

Rabbi Meir and Nimos the Weaver: Contrasting Views of the Feminine Aspect of Creation*

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Conversations about Mothers

Nimos the Weaver asked Rabbi Meir, “Does every fleece that goes down into the [dyeing] vat come up [dyed well]?” He said to him, “Whichever was clean along with its mother comes up. Whichever was not clean along with its mother does not come up.” (*Chagigah* 15b)

This is the only conversation between Rabbi Meir and Nimos brought in the Talmud. The brief dialogue appears at the end of the stories in the Gemara about Elisha ben Avuyah and his student, Rabbi Meir. According to Rashi, Nimos’ question was, “Does the Torah study of all those who study before the Sages protect them from sin?” This seems to be a challenge to Rabbi Meir in view of the life of Elisha. In Rabbi Meir’s reply, being “clean along with its mother” refers literally to a lamb whose fleece has never become soiled through the process of shearing. Such wool absorbs dye well. In response to Nimos’ underlying question, Rabbi Meir was saying that anyone whose fear of Heaven comes ahead of their Torah is protected from sin.

Rashi presents an alternative interpretation that he heard from his teachers. Nimos’ question was, “Do all who descend to Gehinnom ascend?” Rabbi Meir’s reply refers literally to wool on the day it was shorn from the sheep, which had never yet been soiled. In response to Nimos’ underlying question, Rabbi Meir was saying that all who have done meritorious acts during their lifetimes ascend. According to this interpretation, the Gemara is more precisely translated, “Whichever was clean on the back of its mother.”

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Another conversation between the two appears in the Midrash:

Avnimos the Weaver's¹ mother died. Rabbi Meir went to pay his respects and found them sitting in mourning. Sometime later [Avnimos'] father died, and Rabbi Meir went to pay his respects. He found them busy with their work. [Rabbi Meir] said to [Avnimos], "It seems to me that your mother was dearer to you than your father." He said to him, "But isn't it written, 'Each woman to the house of her mother,' but not to the house of her father?"² [Rabbi Meir] said to him, "You have spoken well, for you have no father." (*Rus Rabbah* to *Rus* 1:8)

These are the only two encounters between Rabbi Meir and Nimos the Weaver in the works of Chazal, and in both of them they talk about mothers. In this essay, we will attempt to show that this is more than just a coincidence.

We will first provide some background and then attempt to reveal the meaning behind Rabbi Meir's conversations with Nimos the Weaver.

The Weaver

There is no craft more lowly than weaving. (Rashi, *Shabbos* 15a)

The typical weaver has no shame. (Rashi, *Avodah Zarah* 26a)

Weaving seems like an innocent trade with no particularly negative aspects. Why does Rashi view it so negatively? A Midrash provides a clue.

No wise men ever arose among the nations of the world who were the equals of Bilam son of Beor and Avnimos the Weaver. All the nations of the world gathered unto Avnimos the Weaver and said to him, "Tell us if we can successfully attack this nation [Israel]." He said to them, "Go around to their synagogues and houses of study. If you find children there with their high voices [praying and studying Torah], you will not be able to attack them successfully. But if not, you can, for their father promised them as follows: 'The voice is the voice of Yaakov' (*Bereishis* 27:22). When the voice of Yaakov is found in synagogues and houses of study, the hands are not the hands of Esav." (*Bereishis Rabbah*, *Toldos* 65:20)

¹ Rav Aharon Levin in *Birchas Aharon*, ch. 64, takes for granted that Nimos the Weaver and Avnimos the Weaver are one and the same.

² That is, Nimos, the Gentile, implied, "Doesn't your own Scripture indicate that a mother is dearer to a child than a father? After all, Naomi presumes that were her daughters-in-law to return to Moav, they would go to their mothers rather than to their fathers."

This Midrash implies that Avnimos was, at the very least, sympathetic toward Esav. Weaving, then, could be symbolic of his belief in Christianity, the religion of the heirs of the tradition of Esav. The weaver produces cloth by arranging threads on a loom in a crisscross pattern. Horizontal threads cross with vertical threads to form a fabric. The Hebrew euphemism for the cross, the Christian religious symbol, is *shesi ve'eiven*, “warp and woof,” the vertical threads on the loom and the horizontal ones.

