

In an obscure episode, Esav sells his eldest status to Yaakov.

**וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לֶחֶם וַיִּנְיֵד עֵדְשִׁים וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה וַיִּקָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֶז עֵשָׂו אֶת־הַבְּכֹרָה:**

“And Yaakov gave to Eisav bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank. And he got up and he went. And he despised Eisav, the primogeniture.” (Bereishis 25:34).

What precipitated Yaakov to try and take the *bechora* (primogeniture)? Did Eisav really sell it for some lentils? Why was Eisav in such a vulnerable position? Eisav did not ask for bread, why did Yaakov give him bread first? What does it mean Eisav ate and drank and then got up and went? Also, why did or would Eisav despise the *bechora*?

Gemara Bava Basra 16b says, *Eisav did many bad things. He engaged in adultery, as it is written here: “And Esav came in from the field” (Bereishis 25:29); and it is written there with regard to seducing a betrothed maiden: “For he found her in a field” (Devarim 22:27). He killed a person, as it is written here: “And he was faint” (Bereishis 25:30); and it is written there: “Woe is me, for my soul faints before the slayers” (Yeremiah 4:31). And he denied Hashem’s existence, as it is written here: “What profit is this to me” (Bereishis 25:32); and it is written there: “This is my Lord and I will glorify Him” (Shmos 15:2). The two have “this” in common. And he denied resurrection of the dead, as it is written: “Behold, I am at the point of death” (Bereishis 25:32), indicating that he did not believe in resurrection. And he despised the birthright, as it is written: “And Esav despised the birthright” (Genesis 25:34).*

This Gemara does a good job painting Esav as the eternal villain. It is from the same source that says Eisav is said to be Rome and, later, the Christians. This was first stated only after the Churban Bayis Sheini in the Midrash and cited by sources in early European commentators like Rashi. While it makes sense to put a name to the great antagonists of the time, the connection is unclear and possibly tenuous. It should be noted that historically Edom and Yisroel have not been enemies. This is even though Yaakov took the brachos from Eisav and Eisav vowed to kill Yaakov. True, a descendant of Eisav – Amalek – did antagonize Yisroel, causing two wars in the desert and more in the Land. Haman is also said to be an Agagi, from the family of Amalek kings. (Esther 3:1). Agag is the term for any king of Amalek, i.e., Pharaoh or Avimelech. (See Bamidbar 24:7 and Shmuel I 15:9). Amalek is the son of a concubine of Eliphaz ben Eisav. (Bereishis 36:12). Otherwise, Edom seems to have lived in relative peace to the south of Eretz Yisroel. They actually served as allies in the war against Rome during the Churban Bayis Sheini. (Edom – or as they were called at the time, Idumean – did seize territory after the Churban Bavel, and the Macaabis won that land back after ousting the Greeks. However, there is no other historical evidence of Edom warring against Yisroel. There is the opposite, as King Dovid did attack Edom which later resulted in an Edom exile harassing King Shlomo). At the end, Eisav and Yaakov seemed to reconcile and there were no more hostilities between them.

Rashi says, *Eisav is wicked, he despised the bechora because he really despised serving Hashem.*

Chizkuni explains, *up until Aharon, the eldest would do the service in the Beis Hamikdash. This is the service that Eisav despised.*

Chiskuni seems to make the common err that it was not Aharon that took the service from the firstborns but it was the Leviim in general. Hashem took them instead of the firstborn and allows the firstborn of Yisroel to be redeemed at 30 days old.

Ibin Ezra says, *Eisav despised the birthright because he and Yitzchok were poor. The fact that he was desperate for food, and later, that Yitzchok asked to be fed before giving the blessings, shows how poor they were. He was rich after leaving Gerar but before and after he was poor.*

This does not sit well with the plain reading of the pesukim. Hashem blessed Yitzchok and Yitzchok managed Avraham's great wealth in the south, near Gerar, in Beer-Lachi-Roi. (Ibid 25:11). He became very rich in his own right. (Ibid 26:13). Also, Eisav was not hungry. He was *faint*. He says *כִּי עָיִף אָנֹכִי* "because I am faint." (Ibid 25:30). Further, Yitzchok wanted to be fed because he loved his son and he wanted his son to serve him a prerequisite to obtaining the brachos, and it had to be *תְּבַרְכֵנִי נַפְשִׁי* his very soul's blessing. (Ibid 27:54). That can only be after being satiated with food and wine. (Ibid 27:25). (Ramban also takes umbrage with Ibin Ezra's reasoning. See there).

