

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ESAV SHRUGGED

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

The opening of Parshat Vayishlach makes difficult reading for fans of Jewish assertiveness. Yaakov relates to apparent alpha-dog Esav with over-the-top obsequiousness – “grovel, grovel, cringe, bow, stoop, fall.”

But explicit power relationships can be deceptive. Yaakov successfully refuses Esav’s repeated efforts to establish a continuing relationship. Esav, meanwhile, yields to Yaakov’s insistence that he accept his enormous gift. Sometimes the tail really is wagging the dog. But why was it so important to Yaakov that Esav accept the gift, and why was Esav so resistant?

Rabbi Shimon Sofer, a grandson of the Chatam Sofer who was martyred in Auschwitz, offers a series of politically and psychologically incisive explanations that may add up to a coherent reading.

*“I have much; my brother, let what is yours be yours” – meaning, that if Yaakov had no possessions, Esav would be compelled to support his younger brother. Therefore, Esav said, “Let what is yours be yours,” so that I don’t need to give you anything and the much that I have remains mine. So the overall intent is “I have much **if** what is yours will be yours.”*

Rabbi Sofer starts from the premise that any hatred Esav felt toward Yaakov would have no effect on his understanding or fulfillment of his obligations toward Yaakov. Esav and Yaakov are socially intertwined in ways that Esav cannot escape, and perhaps cannot imagine escaping. So it is in Esav’s self-interest for Yaakov to be independently wealthy. Esav fears that Yaakov is deliberately giving him a gift so large as to leave him no choice but to accept Yaakov and his family as dependents.

We know, but Esav does not, that the gift represents a judiciously chosen share of Yaakov’s assets. Yaakov knows that it is considered rude to attack a person whose gifts you have accepted, because accepting gifts is a way of acknowledging feudal obligations. Most feudal obligations are at heart a trade of economic benefits for security. So Yaakov insists, and perhaps Esav eventually realizes that Yaakov can bear the expense and accepts the transaction at face value.

We can explain why Yaakov insisted that he take the gift from him. The way of honored officials is that even though in their hearts they want and desire gifts and bribes, nonetheless it is beneath their dignity to accept them. Therefore, they want the giver to persist and insist. That way, they end up with both, the bribe/gift that their heart lusts for, and also their dignity, that they did not wish to take it from him without being greatly pestered, and they took it only because they would not withstand the giver and humiliate him by refusing to accept it. Thus “Yaakov persisted/insisted, and he took it.”

On this reading, Esav is in charge throughout. He intends to have Yaakov persist, and he intends ultimately to consent under seeming duress. His goal is to reverse the gratitude framework; Yaakov should owe Esav for the *tovat hana’ab* gained by having such a prominent person willing to accept his gift, rather than Esav owing Yaakov for the gift itself.

Halakhah recognizes this *tovat hana’ab* as having cash value. Very prominent people can marry women by accepting gifts from them. Nonetheless, in most contexts it is a polite/political fiction. Politicians strive to create the impression that they are stooping to accept gifts, or willing to go on junkets for the sake of learning about policy, but lobbyists expect to receive something in exchange for the amenities they provide

politicians. To quote Don Corleone, “Someday, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do a service for me. But until that day, accept this justice as a gift.”

We can say additionally that according to the ways of ‘etiquette,’ if A sends a gift to B, and B returns a lesser gift than he received, it seems as if he is thereby surrendering; if he returns an exactly equal gift, this seems like miserly precision; so B therefore sends A more than he received initially. So Esav realized that etiquette would require him to send Yaakov a gift even larger than Yaakov was sending, therefore he said: “Let what is yours be yours,” but Yaakov indicated that he did not wish a return gift by saying to him “I have everything.”

Perhaps Rabbi Sofer read anthropology? Wikipedia provides the following description of a Pacific Northwest custom called potlatch:

Dorothy Johansen describes the dynamic: “In the potlatch, the host in effect challenged a guest chieftain to exceed him in his ‘power’ to give away or to destroy goods. If the guest did not return 100 percent on the gifts received and destroy even more wealth in a bigger and better bonfire, he and his people lost face and so his ‘power’ was diminished.”

On this reading, Yaakov’s enormous gift is an expression of dominance, while Esav’s ultimate acceptance is a gesture of submission.

So far we’ve drawn models for Yaakov and Esav’s interaction from Native American culture, feudalism, and The Godfather. Rabbi Sofer’s reading is also compatible with a fourth model drawn from Ayn Rand’s critique of altruism. Let me acknowledge upfront that this is likely to be more ethically controversial than any of the others.

Rand famously or infamously argued that altruism, or doing things for the sake of others, is the root of all evil. Actions can be ethical only if done for one’s own sake; thus a programmatic essay was titled “The Virtue of Selfishness.”

This counterintuitive framing is often misunderstood as endorsing boorishness or a pure focus on personal pleasure and material or emotional self-interest. That

this is a misunderstanding is easily demonstrated by the fact that all her novels revolve around an ethical hero(ine) sacrificing their material self-interest, even committing suicide, for the benefit of someone they love. Rather, Rand argues that one must choose virtue because that is the kind of person you wish to be, not because it benefits anyone else.

Why does this matter? Rand argues that virtuous people expect no return for their virtuous deeds; they don’t feel “owed” because they have acted for your material self-interest against their own, because their actions were done for their own sakes. Virtuous philanthropists do not see themselves as superior to the recipients of their charity. By contrast, altruists always feel that they are owed more than they gave. Charity recipients owe them gratitude, and if economic positions reverse, they owe their former benefactors larger alms than they received. (Consider in this light the letters that schools often send to alumni who received scholarships, no matter how much those alumni contributed to the school environment as students, and even if those alumni paid more in tuition than the marginal cost of their schooling.)

Esav suspects, or understands, that Yaakov’s gift is altruistic in nature. Accepting it will impose burdens of gratitude and reciprocity on him that he has no interest in assuming. So he tries to refuse it. But Yaakov insists.

Why does Yaakov insist? Very likely he is also aware that gifts often come tangled in implicit strings. He may suspect that Esav is genuinely altruistic, and therefore will feel himself bound to reciprocate. Or, he may consider that regardless of Esav’s own philosophic convictions, he is embedded in a society of altruists who will hold him to the obligations they recognize as stemming from gift-acceptance.

The common denominator of all four models is that gifting is often not a one-way transaction. Gifts can be Trojan Horses. We should look at their teeth before accepting them; and we should look very carefully in the mirror before and after giving. Our goal should be a society in which givers are indifferent to gratitude, and therefore thanks can be freely given.