

THE “WARRIOR” GENE EXEMPLIFIED IN ESAU

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Kabbala teaches that the reason for Abraham to sire both Isaac and Ishmael and for Isaac to sire both Esau and Jacob was to filter the negative traits from the nation of Israel. The positive traits were harnessed within Isaac and Jacob, while directing the negative traits within Ishmael and Esau. A particularly villainous character was Esau, who exhibited aggressive behavior, as well as uncontrolled anger, and risk-taking, as displayed by his molesting women and committing murder.

With recent advances in science, researchers’ knowledge about the human genome is increasing rapidly. These advances have spurred a new trend within western society: the tendency to blame an individual’s actions on his biological, biochemical, and genetic makeup, rather than hold him responsible for his own behavior. Recent studies have proven that the defective gene for the enzyme, monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A), when combined with a high level of testosterone, triggers aggressive behavior; this defective gene is dubbed the “warrior” gene. The impaired MAO-A gene leads an individual to have much difficulty controlling emotions and stress, resulting in a high propensity toward aggressive behavior, risk-taking, fighting, rape, and murder. An examination of Esau’s life and his warrior-like actions reveals the possibility that he had an MAO-A deficiency. If so, this raises an even more difficult question as to whether Esau should be held responsible for his crimes.

When functioning properly, the MAO-A gene is responsible for breaking down neurotransmitters in synapses of the brain. A study performed in 2006 on New Zealand’s Maori, an aggressive population known for fighting, gambling, and addictions, showed that many of them carried a gene known to induce a similar aggressiveness in animals. Researchers theorized that this gene noted in laboratory animals is what led to the particular behavior within the Maori population. At the National Institute of Mental Health, in Bethesda, Maryland, studies were performed comparing the responses of normal individuals and individuals with the “warrior” gene who were shown frightening, emotion-inducing im-

ages, such as terrified faces. Only individuals with the “warrior” gene expressed hyperactivity in their amygdalae, the area of the brain which responds to fear. The researchers hypothesized that those expressing this defective gene were unable to control their emotions, causing them to behave rashly more often. Additionally, a study performed both in Bethesda and Sweden showed that high levels of testosterone coupled with low MAO-A activity leads to anti-social behavior [1].

ALTHOUGH PEOPLE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LOCATION OF THEIR *NEKUDAT HABECHIRA*, THEY ARE ACCOUNTABLE FOR TRYING TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES.

In 1993, a human, six-generational pedigree was compiled of a European family, which included many males displaying violent or aggressive behavior. The last two generations included seven males exemplifying this behavior. Five of these seven were tested for the MAO-A mutation and all five were found to express this deficiency. Eleven males in these two generations were not known for this type of behavior and of them, four were tested; all four had the normally functioning MAO-A gene. Such data provided strong scientific evidence of the behavioral effects of the “warrior” gene [2].

There is no doubt that Esau had a propensity toward fighting. Even while he was still a fetus, Esau argued with Jacob over who should exit the womb to be the firstborn. In the end, Esau won because he threatened, “If you do not let me go out first, I will kill my mother and leave through the stomach wall.” Jacob then replied, “This wicked one is a murderer from his inception,” and allowed Esau to exit

first (*Midrash HaGadol, Bereishit 25:22*) [3]. According to *Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Tetzei 4)*, when Esau did leave Rebecca's womb, he caused such damage that she was not able to bear the twelve tribes. In addition, **Shocheh Tov** (120:7) noted that Esau hated peace [3]. Such an inclination toward fighting is characteristic of MAO-A deficiency

Esau was also notorious for risk-taking, best displayed in the selling of his birthright. As noted in the *Midrash Shir Hashirim* (18), "Just as *Hashem's* name rested on Jacob, so too it rested on Esau. Esau was worthy of producing kings and Jacob of priests. All of these gifts were taken away, however, when Esau sold his birthright to Jacob." In the text of the Torah, Esau asked aloud, "What use to me is a birthright?" Just as the Maori are prone to gambling, Esau was always found taking risks. Explains *Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Zuta* (19), when Esau sold the birthright to Jacob, the two brothers agreed that Esau would take his portion in this world and Jacob would take his portion in the World to Come [3].

Because G-d did not want Abraham to witness the wickedness of his grandson's degenerative actions, such as rape and murder, He shortened Abraham's life by five years. The Talmud, tractate *Bava Batra* 16b explains that on the day of Abraham's funeral, Esau raped an engaged woman, committed murder, traded his birthright, and denied resurrection of the dead along with God's existence. Esau was known to have raped several women in his lifetime and there is Talmudic discussion about how many *mamzerim* came from him. In addition, Esau murdered Nimrod, to take his garments for himself (*Breishit Rabba* 65:16). Esau also intended to kill Jacob after his father, Isaac, died in order to inherit his brother's lot (*Shocheh Tov* 2:4) [3]. Such aggressiveness and uncontrolled anger are symptomatic of a mutated MAO-A gene.

Finally, Esau's "warrior" gene is possibly best expressed when he encountered Jacob on the battlefield. Esau arrived on the scene with four hundred men, each an army general (*Breishit Rabba* 75:12). He still harbored his anger against Jacob from decades earlier and was willing to risk his life to battle against his brother. His full intentions were to murder Jacob [3]. Esau's readiness for war displayed another characteristic of the "warrior" gene within him.

Yet, if Esau expressed an MAO-A deficiency, a burn-

ing question arises: should he be held accountable for his actions? After all, he was only playing the cards he was dealt, expressing the traits that G-d Himself had given him. According to Rabbi Akiva Tatz [4], the Westernized mindset would answer that due to Esau's genetic, biochemical mutation, he should not be punished for his actions. Esau was subject to the inherent forces which pulled him to the direction of wickedness. Thus, one cannot blame Esau for his deeds.

However, the Jewish approach disagrees. Rabbi Tatz explains that according to Rav Eliyahu Dessler, each individual has a *nekudat habechira*, a point of free will. It is in this area that one is challenged and must make decisions. Although people are not responsible for the location of their *nekudat habechira*, they are accountable for trying to overcome the challenges. G-d is not asking, "Why is your point of free will at that particular level?" Rather, He asks, "How did you cope with the tests you were given? Did you raise your *nekudat habechira* as you struggled to overcome difficulties?" [4]. Rav Natan Slifkin, in an essay on *Parshat Vayeshev*, states, "It is in *Hashem's* hands alone to determine what we have. But it is in our hands alone to determine what we are" [5].

According to Talmud, tractate *Sotah* 13a [3], Esau died in protest of Jacob's burial in the Cave of Machpela when Chushim, the deaf son of Dan, struck him with a club, thereby decapitating him. Esau's head rolled into the cave and landed at Jacob's feet. That is where it remained. Rav Aharon Kotler wrote that Esau, who learned Torah from our forefathers Abraham and Isaac, merited having his head be buried in the Cave of Machpela. Yet, since he never took this Torah to heart, since he did not use this Torah to guide his actions, only his head could be buried in the Cave [6]. Judaism holds Esau responsible for his short-temper, risk-taking, rape, murder, and overall wickedness throughout his lifetime. Indeed, he was given a difficult lot, possibly possessing the mutated "warrior" gene, but he did not live up to his potential. He did not strive to overcome this challenge. Rather, he let it dictate his actions and his life.

May we all have the strength to overcome the challenge of our *nekudat habechira*, despite whatever genetic lots we have been given. With God's help, this will hasten the coming of *Mashiach, Bimheira b'yameinu*, Amen.

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