Ramban says, *he returned to the field and that is when he despised the bechora. For it only came with advantage after Yitzchok passed. He also cared not to plan for the future.*

Sforno says, *even after the sale, Eisav did not see value in the birthright. This is the defense to those that say that he was cheated.*

Ohr Chaim says too, *he got up and went and then he despised it. It was a deliberate act that he despised it. Therefore, even if he had not been famished, he would have sold it for beans.*

Radak points out, *he did not despise Yaakov. He despised the primogeniture itself.*

Many of these and other commentaries all derive at the same ideas: Eisav despised the *bechora* and did not hate Yaakov, that it was an independent thought and he would have given it away for free. However, he did not give it away, and we only seemingly see him despising it or selling it this episode. The pasuk is to be illuminated as to why.

"And Yaakov gave to Eisav." Yaakov did not *sell* or *exchange*. The pasuk previous said, "he swore and he sold his primogeniture to Yaakov." (Ibid 25:33). Yaakov adjured Eisav to swear. (Ibid). The sale was not promulgated on Eisav needing a meal. The pasuk does not say "hunger." It says *עָיִף* he was *tired*, or faint. (Ibid 25:30). What Yaakov gave to Eisav here was post-sale meal. The sale was done over the oaths. "And Yaakov said, at this time [first] sell your *bechora* to me." (Ibid 25:31). Yaakov did not ask to exchange the lentils for the birthright. He wanted the birthright first, though oaths, and then he would give the meal. That is why this pasuk says, *and he gave*. He gave him a post-sale meal, bread and the stew, *after* the transaction was completed.

"Bread and red lentil stew." What Yaakov was cooking earlier (ibid 25:29) is revealed now. More specially, what Eisav asked for is revealed now. If Eisav returned from the field faint, why did he come to Yaakov? Why was it important that Yaakov was

making red lentil stew? Yaakov not only gave the stew, he added bread and drink. This is because Eisav was fainting. Apparently, after working hard (coming from the field) he felt like he was dying. This happens when a person's blood sugar suddenly drops. Red lentils (you guessed it!) regulate sugar in the body. It is an easy to digest food rich in protein and fiber that promote good digestion, health, and can also reduce the risk of cancer. Perhaps Eisav did not know the latter, but when he felt faint, the red lentil was the perfect solution. Eisav came from the field meaning, *he came from his locale* and sought out Yaakov. Yaakov then paired it with bread that also raises blood sugar. Yaakov needed Eisav revived. Why?

Before continuing, there is one more point to make. Yaakov should have let Eisav die. He could have refused the food, allow Eisav to die, and then the birthright would be his. Instead, he thought Eisav would give up the *bechora*. Why?

"And he ate and he drank." There is no mention of water here but surely if he felt faint, he would drink water. Also, with a meal comes water. Wine is not mentioned here, but the inference is that Yaakov prepared a feast for Eisav. There is a reason Yaakov was going all out for Eisav. This meal meant something, as is stated *infra*.

"And he got up and he went on his way." Eisav left. Nothing was exchanged further. Eisav got up and went on his way in the same way as he came in. Except for being revived he was unchanged.

"And he despised Eisav, the primogeniture." He—Yaakov—despised Eisav who was the eldest, or over the eldest status. Despite the Midrash and a simple understanding of the pasuk, Yaakov did not secure the birthright here. The interpretation needs to be in context (plain meaning). The exchange later on clarifies this pasuk. When Yitzchok became old, he wanted to bless his "older" son. (Ibid 27:1). It does not say *bechora* there. This is because he was going to give over the primogeniture now. We know this because the eldest son is not the automatic heir. Yitzchok himself skipped over Yishmael. Later, Yehuda skips over Reuven and Ephraim skips over Menashe. The *Bechora* is an inheritance right, it is not as it is interpreted in English *birthright*, per se. That is why Yaakov made Eisav swear. He wanted Eisav to swear that in the future בְּיָמָיו "at the time" (ibid 25:31) he would acquiesce the duties and blessings.