We find Midrashic support for this idea. *Bereishis Rabbasi* to *Bereishis* 33:11 says:

“He pleaded with him, and he took it.”³ This reflects the idea of the verse, “The mouth of a righteous person is a flowing spring” (*Mishlei* 10:11). That was [the prophet] Elisha. Just as a flowing spring does not stop, so [the prophet] Elisha did not go back on what he said with his mouth, as it says, “He pleaded with him to take it, and he refused”⁴ (II *Melachim* 5:16). “But the mouth of the wicked conceals injustice” (*Mishlei* 10:11). This is Esav who said, “Let that which is yours be yours”⁵ (*Bereishis* 33:9). But in the end, “He pleaded with him and he took it.” He made himself appear as if he was backing off, but his hands were outstretched [to take the gift].⁶

This is the version of the Midrash that appears in *Bereishis Rabbasi*, but the commentary *Chizkuni* on Rashi⁷ (*Bereishis* 33:9) had a different version of the text which he attributes to the Yerushalmi. Instead of “he made himself appear as if he was backing off, but his hands were outstretched,” his version ends: “He was like a weaver, with his hands outstretched.”⁸ *Chizkuni* explains, “That is, Esav was like a weaver who tosses the shuttle from one hand and catches it with the other. Thus did he make himself look like he was declining the offering [by seemingly tossing it away, but then ‘catching’ it].”

Accordingly, Esav himself is like a weaver. “With his hands outstretched” is a phrase that could be used to describe the position of a man

³ Yaakov pleaded with Esav to accept his gift, and Esav accepted it.

⁴ The verse speaks of the prophet Elisha’s refusal to accept Naaman’s gift.

⁵ Thus declining Yaakov’s initial offer of the gift.

⁶ In the original: מתחמי חזר וידוהי פשיטן.

⁷ By Rav Yaakov bar Shabsai of 13th-century Provence, not to be confused with *Chizkuni* on the Torah by Rav Chizkiah ben Manoach of 13th-century France.

⁸ דאמי למחוי וידוהי פשיטן.

being crucified. We thus have a measure of support for the idea that “weaver” represents someone who practices the religion of Edom.⁹

We can now understand why “the typical weaver has no shame.” The *Mei HaShiloach* writes¹⁰: “Amalek, who is called an apostate Jew¹¹ as stated in *Kiddushin*,¹² ascribes all his actions to God. He says that all the evil he does is God’s will, for otherwise, he would not be able to do it.” The central figure of Christianity expressed this idea in words that are used to justify the abandonment of the Torah’s commandments: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfill.” A failure to acknowledge any faults is the height of shamelessness. In this sense, there is indeed no craft more lowly than weaving.

We have thus far brought evidence that when weaving appears in the words of Chazal, it can represent Christianity. We have discussed why Christianity itself can be described as lowly and having no shame, as Rashi describes weaving. But Rashi uses these terms to describe weaving itself, not the religion that adopted the crisscross pattern as its symbol. What is lowly and shameless about weaving in its simplest sense?

To answer this question let us look at Rabbeinu Bachye’s interpretation of *Shemos* 28:32, the first verse in the Torah to mention weaving. The verse describes the *me’il*, “coat,” the outer garment that covered the upper body of the Kohen Gadol. The end of the verse reads:

שפה יהיה לפיו סביב מעשה אורג כפי תחרא יהיה לו לא יקרע.

The opening at its top shall be [folded] into it, the work of a weaver.

It shall have a mouth like that of a suit of armor. It shall not be torn.

The Gemara (*Zevachim* 88b, *Arachin* 16a) says that the sound made by the bells that hang from the hem of the Kohen Gadol’s coat atone for the sin of *lashon hara*, malicious talk. Rabbeinu Bachye says that the Gemara’s wording implies that the atonement extends to all forms of forbidden talk, including falsehood. Man has a natural inclination to do “the work of a weaver,” talking out of both sides of his mouth, as the weaver moves in two directions. His mouth is like the links of a suit of armor, coupled with each other.

⁹ The numerical value of הגרדי, “Nimos the Weaver,” equals that of עשו, “He is Esav” (*Bereishis* 36:43).

