

Yaakov and Esav: Eternal Struggle in This World and the Next
[From Rav Moshe Feinstein, Zt'l]
By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

In Bereishis 25:22 we read that Rivka Emainu was experiencing the struggling of her two sons inside of her. Our Midrashim tell us that when she passed by a place of holiness such as the Bais Midrash of Shem and Ever, Yaakov was struggling to get out. When she passed by a place of idol worship and/or immorality, Esav was pushing to get out. Not realizing she was carrying two sons, she could not bear the idea of a child whose reaction would be identical to such total opposites, holiness and moral filth. The Torah tells us that she went to inquire of Hashem as to what was happening inside of her. The Midrashim again fill us in and tell us that she went to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever who told her that she was carrying two sons. These two sons would eventually emerge into two separate nations who would bear two opposite, irreconcilable legacies. [Rivka had the prophecy on this matter but Yitzchak did not. As an aside, this is an important point to bear in mind as we see the events in Parshas Toldos unfold.]

Rashi quotes the above-mentioned Midrashim. He also brings the idea of Yaakov and Esav struggling over the inheritance of both worlds. This requires explanation. After all, on the surface it should be an easy division. Esav, the purely materialistic one, should only be interested in the rewards one receives in this world. Olam Haba meant nothing to him. Yaakov, our patriarch, should have only been interested in the rewards of Olam Haba and should not be interested in this world of ephemeral, short-lived pleasures.

My Rosh yeshiva, Rav Moshe Feinstein, Zt'l, pointed out the following. We can readily see why Yaakov felt he was entitled to his portion in this world as well. As Rava states in the Gemara Horiyos 10b, it is worthwhile for a Tzaddik to have both worlds sometimes. There are many explanations given about how our world is to be used as a vehicle to attain the lofty spiritual riches of Olam Haba. While Tzaddikim grow from their sufferings in this world, enjoyment of this world can be beneficial to spiritual growth. Ultimately, this world is to be used as a means to attain the rewards of Olam Haba. But what does Esav want from the next world? Rav Moshe Feinstein, Zt'l, explained that contrary to popular belief, Esav did understand the value of the next world. However, he thought that if he uses his resources to support Yaakov's Torah and Mitzvos, he could go and do anything he wants and live a life of complete immorality. His support of the lofty Torah world, he reasoned, will justify his personal inability to control himself morally and religiously. We see from the Gemara Avoda Zara 2b that the Romans, descendants of Esav, among other nations, will even make such claims that all that they accomplished in the physical world was for Am Yisroel. They will then want their rewards for taking care of Am Yisroel. However, Hakadosh Baruch Hu does not want it this way. One who lives a life of complete letting go of all moral bounds cannot support Torah. Only Yaakov, who lives his physical life in holiness and purity, could be the chariot of kedusha for this world. This is why, in the end, all of the brachos that Yitzchak had intended to bestow on his children, including the brachos for material successes were given to Yaakov.

Rav Moshe Feinstein summed up that the whole concept of living a life of kedusha, holiness, was too much for Esav. He could not accept the responsibilities of serving Hashem even though he understood them. Indeed, to grow requires responsibility and much discipline. These two completely opposite outlooks of Yaakov and Esav, moral discipline and moral anarchy, cannot coexist nor be reconciled. Thus, the struggle between Yaakov and Esav remains to this day.