חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

SOCHATCHOV · SHEM MISHMUEL, TOLDOT

Why did Esav ask about tithing salt and straw?

Shem MiShmuel

Drawing on the Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah on Vayishlach), the Shem MiShmuel teaches that Esav's question about tithing straw exposed his arrogance, which is the kelipah (husk that conceals holiness) of pride: he regarded himself as the principal purpose of creation rather than as secondary to Yaakov, and his refusal to accept that subordinate role is why no light could reach him. The Zohar's image of dark clouds that drown all light, together with the Rabbi of Peshischa's observation that Esav's failing was pride rather than the fulfillment of mitzvot, underlies this reading. AI SUMMARY

"And Yitzchak loved Esav, because game was in his mouth" (Bereshit 25:28). Rashi explains: to trap and deceive his father with his mouth. He asked him, "Father, how does one tithe salt and straw?" His father thought that he was scrupulous in the mitzvot (commandments). We must understand why Esav did not ask about other fine points of mitzvot, such as ritual slaughter and the like, which truly contain fine points of mitzvot. Why did he choose a point like this one, which is false?

It appears that the entire order of creation consists of the secondary and the principal. The World to Come is principal and this world is secondary, as Chazal (our Sages) said (Avot, ch. 4): "Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the banquet hall." Likewise the six days of creation are secondary to Shabbat. This is what Tanna Devei Eliyahu says: "Days were formed, and one of them is His" (Tehillim 139:16), meaning Shabbat. Likewise, fruit has stems and a peel that guard the fruit, as it is written "its fruit," meaning that which is secondary to its fruit. And anything that performs the function for which it was created thereby acquires completeness. If the secondary is truly secondary to the principal, then through the principal the secondary also becomes complete.

If this world is truly secondary to the World to Come, and "prepare yourself..." is fulfilled, then this world is also elevated and sanctified, and the World to Come shines in this world as well, and "you will see your world in your lifetime" is fulfilled. Likewise, if the six days of creation are truly secondary to Shabbat, then through Shabbat they are repaired, and the six days attain through it. This is what Chazal hinted at (Beitzah 16a), that one should eat every day in honor of Shabbat. That is, Shabbat shone upon the six days of creation. Likewise the peel of a fruit, if it guards the fruit, attains importance. Because of this, it also receives impurity, since the guard brings impurity into the fruit, as in the Talmud, Chullin 118.

One may say that this very thing was the purpose in the creation of Yaakov and Esav: Esav was to be secondary to Yaakov, and through Yaakov Esav would also attain completeness. This is as the holy Rabbi, Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa, said: What is the difficulty with Esav being wicked? If he had fulfilled the mitzvot of G-d, it would be worse, for because of the mitzvah of honoring a father that he fulfilled, we suffer so many evils and troubles. He said that Esav could have remained as he was, except that he needed to be submissive to Yaakov. The meaning is certainly as we have said. But Esav's arrogant heart

led him astray, and he did not want to be secondary to Yaakov. He made himself the principal, as if the world had been created for him.

In Midrash Rabbah, at the end of Parashat Vayishlach: The straw, the stubble, and the chaff argue with one another. This one says, "The field was sown for me," and that one says, "For me," and so on. So too the nations of the world say, "We are the principal, and the world was created for us," and these say the same. Israel said to them, "Wait until the day comes, and we will know for whose sake the world was created."

On this basis one may say why our father Yitzchak wished to bless Esav, even though he knew that Yaakov was more of a tzaddik (righteous one) than Esav. His intention was to enlighten Esav's eyes through the blessings and the holiness that would enter him, so that he would know what his own completeness was. But he did not know of Esav's arrogance. Because of that arrogance there is no remedy for him, as stated in the holy Zohar, Parashat Pinchas, that there are dark clouds in which any light that enters is drowned. These are the seven bad cows, "and it could not be known that they had come into their innards" (Bereshit 41:21); see there. My master and father, of blessed memory, said that this is the kelipah of arrogance: if a little holiness comes into it, it becomes even more proud because of it.

According to this we can understand why Esav asked how one tithes straw. His very essence was speaking from his throat. Just as he considered himself the principal, so his question about straw was whether it is considered principal and requires tithing. For the nations of the world are the chaff of the straw, and if he considered himself principal, then the chaff requires tithing. According to this one may also say the reason for salt, which does not require tithing: it is not principal but only secondary to the food.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5.5)