¹⁰ חלק א, פרשת בשלה, ד"ה ה' ילחם לכם. רעיון זה נמצא גם שם, חלק ב, פרשת בראשית, ד"ה והנחש היה ערום; פרשת חקת, ד"ה ויאמר ה' על משה ואל אהרן בהר ההר; וכן בעוד מקומות בכתבי תלמידיו.

¹¹ "ישראל מומר".

¹² 18a. The Gemara refers to Esav in general, not only to Amalek.

Accordingly, the act of weaving itself entails repetitive material representations of falsehood. Such activity can leave a subliminal effect on one who practices it.

All that Rabbeinu Bachye says about the verse is compatible with Christianity's false conception of God and the Torah. But the Chasam Sofer sees a more specific connection.

The Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe, Shemos* 28:32) cites an interpretation of the verse in the name of Rav Shimshon of Ostropoli, *Hy"d*.

The first letters of the words **לפיו סביב מעשה אורג** spell the name of the angel of Esav, **ס-מ-א-ל**. Rav Shimshon views the following word, **כְּפִי** ("a mouth like that of") as a Name of God, just as he views a word spelled with the same letters, **כְּפִי**, in the verse **והסרתי את כפי**, "And I shall remove My palm" (*Shemos* 33:23). The following words in the verse we have been discussing, **תחרא יהיה לו לא יקרע**, have first letters that spell **לילית**, the feminine counterpart of the angelic personification of Esav. Thus, Rav Shimshon says, a Name of God separates Esav's masculine angelic aspect from the feminine. We will elaborate on this idea further on. However, we note here that the verse about weaving that in Rabbeinu Bachye's eyes alludes to the trait of duplicity, also alludes, according to Rav Shimshon of Ostropoli, to Esav himself.

Rabbi Meir's conversations with Nimos, then, might be viewed as discussions regarding the contrasting beliefs of Judaism, and, *lehavdil*, Christianity. Before dealing with the conversations directly, we will show that there may be reason for Rabbi Meir to have a unique interest in the topic.

Rabbi Meir's Edomite Heritage

Rabbi Meir was the descendant of a convert who descended from Esav (*Gittin* 56a). No one in his generation was his equal in Torah knowledge, yet at the same time, his halachic rulings were not accepted, for his contemporaries could not understand him fully; he could make reasonable arguments declaring that which was accepted as impure to be pure, and vice versa (*Eiruvim* 13b).

The commentators note that Rabbi Meir's reasonable arguments seem to be no more than mental gymnastics. What practical value do they have? And why, among all the Sages, is it only Rabbi Meir who is endowed with this unique intellectual flexibility?

Rav Tzadok HaKohen¹³ says that Rabbi Meir's unique approach to Torah is the legacy of his biological ancestor, Esav. Esav, as we have mentioned above, was born a Jew. His spiritual composition contained elements of the holiness of Yitzchak and Rivkah. The Torah says that Yitzchak loved Esav "כי ציד בפיו" (*Bereishis* 25:28). These words bear multiple interpretations. One explanation, cited by Rashi, understands them as meaning "for there was game in his mouth"; that is, Esav provided Yitzchak with the game that he liked to eat. Another explanation, also cited by Rashi, understands them as "for there was trapping in his mouth"; Esav would ensnare his father by saying things to trick him into believing that he was God-fearing. Rav Tzadok cites the Ari who sees the words as meaning "for there was something trapped in his mouth," an allusion to the soul of Rabbi Meir, the cornerstone of the Mishnah, which is the outline of the Oral Torah. We have mentioned above Esav's inflated conception of his place in the world. Based on the Ari, Rav Tzadok says that Rabbi Meir salvaged an aspect of Esav's skewed worldview and applied it to the study of Torah.¹⁴ As mentioned by the *Mei HaShiloach* cited above, Esav saw himself as situated so closely to the pure unity of God, that dichotomies such as pure/impure or permitted/forbidden could not apply to him. He was "a man of the field" living in a world in which there were no barriers. By virtue of his ancestry, Rabbi Meir was able to see that there was room for limited application of this approach within the legitimate method of studying Torah and fulfilling its laws.

