

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

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VAYISHLACH וַיִּשְׁלַח

(Genesis 32:4–36:43)

There Are Two Fears: Killing Others and Being Killed

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed. (Genesis 32:8)

Why [is fear mentioned] twice? “Jacob was greatly afraid” that he should kill “and was distressed” that he be killed. (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Vayishlach 4)

When Jacob anticipates meeting his estranged brother Esau, he is afraid. The verse describing his state of mind surprisingly repeats itself, using two words for his fears. The Midrash attempts to understand this unusual repetition. He fears for his life and the lives of his family. He also fears that the encounter might cause him to kill others. Even in self-defense, permitted in Jewish law, ending the life of another brings trepidation.

God seeks after the welfare of the pursued. The Holy One, blessed be He, ever loves the pursued and hates the pursuer.... Thus Esau pursues Jacob. “For pursuing his brother with a sword and destroying his mercy” (Amos 1:11), the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “I love the pursued, and I abhor the pursuer.” (*Pesikta Rabbati* 1:1)

It is better for a person to take care that he not injure others than that he not be injured himself. (Tosaphot, *Bava Kamma* 23a, s.v. “*v’li chayav baal*”)

Given a choice between being pursued by an aggressor with violent intent or becoming the one in hot pursuit of another, the sages picture God preferring the former. Carrying out violence against another was abhorrent in rabbinic eyes. Their reading of Jacob’s state of mind is that he was as afraid of perpetrating violence upon his brother as of being the victim himself.

Jewish tradition detests violence as a violation of key values in its worldview. Yet, rooted in this world and acutely aware of the fragility of human relations written large in Jewish history, Jewish teaching permits using violent means in self-defense or in defense of others. Balancing the heartfelt quest for a peaceful way of coexistence with the urgent need at times to bear arms is a steady motif in sacred texts and in living conversation. The baseline is an affirmation of life for all creatures. One would strive to live one's life without ever having to lift up a weapon against another, so strong is the reverence for life. The preference of God for the oppressed or the pursued in rabbinic imagination is one way of expressing revulsion at the prospect of one human being aggressively threatening another. Harming another is considered worse than being harmed.

It Is Possible to Transform Oneself and Another

And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. And he said: "Let me go, for the day breaks." And he said: "I will not let you go, until you bless me." And he said to him: "What is your name?" And he said: "Jacob." And he said: "Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:25–29)

"Wrestled": It seems to me that the word *wrestled* has the sense of being connected..., of being bound together as two who struggle together, each trying to topple the other with their arms intertwined. Our sages interpret that he [the adversary] was the spirit of Esau. (Rashi, Genesis 32:25)

"And a man wrestled with him": I prefer that [wrestled] has the meaning of being connected.... This is the interpretation of Rashi, for *avika* in Aramaic as *chavika* [embracing] is used often in rabbinic usage...for the [letter] *chet* in their usage was difficult, and they softened it to an *aleph*.... And it is possible [to read] *vaye'avek* [he

wrestled] as *vayechabek* [he embraced], like *vayechabkehu* [and he embraced him (Esau)](Genesis 33:4). (Ramban, Genesis 32:25)

“Israel”: He uprooted the name *Jacob* from him, for Jacob points to crookedness of heart and being bereft of humanity, while *Israel* has the sense of the straightforward, as it is said: “and the crooked will become straight.” (Kli Yakar, Genesis 32:29)

This mysterious encounter of Jacob with another is seen by many commentators as a struggle with the angel of his brother Esau, whom he was about to meet in person. In this encounter, Jacob is transformed. His relationship with Esau up until this moment had been characterized by deceit and trickery. Grasping his brother’s heel (*ekav*) at birth, taking advantage of Esau’s hunger to purchase the birthright, and deceiving his father in order to receive the preeminent blessing, Jacob had a reputation of deceit. He had not yet earned his special blessing. But at this moment, facing his brother without deception whatever the consequences might be, being prepared to seek forgiveness and reconciliation, Jacob has become another person worthy of a new name. The meaning of his new name, *Israel*, is debated among commentators but, for the Kli Yakar, it testifies to Jacob’s growing into manhood as one willing to face his adversary, to seek reconciliation, and to become a brother once again.

Ramban (and Rashi) also suggest that the Hebrew word for wrestling (*vaye’avek*) in this passage is ambiguous. It can be understood as an embrace, perhaps a suggestion that wrestling and embracing can indeed become close to one another in actuality. The word then prefigures the actual embrace of the two brothers a few verses later. The encounter with the angel records both a struggle between the two brothers and a final reconciliation between them. Jacob does the hard work necessary to overcome past enmity due to his own behavior and to restore a lost sense of brotherhood.

Jacob is the best example in Torah of personal transformation. He overcomes a deceitful past and grows into a mature man desirous of overcoming hatred. He is willing to take risks to create a new beginning of brotherhood with Esau. His hard work overcomes the pent-up hatred and anger which Esau surely harbored.

And he [Jacob] himself passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept. (Genesis 33:3–4)

“Embraced him”: His [Esau’s] mercy was stirred when he saw him [Jacob] bow down in all of these prostrations. (Rashi, Genesis 33:4)

“And kissed him”: Rabbi Simeon son of Yochai said: “While it is known that Esau hated Jacob, his mercy was stirred in the moment, and he [Esau] kissed him with a full heart.” (Rashi, quoting *Midrash Rabba*, Genesis 33:4)

Esau had ample reason to despise his brother Jacob, and commentators debate the sincerity of this reconciliation. Rashi himself quotes an additional midrashic opinion in *Sifre* that dots placed by the Masorites over all the letters of the word *kissed* (seen in a Torah scroll) indicate that the kiss was insincere. Some commentators hold, however, that the efforts of Jacob were so persuasive that, at that moment, they overcame Esau’s feelings. The power of a gesture by a former adversary can undo layers of ill feeling. Jacob had been transformed, and he was determined to make a grand gesture of reconciliation. He returned home to face his brother directly, and the gifts that he presented and his repeated bowing before Esau revealed a new person who was ready to make amends and to be a brother once again.

The End of Life Brings Reconciliation

And Isaac expired, and died, and was gathered unto his people, old and full of days; and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him. (Genesis 35:29)

“Esau and Jacob”: Because he [Esau] was the firstborn, and Jacob accorded him honor, the verse places him [Esau] first. (Rashbam, Genesis 35:29)

“Esau and Jacob his sons”: As above in Genesis 25:9, at the funeral of Abraham, it says, “*Yitzchak v’Yishmael banav*” [Isaac and Ishmael

his sons], although there, too, Ishmael was the older. But here Esau is put first. We think we can find in this, too, a confirmation of the fact that Jacob derived no outward preference, either from the *bechora* [birthright] nor from the *beracha* [blessing], but that, after Isaac's death, without any ado, Esau was accorded the rank of the elder brother. (Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, Genesis 35:29)

Isaac did not have an easy life. His children were in conflict even before birth, and their struggle with one another for primacy tore the family apart. Jacob finally fled from his family's home fearing for his life and was away for more than twenty years. How is it, then, that Isaac could pass from the world "old and full of days"?

We have learned that the two brothers did reconcile, and they stood together to bury their father. Parallel to the narrative of the end of Abraham's life, perhaps it was the knowledge that his children had overcome their differences and would bury their father that gave Isaac a sense of peace and tranquility as his end drew near. Distinctly different from that earlier passage, here Esau is named before Jacob, perhaps indicating that his status as firstborn had been restored.