While Eisav is out, Rivkah and Yaakov create an elaborate plan to trick Yitzchok—and it works. They could have simply gone into his tent (or at any time between the "sale" and the blessings) and told him that Yaakov purchased the primogeniture. This is especially easy if "Eisav despised the primogeniture." This matter could have easily been cleared up. It also seems that a lot of time passed between the sale and the blessings. (Yaakov moved around from Gerar all the way back to Beer Sheva). There was plenty of time to clarify the succession.

Hashem previously clarified that Yitzchok (not Yishmael) was the proper son to succeed Avraham. (Ibid 17:19). Hashem spoke to Yitzchok plenty of times and could have revealed to Yitzchok that Yaakov was now the rightful son to take over. (See Ibid 26:3-5). Instead, Yaakov admits that Eisav in the *bechor*. (Ibid 27:19). Eisav also calls himself the *bechor*. (Ibid 27:32). Clearly, no sale took place.

This entire episode was initiated because “Yitzchok loved Eisav...and Rivkah loved Yaakov.” (Ibid 25:28). **וַיִּזְכֹּק יַעֲקֹב אֶת-עִשָׂו** “And Yaakov was cooking a stew.” (Ibid 25:29). There are no breaks. This is a direct connection, one pasuk to the next. It is because of this difference in love. Yitzchok loved Eisav because he was a worthy heir. He was a provider; he fed and served his father. (Ibid). It makes sense that a father loves / favors his first born. Rivkah, though, favored Yaakov over Eisav. This, and the fact that he was named after holding onto his brother’s ankle (ibid 25:26), pushed Yaakov to desire the primogeniture for himself.

This episode turns on where Eisav was coming from and what Yaakov had to offer. Eisav came in from the field (his home turf) and was faint. Certainly, a man who knew hunting and a planter would have plenty of access to food. Also, where was Yaakov’s sense of duty? His grandfather ran to strangers to feed them. Here Yaakov seems to be using Eisav’s hunger to exploit him. It was not hunger, but Eisav was in need of medicine. He needed the “red, this red thing.” (Ibid 25:30). He came specifically for the red lentils. “And that is why he was called “red.” (Ibid). Clearly, eating a lot of the red food made him look red or it was because he always asked for “the red stuff”, so he was named Red. He had a condition. He came in and asked Yaakov for the medicine, which Yaakov was preparing. Yaakov felt that Eisav was not fit to be the leader of the family. True, he was a good worker, but Yaakov was clearly the sustainer. He managed the household affairs and did merchant’s work (i.e., tent dweller). (See ibid 27:27). “Sell to me at this time.” (Ibid 27:31). *This time*, such times as you are vulnerable and showing you are not going to last as leader of this family. And at the time when it becomes relevant (blessing time). Yaakov is not said to have taken it. He could not purchase it. He could only ask Eisav to give it up, to sell it. He never did get it from Eisav. He got it later through the bracha.

Eisav has the correct response. He does not say *why do I need it?* He asks, “Behold, I am going to die. Why is this *bechora* given to me?” (Ibid 27:32). Indeed, maybe Yaakov is correct, perhaps I am not the one that will sustain the family, especially if I should die. Yaakov then makes Eisav swear that he would sell the *bechora* to Yaakov in the future. He swears it and take the medicinal food in exchange. “And he sold the primogeniture to Yaakov.” (Ibid 17:33). This was done over the oaths. However, there cannot be a proper exchange when one party is being exploited. Eisav was on the brink of death. His sale means nothing. Yaakov wanted to secure the sale under better terms. Also, as Eisav seemed to be healthy through life, the requisite condition of the sale terminated.

That is why Yaakov served a meal to Eisav of bread, the ren lentils, and water (or wine). (Ibid 27:34). He wanted Eisav to now make the sale under proper conditions. Otherwise, this entire meal is unnecessary for the pasuk to reveal. Yaakov served his older brother like Yitzchok would want to be served later. Yaakov did it in the hope he would secure the *bechora* properly. However, Eisav got up and left. That is why Yaakov “despised Eisav over this *bechora*.” (Ibid).