

Just think of it – if only Esau had been a better hunter, he wouldn't have been so hungry, he would never have sold his birthright for a bowl of stew, and we would all be big strong hairy redheads. But then we wouldn't be here offering prayers, hearing the Torah, and celebrating Shabbat. Maybe a better way to picture it is, if our ancestor Jacob hadn't been such a good cook, we Jews would really be in the soup. So as far as we're concerned, things turned out for the best, but it's too bad that Isaac and Rebekah weren't able to pass their heritage on to both their sons. They had a success rate of 50%, which is about the same as the overall Jewish community today. About half our kids marry Jews, and half don't. About half of us belong to synagogues or other Jewish institutions, and half don't. At current rates, in another generation about half the Jews in the world will be living in Israel, and half won't. It's a little too simple to say that there's a good half – the Jacob half, and a bad half, the Esau half. Jacob the trickster, the conniver is not exactly the poster child for Jewish goodness. Nor is Esau all bad. The Esau of the Book of Genesis is a fairly sympathetic fellow. He is a sensitive man who loves his father dearly and weeps bitterly when he is deprived of his father's blessing. Tears flow again years later when he is reunited with his brother in a warm hug. Esau is described as a skilled hunter, and his logic is completely accurate when he reasons that there's no value in possessing a birthright when you're dead. Our rabbis made Esau out to be the embodiment of evil, and they used his second name, Edom, as their code word for our worst enemies, the Romans. What made them turn their wrath against a tribe of our cousins, and why did they re-imagine Esau to be a brutish fool? Perhaps it was their hatred for King Herod. Herod was appointed by the Romans to rule Israel. Because our ancestors would only accept an Israelite as their king, Herod converted to Judaism. Though he now worshipped the God of the Israelites, he himself was still not an Israelite. Herod was an Idumean, that is, an Edomite, that is, a descendant of Esau. As the imposer of Roman might in the region, Herod was resented for his cruelty, and for his illegitimate claim to be King of the Jews, he was despised. And so, by extension, was his ancestor Esau.

Herod's oppression of the Jews, and his fierce defense of his throne, are depicted in the New Testament. Three centuries later, the entire Roman Empire converted to Christianity. How different things might have been. Herod's appointment as king was intended to bring Roman ways to Israel. But in the long run, it was Israel that had a much greater impact on Rome. Herod's conversion to Judaism, if it was sincere, could have been a two way street. The Roman

people were clearly ripe for a whole new religion to replace their pagan gods. Herod could have been the carrier to spread Judaism among the Romans way before Christianity ever got started. Like celebrities from Tom Cruise to Madonna, he could have been that big-name celebrity who introduced the public to an unknown new spiritual expression. Just imagine what the world would be like if the Emperor Constantine had converted his whole empire to Judaism!

When Herod, the offspring of Esau, came back to reclaim the faith of his and our ancestor Abraham, he was rebuffed, and for valid reasons, let me add. The descendants of Jacob and the descendants of Esau never got the chance to share the ancient birthright. In our day, the success rate of 50% or so has many of us worried. Our fears for the Jewish future express themselves in ways that are both loving and generous and blaming and negative. At times we've been a little too quick to label sensitive, intelligent men and women as betrayers of Judaism. We accuse them of spurning their birthright, while from another perspective, it might be us who are withholding it from them. When we demand uniformity in our worship, or in our politics, or in our practices, we inadvertently send our own people off like Esau, hunting for something they can't find at home. Let us remember that they respect the ways of their elders every bit as much as Esau looked up to Isaac, and they are aching for their own blessing. So let us like our ancestor Jacob grasp their heels, but not to trip them up, but rather to steer them toward the paths of their forefathers. Let us freely offer all our brothers and sisters the inheritance of our birthright like a nourishing bowl of plentiful stew, and let them partake of it as much as they want, to their heart's content. Jacob didn't need to convince Esau the stew was good for him – Esau already knew that. We don't need to scheme and stew over how best to market Judaism to unaffiliated Jews. We can simply continue to make our religion meaningful and enjoyable for us. If we find it good, they will naturally want to share in it with us. If even we find it thin and flavorless and lacking in nutrition, well, we better enrich it and season it and spice it up before we criticize others who tasted it and found it wanting. Jacob was a good cook. We who offer up portions of religion need to do a good job as well. Whether it's traditions perfected over the generations like a favorite family recipe or new additions to the Jewish menu, let us serve it with the skill of Jacob, and partake of it hungrily like Esau, and cherish it like the blessing of Isaac, their father and ours. AMEN