Yishmael –

we do not need the midrash asserting that Yishmael repented (in order to answer this question),

because anyone with a pretty name whose deeds are ugly – the name can be used independently.

But an ugly name, or one that has no pleasant interpretation –

<sup>1</sup> speaking *derekh leitzanut*

<sup>2</sup> = *bayah kemetzachek*. In Genesis 21:9, Sarah sees Yishmael being *metzachek*, and demands that Avraham expel him.

<sup>3</sup> that his meekness led to the destruction of the Second Temple – see Gittin 56a

<sup>4</sup> The children who follow the prophet Elisha, making fun of him, are eaten by bears – see II Kings 2:23-24

because it was “worn” by a wicked person, the name becomes a signal.

Let me retell this teshuvah in my own words.

A student asked an intellectually reasonable if trivial question. His teacher feels that the question was asked mockingly, and that the student has on several previous occasions displayed insufficient reverence for traditional texts. He asks a colleague for advice.

The colleague makes no effort to get any sort of context about the student, or the class. Instead, he issues a ruling, cloaked in cleverly borrowed halakhic language, that the student must be immediately expelled even if he is probably just engaged in adolescent boundary-testing. He follows this up by making the stakes ultimate: failure to expel the student will be equivalent to destroying the Temple and also make the entire student body liable to death by Divine vengeance.

This seems to me clearly over the top – it differs from Swift mostly in that the children are eaten by bears rather than by the British. I was distressed that several people I deeply respect did not see any evidence of parody. I’m quite confident that none of them would see this as a proper or reasonable pedagogic reaction; I wish they could honestly believe that no one in our Tradition would see it as a proper or reasonable pedagogic reaction.

Let me therefore introduce one more piece of evidence.

Besamim Rosh appears to distinguish between the names Yishmael and Esav as follows: Yishmael is a pretty-sounding and pleasant-meaning name, so we don’t care if a past famous Yishmael was wicked. Esav is an ugly-sounding and unpleasant-meaning name, and therefore is inextricably bound to the original wicked Esav. That’s why there are Tannaitic Rabbi Yishmaels but no Rabbi Esavs.

Kasa Deharsena says something very different. He notes Besamim Rosh’s logic yields the conclusion that if the name Esav can be interpreted positively, there should be no objection to naming Jewish children Esav. This poses no difficulty for Besamim Rosh so long as the name Esav is regarded as fundamentally ugly and unpleasant. Kasa DeHarsena nonetheless feels a need to comment that

“our master did not come to resolve (why no Jews are named Esav), since one cannot challenge a negative. He came only to remove the difficulty of the name Yishmael, how people could name after him. Other resolutions are easily available, but one should not go on and on.”

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<sup>5</sup> to Bava Metzia 105a. I assumed the case was fictional, but my daughter Channah Leah tells me that one of her teachers claims to have met many Jews named Esav, so I can’t be sure.

In other words, Kasa Deharsena claims that in Besamim Rosh, he chose not to answer the student’s question. Then he chooses not to answer it in the commentary either, claiming that it is unanswerable. Then he claims that answers are easily available, but that he’s gone on too long already and can’t be bothered to provide them.

The outcome is that there is in fact no reason not to name Jewish children (or Rabbis) Esav, so long as one offers any sort of positive interpretation of the name.

Every element of the answer in Besamim Rosh and the commentary in Kasa Deharsena seems better suited to the cheeky character of the young questioner than to the stuffed-shirt persona of the intolerant respondent. I suspect that Rabbi Berlin asked this and many questions like this in his youth and was given similarly inadequate and aggressive answers. The whole kit and kaboodle is satire, and a way of getting the tradition to take his question seriously while pretending to condemn it.

This is a dangerous tactic for uncertain gain. But I’m happily unaware of any subsequent halakhist citing Besamim Rosh’s pedagogic advice, while the question about Esav’s name reverberates.

Here is the incredible case that Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein’s contemporary *Chashukei Chemed*<sup>6</sup> constructs as a successor to our Besamim Rosh.

A young couple named Yitzchak and Rivkah are blessed with male twins during the week we read Parshat Toldot. They name the twins – you guessed it – Yaakov and Esav. Yaakov b”H is doing well, but Esav is not thriving, and Rivkah asks you to pray for him. May one pray for Esav, or must one first change the ailing infant’s name?

Rabbi Zilberstein clarifies that a Jew of any name retains the dear perfection that obligates other Jews to pray for his/her rescue and healing<sup>6</sup>. He worries however that the efficacy of prayer in this case will be diminished by the patient’s name.

“At first light it seems improper to pray for the child by citing his name,  
which is after a wicked man,  
as this is like mentioning his sin in one’s prayer”.

