
Esau's Blessing: How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs

By Ora Horn Prouser
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Review by David Wise

Esau is one of the Hebrew Bible's most physical characters. He is distinguished not only by his hairy skin, but also by the physical nature of his conduct. He's the prototypical outdoorsman, a skilled hunter. He's also physically demonstrative in his emotions. So angered is he at losing Isaac's blessing to Jacob via trickery that he threatens to kill his twin brother in the future. Come that future encounter, though, he greets Jacob affectionately: "Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him — *vayehabkehu* — and, falling on his neck, he kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). Jacob gets a bear-hug from this bear of a brother; it is a poignant scene of *hubbuk*, of embrace.

The embrace of Esau is understood in symbolic rather than in physical terms by Ora Horn Prouser in her recent book, *Esau's Blessing: How the Bible Embraces those with Special Needs*. In Prouser's understanding, Esau is the recipient of a hug, not the giver; and the hug comes in the form of lessons about sensitive treatment of Biblical characters who exhibit patterns of behavior consistent with what have come to be known as Special Needs individuals. In Esau's case, argues Prouser, that special need is attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Prouser is careful to assert that she is not diagnosing Biblical characters as having particular conditions unless made explicit by the text (i.e., Mephiboshet's physical disability, which is his primary identity according to 2 Samuel 4:4). Rather, she presents her interpretation as one plausible *p'shat* (contextual approach) reading. Nor does Prouser assert an interpretation based merely on isolated verses that indicate possible symptoms; multiple and consistently appearing clues must be present.

The principal and title Biblical personality is Esau, and it is here that Dr. Prouser makes her strongest and most sympathetic claim. While rabbinic literature and medieval commentators saw Esau as evil personified, equating him and his descendants (Edom) with whichever empire oppressed them at the time, in the *p'shat* Esau is at worst foolish. Prouser sees in Esau behavior typical of someone who suffers from ADHD: his impulsive behavior leads him to squander his birthright in inelegant, brusque form (Genesis 25:34); he may be a hunter, but his father seems to need to remind him to take his hunting gear (27:3-4); he even displays social awkwardness in inviting Jacob to travel with him after their first encounter in years, as if no tension could possibly remain (33:8).

Prouser also urges the reader to focus on the long-term impact of a character's

disability, even if it is not mentioned in the ongoing Biblical narrative. For example, Moses' early expression of his difficulty in speech should inform our understanding of the episode in Numbers 20 that seals his fate as the leader who won't enter the Promised Land. Writes Prouser: "Perhaps God, in asking Moses to [speak to] the rock, is giving Moses one last chance to overcome his speech difficulties...[and] had been hoping that Moses would evolve beyond the needs for the kinds of help that had been provided earlier...Thus, Moses' failure in the incident with the rock is a terminal failure. When he is unable to use his faculty of speech in a terribly tight spot, he no longer can lead a people that will soon emerge from the desert" (p. 69).

In a similar way, Prouser notes that Jacob is not the same vigorous, even manipulative man after his wrestling encounter left him wounded and limping. He declines the invitation to travel with Esau, claiming that his young children can't keep pace, perhaps knowing that he's the one who will fall behind. His responses to Dinah's rape, Simeon's and Levi's violent act of vengeance, and even the disappearance of Joseph are indicative of "a nervous, vulnerable man, who deals with his disability and his pain, and who has less faith in his ability to take charge in situations" (p. 93).

Most of the chapters in *Esau's Blessing* raise insightful observations about Biblical figures and their special needs. Particularly sensitive is the chapter titled "Family Dynamics in Families with a Disabled Member" (pp. 35-44). Her reading of the *Akedah* (Genesis 22) sheds new light on the meaning of the test: "God places Abraham in an unsettling and unclear situation, yet directs him with a voice that Abraham feels compelled to follow and trust. In other words, God has given Abraham a taste of what it means to be Isaac. Isaac often does not understand context and might be fuzzy about long-term goals, but he obeys his father and performs as directed. At Moriah, Abraham enters Isaac's world" (39). In a footnote, Prouser by analogy notes the method employed by special educators to show mainstream students how it feels to be a learning disabled student.

A mention of footnotes, though, raises this reader's primary concern with *Esau's Blessing*. Billed as a volume to be categorized in both Bible and Special Education, the book simply lacks sufficient full citations from the primary sources of both disciplines. Passages from the Bible are mentioned too often in passing, as if it is expected that the reader has a *TaNakH* open alongside. The format of the late Tikva Frymer-Kensky's *Reading the Women of the Bible*, with sections of text followed by the author's observations, would have been helpful. Expanded citations from the special needs or disability literature would also have added clarity, authority, and color to the juxtaposition of the disciplines. On the rare occasion where this was done—namely, the reminiscences of Marty Jezer (p. 63—Moses may have been the great liberator of Jewish history, but in giving in to his fear of speaking he's not a role model to this stuttering Jew"), the impact is significant.

The flow of the book and its focus on special needs is weakened midstream by a chapter titled "Miriam and Gender and Education" (pp. 71-79). Despite the author's

protestations to the contrary (“as equal education for both genders is an area of struggle for many students and teachers, it is a fitting topic for this book”), this chapter is misplaced in an otherwise comprehensive look at special needs. One of the major contributions of the women’s movement to *halakhah* was to press for the removal of women from the same legal category as that of the disabled; restoring the connection isn’t particularly helpful.

On the whole, *Esau’s Blessing* is a sensitive and meaningful contribution to the modern reader’s engagement with Torah, and has the ability to raise our consciousness to the special needs of everyone in our community. Prouser emphasizes God’s role as “Master Teacher of special needs students” (p. 118). If our ultimate purpose is to strive to imitate God, may we grow ever more sensitive to the great responsibility that comes with our privilege to be teachers, formal or otherwise, in God’s footsteps. *Esau’s Blessing* will help us embrace the challenge to mirror God whenever we teach.