The difference between Rabbi Meir's approach and that of his ancestor was critical. Esav used his line of thinking before the fact, to justify the evil things he wished to do. But Rabbi Meir limited the application of "declaring that which was impure to be pure" to finding grounds for defending a sinner after the fact, as Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Meir's teacher, Rabbi Akiva, suggest in *Makkos* 7a.¹⁵

¹³ *Pri Tzaddik, Vayishlach* 4.

¹⁴ This would be akin to his ability to extract the fruit from the peel of the "pomegranate" to which the Torah of his apostate teacher, Elisha ben Avuyah, is compared (*Chagigah* 15b). Rabbi Meir's relationship with Elisha ben Avuyah will be discussed further below.

¹⁵ According to Rav Tzadok HaKohen (*Resisei Laylah* 52), Rabbi Akiva himself was descended from Esav's daughters. The idea that Rabbi Akiva stems from Esav in some spiritual sense is found in many sources, e.g., *Shaar HaGilgulim, hakdamos* 36 and 38, and *Devash Lefi* by the Chida, under the letter *ayin*, entry 23.

“Lest He Kill Others”

We find an allusion to Rabbi Meir’s descent from an Edomite convert in the text of the Torah itself.

Before Yaakov’s reunion with his brother after having spent twenty years with Lavan, Yaakov is informed that Esav is on his way to him accompanied by 400 men. The Torah tells us Yaakov’s reaction. **וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב**, “Yaakov was very fearful, and it distressed him” (*Bereishis* 32:8). Rashi comments, **וַיִּירָא שְׂמָא יִהְיֶה וַיִּצַּר לוֹ אִם יִהְרֹג הוּא אֶת אֲחֵרִים**, “He was fearful lest he be killed, and it distressed him were he to kill others.” Rav Chaim Palagi ז”ל cites¹⁶ an interpretation of this comment of Rashi which sees it as containing more than meets the eye on the level of *peshat*.

The *Nasi* of the Jewish people in Rabbi Meir’s day was Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. Rabbi Meir instigated a plot to depose Rabban Shimon. The plot was foiled, and Rabbi Meir was punished. His teachings were no longer recorded under his name, “Rabbi Meir says...” Rather, they were recorded with the introductory words “Others say” (*Horayos* 13b).¹⁷ According to Rav Chaim Palagi, when Rashi says that “it distressed him were he to kill others,” he alludes to the pain Yaakov felt lest he would kill Esav and thus deprive the Jewish people of “Others,” Rabbi Meir.¹⁸

Accordingly, Yaakov’s distress was allayed. He did not kill Esav, and “Others” did indeed become part of the Jewish people.

Careful examination of *Bereishis* 33:15 reveals an allusion to the assimilation of the aspect of Esav contained in Rabbi Meir into Am Yisrael. In that verse, Esav says to Yaakov, **אֲצִיגָה נָא עִמָּךְ מִן הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי**, “I will station now with you part of the people who are with me.” *Sefer Gematrios* by Rabbeinu Yehudah HeChasid comments, “The *gematria* of the first and last letters of the words **אֲצִיגָה נָא עִמָּךְ מִן הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי**, ‘I will station now with you part of the people who are with me,’ equals that of **בְּגָרִים**, ‘through converts.’ *Sefer Gematrios* goes on, “The *gematria* of the word **אֲצִיגָה**

¹⁶ *Par Echad* to *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 37. This appears to be the earliest source for this interpretation. It is also found in *Imrei Noam* by Rabbi Meir Horowitz of Dzikov (*Parashas Vayishlach*, s.v. **אִם יִהְרֹג עֲשׂוֹ אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאֵת**), *Zichron Shmuel* by Rabbi Shmuel Shemaryahu Heine of Ostrowca (*Parashas Vayishlach*, s.v. **וַיִּירָא**), and *Pardes Yosef* by Rabbi Yosef Pacanovski (*Vayishlach* 8).

¹⁷ *Seder Tannaim VeAmoraim* and others say that this alternative name was used only for those opinions of Rabbi Meir that he learned from Elisha ben Avuyah.

¹⁸ *Sifsei Tzaddik* by Rav Pinchas Menachem Elazar of Piltz (*Vayishlach* 12) says that Yaakov felt the fear that Rabbi Meir would feel when he was threatened with death at the hands of the Romans (see *Avodah Zarah* 18b).

equals that of the words **זה עובדיה**, 'This is Ovadiah' (the Jewish prophet who was originally an Edomite)."¹⁹

Here we have an allusion to converts from Esav joining the Jewish people, but not specifically to Rabbi Meir.