His preference therefore is to persuade the parents to change the child’s name. If they refuse, he offers two workarounds. The first is to leave out the infant’s name and pray for “the son

<sup>6</sup> I’m leaving aside here the question of whether such an obligation exists for and/or toward non-Jews.

born to (Rivkah) daughter of (Devorah)”<sup>7</sup>. The second is for the local rabbi to give the infant a new name without telling the parents<sup>8</sup>.

All this assumes that the name Esav has purely unpleasant connotations and reverberations, as Besamim Rosh implies. But, Chashukei Chemed asks, why would Yitzchak and Rivkah give their son such a name?

CHIDA, in *Shu”T Yosef Ometz* #11, explains that Besamim Rosh would not be satisfied with just any positive connotation - he requires one as positive and compelling as that of the name Yishmael. But why would Rivkah and Yitzchak have settled for less?

Rashi solved this problem elegantly. He noted that Genesis 25:25 refers to Esav being named by a plural: **They** called his name Esav – whereas 25:24 refers to Yaakov being named by a singular – **He** called his name Yaakov. He explains that Yaakov was named by Hashem, whereas Esav was named by the general public<sup>9</sup>. Rivkah and Yitzchak may have tried to name him ‘Seir’, or ‘Edom’, or ‘Sue’.

Why did the public name him Esav? The simplest answer is because of his looks – he was unusually ruddy and hirsute. But for ruddiness, they could have named him ‘Edom’; for hairiness, they could have named him ‘Seir’! What Rashi really calls to our attention is that **we don’t know what the name Esav means**. With apologies to ShaDal, who connects it to an Arabic word for “hairy”, it seems more likely to have a meaning that differs from those of his other Biblically attested names, *Seir* and *Edom*.

Midrashim offer at least three such possibilities.

The first turns עשו into הָאִשָּׁה שׁוֹאָה, meaning “this is worthless”. I find this approach unconvincing on every level – it is feebly connected to the letters of the name, it doesn’t connect to Esav’s appearance in any way, and why would Rivkah and Yitzchak be willing to call him that subsequently (as they do in Genesis 27)?!

The second connects עשו to the verb עָשָׂה. “one who does the will of those who made him (= עוֹשֵׂי)”. If I am reading the last word correctly as a plural, it probably means that he obeyed his parents. That midrash draws a contrast between his pleasant name and his ugly deeds. But since those deeds grieved his parents, it seems that the most we can say is that he never explicitly violated parental commands, not that he “did their will” broadly. Perhaps what Esav needed was very, very, very

precise and comprehensive parental instructions. On this understanding, a parent would still be unwise to name their child Esav.

The third interprets the connection to עָשָׂה differently. He was already-made = עָשׂוּי.<sup>10</sup> Esav’s hairiness was a symptom of being born adult, perhaps even sexually mature. This also connects *admoni* = ruddy to *adam*, the first human, who also seems likely to have been come into being as an adult.

What are the implications of having literally no childhood? Many commentators give this a negative spin, suggesting that Esav had no capacity for growth<sup>11</sup> – but this seems incompatible with the parallel to the first Adam. Can it be given a positive spin?

A modern reader might suggest that of course Esav was capable of growth, but that possibility was never actualized because his parents – and everyone – were blind to that capacity, and the name Esav expressed and reinforced their blindness. That reading leaves us searching for midrashim in which Esav repents, and his name comes to mean “self-made”.

The historically true answer to Besamim Rosh’s question may be that Yishmael has an *obvious* positive meaning, and specific positive associations in Tanakh<sup>12</sup>.

The problem is that even the most obviously positive name-meaning can be flipped negative when Esav is involved. For example, the medieval Torah commentary *Paaneiach Raza* notes that Esav עשו shares a gematria with שְׁלוֹמִים/peace – and then informs us that “had his name not been peace, he would have left no person alive in the world.” Esav’s name meant peace – and that is what kept him from killing all of humanity. Would you name your child Esav?

A rose by any other name will smell as sweet, but only for a few hours, and then wilt unrecognized and therefore unwatered. Rabbi Berlin’s question suggests that Esav was sorted into Slytherin too young. The angry and dismissive non-answer illustrates how such destructive early sortings happen all the time when we lack the ability to laugh at ourselves. Perhaps that’s why only Yitzchak could see the good in Esav.

<sup>7</sup> A further marker would be necessary to distinguish Esav from his twin

<sup>8</sup> Since such renamings must be public to have any legal effect, this would be a risky strategy.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ibn Caspi, who denies any significance to the shift between singular and plural.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Ralbag

<sup>11</sup> See for example Keli Yakar and Malbim

<sup>12</sup> perhaps also that Islam doesn’t arise until after the Talmud, whereas Rome = *Edom* is the dominant power of Tannaitic times.