

An Essay by Our Campus Fellows at UCLA

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Shaina Sedighim and Daniel Levine are our Institute's Campus Fellows at UCLA. Like our Campus Fellows throughout the country, they arrange programs that foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

We have all heard the famous story of Esav returning from the field and seeing his twin brother, Jacob, sitting with a delicious bowl of soup in front of him. Esav decides that he needs to eat the soup and he is willing to go so far as to sell his birthright for it.

Later on in the story when Esav runs in from the field to receive the blessing from his father; upon realizing that he no longer had this option (as the blessing went to Jacob), he exclaims that this is the second time he has been tricked by Jacob (referring to selling the birthright as the first time). Obviously Esav is still bitter about the entire episode with him selling the birthright. This begs a very basic question: why would Esav sell his birthright for a simple bowl of soup? At first one might say that Esav himself gives us an answer when he states that he is “dying” of hunger but this seems to be the same type of exaggeration we are used to using on a daily basis. I think that the answer here is much deeper and has a connection to why we have come to know Esav as the typical Rasha.

The Talmud speaks about a concept called a “davar shelo bah leolam” or something that doesn’t exist yet. For many things in business some sort of “kinyan” or transaction needs to take place. The Talmud decides that one cannot do business with something that does not yet exist. For example one cannot marry a girl (something that needs a transaction to take place) with next year’s crops which have yet to grow. It seems that when something doesn’t exist yet, even though both people know that it will come, it isn’t considered like is something of value. We can relate this Halacha to human psychology in what is known as the need for instant gratification. People want to see results and

benefits immediately or else they will try something else. This seemed to be Esav's problem; although he may have known that the bechor was technically worth more than a bowl of soup, he wanted the instant gratification. When one is overcome by his desire for instant gratification he is at risk to throw away things worth much more in value. It is no coincidence that our Rabbis state that desire is able to remove a man from this world. This need for instant gratification is such a bad character trait that one who is overcome with it would be denoted by Chazal as the prototype of the Rasha.

On the other end of the spectrum we have Jacob. Already from a young age he is described as a simple man, but this story with the soup is really the first time we see him in action. Just as Esav was ready to throw away the Bechor for some soup, Jacob was willing to give his soup away. He probably went hungry that night but he had more important things to worry about; he had a vision.

When Jacob has to run away from his parent's house he finds himself in the house of Lavan. He sees that his daughter, Rachel, is an amazing woman and he sets out to marry her. He works 7 years straight just to marry her and in the end he is tricked! The 7 years here isn't random, the 7 years represents an entire cycle of time or agricultural cycle (as we see with Shmitah). Jacob is able to work the entire first set of 7 years and it seemed very short in his eyes because of the passion and his ability to see the goal at the end of the road. Even after getting tricked he is able to pick himself back up and work another 7 years for his goal. Jacob internalized the fact that to acquire something of value one has to work hard and it doesn't come instantly.

As current college students, it pains us to see how quickly Jews are becoming assimilated and distant from the Torah. People think that the Torah is an outdated book that holds little value in today's practical world. We wish to show that Torah is a dynamic and interactive guidebook that provides us with the tools to build this world within the context of Hashem's word and desires. We strive to show that Torah, in all its depth and beauty, is not something outdated and irrelevant, but clearly pertinent and timeless. Throughout our time here at UCLA, we have learned that being a Jew not only means that we must make these Torah lessons relevant to ourselves, but to wear our Jewish persona 'on our sleeves' and make sure to present ourselves as the advocates and representatives of God and his mission statement. We realize that being part of the secular world and studying history, recognizing other nations' scientific contributions, and reading about other philosophies, does not detract from our mission—rather it augments the understanding that we should be involved in this world in order to make Torah relevant to any and every Jew whom may have a different approach in living

his/her life. Thus, our goal is to work one day and one student at a time to try to fix this phenomenon. No one event and no one single conversation will be able to save the current situation in the Jewish community, it is the constant accumulation of such events and conversations that will ultimately help the Jewish future. With events such as a biweekly Mishmar, challah baking and learning, and just being there to talk to people about anything that is on their mind, we hope to change the Jewish people one student on one college campus at a time.