Sifsei Kohen makes similar points in his discussion of the verse. "I have found written: 'Because Esav said, "I will station," he became worthy of establishing converts who are stationed with Yaakov.' The *gematria* of **אציגה נא עמך**, 'I will station now with you,' equals that of **אלו גרים**, 'These are converts.' The *gematria* of the word **אציגה** equals that of the words **זה עובדיה**, 'This is Ovadiah,' an Edomite convert who prophesied about the downfall of Aram."²⁰

Here we find yet a second *gematria* in this verse that hints at converts from Esav, but still no specific allusion to Rabbi Meir. For this, let us examine the words that allude most directly to the future converts themselves, **העם אשר אתי**, "The people who are with me." Esav could not have been referring to the 400 men who accompanied him, for they abandoned him.²¹ So let us delete the letter **ת**, whose *gematria* is 400. That leaves us with the (underscored and bolded) letters **ה-ע-פ-א-ש-ר-א-ת-י**. Esav could not have been referring to himself, for the Torah states explicitly that he did not accompany Yaakov. So let us delete the letters that equal the *gematria* of **עשו**—the letters **ע, ש, ה, and א**. That leaves us with the (underscored and bolded letters) **ה-ע-פ-א-ש-ר-א-ת-י**. Rearranging the remaining letters leaves us with **מאיר**, "Meir."

So Rabbi Meir is part of the element of Esav which joins the Jewish people. It would not be surprising, then, if he was among those of his Tannaitic contemporaries who had a particular interest in engaging in dispute with the spiritual heirs of Esav. Nimos the Weaver could well have been one of his opponents.

¹⁹ In the original, [תחילת וסופי התיבות] (בראשית לג, טו), **אציגה נא עמך מן העם אשר אתי** בגימטריא בגרים.

אציגה בגימטריא זה עובדיה.

²⁰ The word "Aram" obviously must have originally been "Edom," but was altered as a concession to Christian censors.

The words of *Sifsei Kohen* in the original read: **מציאתי כתוב** ויאמר עשו אציגה נא וגו'. לפי שאמר עשו אציגה נא לכך זכה להעמיד גרים שהם מוצגים אצל יעקב עד כאן. אציגה נא עמך גימטריא אלו גרים, אציגה בגימטריא זה עובדיה, שהיה גר אדומי וניבא על מפלתן של ארם.

²¹ See Rashi to *Bereishis* 33:16.

Other Aspects of Esav in Rabbi Meir's Life

We find other aspects of Esav influencing Rabbi Meir's life. Rabbi Meir was a prime student of Rabbi Akiva, but he was also a student of Rabbi Akiva's contemporary, Elisha ben Avuyah. Elisha ben Avuyah and Esav share certain salient features. Rav Tzadok HaKohen says of Elisha's deviant beliefs, "He thought that behaving in accord with the Torah through free will was for those who could not perceive God's true Oneness as he did, but for one who perceived the truth of 'there is nothing but He,' there is no place for Torah."²² As we have noted, this is the same image that Esav had of himself. Furthermore, both Elisha and Esav share the same alternative name, *Acher*, "Other."²³

Additionally, the Gemara (*Berachos* 10a) tells us that hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood were causing him great distress. He prayed that they die. His wife, Beruriah, told him that he should pray instead that they repent. Rabbi Meir followed his wife's advice, and his neighbors repented. *Midrash Tehillim* (104) presents a slightly different version of this incident. It was not hooligans who were distressing Rabbi Meir, but *ההוא מינא*, "that *min*." The word *min* means "heretic." In Rabbinic literature it is often used for "Christian." In this version of the story, we are told how the neighbor distressed Rabbi Meir. "He pained him with Scriptural verses." Rabbi Meir was being harassed by a Scripture-quoting Christian trying to convince him of the truth of his beliefs. But in accordance with his wife's advice, Rabbi Meir brought even this preacher of Edomite doctrines to repentance.²⁴

Esav's Misogyny

Now we can begin to decipher Rabbi Meir's conversations with Nimos the Weaver.

Kabbalistic and Chasidic literature is replete with discussion of the male and the female aspects of the cosmos. The gist of the discussion is encapsulated in the words of the *Kli Yekar* to *Bereishis* 1:31: "The male always represents that which affects, and the female always represents that

²² *Sefer Zichronos* 32a. See also Rav Tzadok's *Likkutei Amarim* 103b, and *Be'er Mayim Chaim* by Rav Chaim of Chernovitz, *Parashas Devarim*, s.v. *ולזה אמר*.

²³ For Elisha ben Avuyah, see *Chagigah* 15a; for Esav, see *Sefer Gematrios* by Rabbeinu Yehudah HeChasid (201).

She'eiris Yisrael by Rabbi Yisrael Dov Ber of Wiladnik, *Derush Sheini, Parashas Beshalach*, says that Rabbi Meir was called *Acherim*, "Others," because of his ability to bring rectification even to those like his teacher, "Other."

²⁴ See *She'eiris Yisrael* cited in the preceding note.

which is affected.”²⁵ When God created the universe, He produced a dimension of existence in which His perfect Unity is imperceptible. Man’s task is to bring perceptible Godliness into this void, to the point where it will be filled with it. That part of Creation that is already manifestly filled with Godliness is the male part. It must expand itself and fill the female part.

Human souls have some characteristics of both the male and the female. To some extent, each of us has realized our Godly potential. But at the same time, each of us has a void to fill. In the words of Rav Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb, the contemporary expert in the thought of the master kabbalist Rav Yehudah Lev Ashlag:

According to the Kabbalah, each man and woman has both the male and the female aspects of the soul: the desire to give is labeled “male” and the desire to receive is called “female.” This association of “male” with giving and “female” with receiving derives from the biological fact that the male gives the seed which is received by the female, and there is nothing positive or negative about giving or receiving in this sense. The code-name “woman,” however, applies to anyone who is dominated by his or her receiving side. This applies whether that person is biologically a male or a female.”²⁶

This is reality, but it is not how Esav viewed himself. He convinced himself, or tried to convince himself, that he had arrived at the pinnacle of human perfection, being a complete expression of God’s Unity in the material world. If he felt no responsibility to perfect the rest of the world, that, too, in his eyes must be God’s Will, for he had no will of his own.

Rav Shalom Rokeach of Belz²⁷ sees *Bereishis* 28:5 as revealing Esav’s attitude toward his mother. The verse reads, “Yitzchak sent off Yaakov, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Lavan son of Besuel the Aramean, brother of Rivkah, mother of Yaakov and Esav.” Rashi there says that he does not know why the verse finds it necessary to inform us at this late stage that Rivkah was the mother of Yaakov and Esav.

Rav Shalom of Belz suggests a lesson to be learned from this description of Rivkah. In the very next verse, the Torah tells us, “Yaakov listened to his father and his mother, and he went to Paddan Aram” (*Bereishis* 28:6). In the following verses, the Torah uses different wording regarding Esav in a comparable situation. “Esav saw that the daughters of Canaan were bad in the eyes of Yitzchak, his father. Esav went to Yishmael, and he

²⁵ “כל זכר דמיון אל המשפיע וכל נקבה דמיון אל המושפע”.

²⁶ *Giving: The Essential Teaching of the Kabbalah*, Rabbi Yehuda Lev Ashlag and Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb, translated by Aryeh Siegel, p. 165.

²⁷ Brought in *Maaseh Yechiel* by Rav Yechiel Michel Hibner, *Toldos* (19).

took Machalas the daughter of Yishmael son of Avraham, sister of Nevayos, in addition to his wives as a wife.” Yaakov obeys both his mother and his father, but Esav cares only about the opinion of his father. Rivkah was just as repulsed by the thought of a Canaanite daughter-in-law as Yitzchak, as she said, “I am disgusted with my life because of the daughters of Ches. If Yaakov marries a woman from among the daughters of Ches such as these, from among the daughters of the land, what is life to me?” (*Bereishis* 27:46). Yet the Torah does not say, “Esav saw that the daughters of Canaan were bad in the eyes of Yitzchak *and Rivkah*.” This implies that Esav showed honor to Yitzchak not because it was the right thing to do. Were that so, he would have honored his mother, as well. Rather, Esav was interested only in exploiting the parent who had something to offer, his inheritance. The Torah prefaces this contrast between Yaakov and Esav by stressing that Rivkah was the mother of both Yaakov *and Esav*, thus highlighting Esav’s duplicity.

According to the Midrash,²⁸ Esav didn’t merely disrespect his mother. He did physical harm to her. He destroyed her womb at birth.

What is the source of this violent hatred? Esav did not have the humility to acknowledge that Yaakov’s role in the service of God was on a higher level than his own. He therefore concocted a worldview which put him so close to God that there was no need for “service.” Anything he did was of necessity an expression of God’s will. Hence, the female side of the cosmos, the aspect that man must fill with Godliness, held no significance for him. In his eyes, he lived in a purely masculine world, a world which denied any deficiency in those such as him. Attaching significance to his mother threatened his worldview. He was the son and living heir of the Divine Father, the culmination of Creation, the embodiment of “they shall become one flesh.”²⁹

Not so Yaakov. He saw the material world as the sphere which held the promise of perfection for himself and for all of mankind. He relished his role as one who expands the realm of Godly Unity into the female aspect of created existence. He loved and respected the domain in which he would bring the Divine Will into fruition.

We spoke above about how Rav Shimshon of Ostropoli views the first verse in the Torah that mentions weaving as alluding to the Name of God separating the masculine angelic aspect of Esav from the feminine.

²⁸ *Tanchuma, Ki Setzei* 4, brought in Rashi to *Tehillim* 109:14.

²⁹ The book held holy by Christians relates an incident in which the religion’s central figure speaks disrespectfully to his mother. When the wine ran out at a wedding, the mother informed her son of the problem. He responded, “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.”

Our understanding of Esav's view of his relationship to the female component of Creation can shed light on Rav Shimshon's idea. Were Yitzchak to have accomplished his original intention to give the blessings to Esav, he would have put his stamp of approval on Esav's belief that he had united the feminine and masculine aspects of existence. Yitzchak would have been instrumental in endowing that notion with some degree of reality. But God intervened and prevented the culmination of Esav's view that the world had already attained perfection.

Before we deal directly with Rabbi Meir's conversations with Nimos the Weaver, let us look at another support for the idea that Esav did not attach sufficient importance to the mother, the female aspect of the cosmos.

"Yaakov's Brother"

When Yaakov and Esav had their reunion, after Esav saw Yaakov's family and his lavish offering to him, he asked Yaakov, "What did you have to do with that whole camp that came to greet me?" (*Bereishis* 33:8).³⁰

Rashi comments:

According to the verse's Midrashic interpretation, Esav encountered groups of angels who were shoving him and his men. The angels said to the men, "Who do you belong to?" They answered, "To Esav." Some angels said to the others, "Keep on hitting them!" Esav's men said, "Leave us alone! Esav is Yitzchak's son!" The angels paid no attention to them. The men then said, "He is Avraham's grandson!" They still paid no attention to them. The men said, "He is Yaakov's brother!" The angels said, "If that is so, you are on our side."

Rav Yehudah Heschel Levenberg asks,³¹ why did pointing out that Esav was Yaakov's brother tip the scales in Esav's favor, when pointing out that he was Yitzchak's son and Avraham's grandson did not? He says he heard an answer in the name of Rav Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rov. Esav's relationship to Yaakov differed from his relationship to Yitzchak and Avraham in that it was a relationship that was maternal in addition to being paternal.

The Brisker Rov's answer requires further explanation. Why does the maternal facet of the relationship make a difference?

In light of the ideas we have been discussing, we can see why this is so. Esav deserved to be shoved and hit because he denied the female aspect which demands active worship of God. By ending his suffering only

³⁰ Translation from *The Living Torah* by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan.

³¹ *Imrei Chen* on the Torah, p. 53.

after his men invoked the name of his brother from his mother, he was reminded of his refusal to acknowledge reality.

We can view Rabbi Meir's conversations with Nimos the Weaver as reflecting the differing views of Yaakov and Esav of the female element of existence.

A Fleece That Is Clean along with Its Mother

Rashi in *Chagigah* brings two explanations of the question Nimos posed to Rabbi Meir. Depending on which explanation we follow, he wished to know either how Elisha ben Avuyah's Torah did not protect him from sin, or whether those condemned to Gehinnom ever ascend from it.

*Mei HaShiloach*³² says that Esav believes he is "clean along with his mother." According to our explanation, this means he believes he has already achieved the perfect pristine relationship with this world. He need not work on his relationship with his mother. In line with this, in both of Rashi's interpretations of Rabbi Meir's answer, Rabbi Meir attributes Nimos' inability to answer his question to his underestimating the significance of the mother. Rabbi Meir answers, "Whichever was not clean along with its mother does not come up." According to the first interpretation, Rabbi Meir meant that study of Torah in and of itself is insufficient to protect against sin. One's mother must also be clean; that is, the manner in which a person is involved with the world as represented by the mother, the female figure, must be characterized by fear of God. We cannot presume that all our actions express His will. If we put fear of God ahead of our Torah study, we will indeed be protected. But if, like Elisha ben Avuyah, we do not, we will be left vulnerable.

According to the explanation Rashi brings in the name of his teachers, Nimos asked Rabbi Meir if all who descend to Gehinnom are doomed to eternal damnation. Here, too, Rabbi Meir answered that it depends on the quality of one's service to God in his lifetime. If one's mother is clean, if a person's life in the material world is conducted in a meritorious way, he will ascend from Gehinnom. Otherwise, he will not.

And so, too, can we understand the conversation between Rabbi Meir and Nimos when Rabbi Meir went to pay his respects upon the death of Nimos' father. When Nimos' mother died, he responded appropriately by sitting in mourning. But when his father died, he acted as if nothing had happened. It looked just as Rav Shalom of Belz said, that Esav's respect for his father was nothing but a sham.

³² ויאמר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן בהר ההר. Vol. 1, *Parashas Chukas*, s.v.

Rabbi Meir remarked, “It seems to me that your mother was dearer to you than your father.” That is, your lack of respect for your father, in contrast to your mother, indicates that you recognize that you have not achieved perfection, and have need for service of God through His commandments.

Nimos replied, “But isn’t it written, ‘Each woman to the house of her mother,’ but not to the house of her father?” Those who still believe that the female aspect of Creation matters must go to the house of mourning for her, but there is no mourning for the father. The father is eternal.³³

Rabbi Meir said to him, “You have spoken well, for you have no father.” The verse you quote is apt, but not for the reason you think it is. The only way to the father is through the mother. But you have no father. You have rejected Him and are no longer linked to Him. This is reflected in your nonchalant attitude toward the death of your earthly father.

Beruriah

We mentioned above the Talmudic and Midrashic story that tells us that it was Beruriah who opened Rabbi Meir’s eyes to the power of *teshuvah*. It was she who made him realize that it could lead even to the forgiveness of the sins of their evil neighbors. We can now explain why this was not something that Rabbi Meir realized on his own, and why it was a lesson he had to learn from his wife.

To some extent, Rabbi Meir was an intellectual descendant of Esav. As mentioned, he inherited an accurate version of his biological ancestor’s claim to be able to see the Divine core of all that exists, and to apply this acute perception to halachah. But there was one area of existence in which Esav could not claim to see a Divine core. Esav claimed to be free of sin. Hence, he could not claim to see Divinity at the core of something whose existence in his own life he blinded himself to. Esav had no experience with *teshuvah* for he convinced himself that he had no need for it. Hence Rabbi Meir’s inability to see the extent of the power of *teshuvah* on his own. This was a gift he could not inherit from Esav. This was a gift he could receive only through merging with the feminine side of existence, the side that gives the impression of being devoid of God’s presence. It was Rabbi Meir’s wife, Beruriah, who showed him that the darker the darkness, the brighter the light it conceals.

³³ As noted above, Nimos has an alternative name, Avnimos. The word *av* means “father.” The name could have been derived from the exaggerated significance Nimos attached to the father. Or perhaps “Father” is a title for clergy of the Edomite faith.

“Hashem, God, made for Adam and for his wife coats of hide (כתנות עור), and He clothed them” (*Bereishis* 3:21). They found written in the Torah of Rabbi Meir “coats of light,” כתנות אור. (*Bereishis Rabbah* 20:12) א