

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

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⁴Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁵and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; ⁶I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor.'" ⁷The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hun-

4 וישלח יעקב מלאכים לפניו אל-עשו אחיו ארצה שעיר שדה אדום: 5 ויצו אתם לאמר כה תאמרון לאדני לעשו כה אמר עבדך יעקב עם-לבן גרתי ואחר עד-עתה: 6 ויהי-לי שור וחמור צאן ועבד ושפחה ואשלחה להגיד לאדני למצאתון בעיניך: 7 וישבו המלאכים אל-יעקב לאמר באנו אל-אחיק אל-עשו וגם הילך לקראתך

JACOB AND ESAU: THE CONFRONTATION (32:4–33:20)

Jacob resumes his homeward journey. Long-suppressed memories begin to haunt his consciousness. The specter of a vengeful Esau looms before him.

JACOB'S PREPARATIONS (vv. 4–22)

GATHERING INFORMATION (vv. 4–7)

4. Seir The narrative assumes that Esau/Edom by this time had migrated east of the Jordan, having dispossessed from Seir the aboriginal Horites or being engaged in dispossessing them.

5. To my lord Esau This opening phrase identifying the recipient is part of the message. It conforms to the standard letter-writing style of the ancient Near East.

lord . . . servant This normally deferential mode of address, used by a vassal speaking to his lord, is motivated here by fear and intended to be conciliatory.

I stayed with Laban The Hebrew verb for "stayed with" (גור) here connotes both tempo-

rary residence and loss of protection. As to his reasons for going to Laban in the first place, Jacob says nothing.

and remained until now This explains why he had not contacted Esau previously.

6. I have acquired Jacob hints that he can pay off his brother, if the need arises. Listing each item, he omits mention of the camels, the most valuable of all his livestock, even though they are listed in verse 8 and are part of the gift in verse 16. Probably, he understates his possessions so that the gift will be that much more of a surprise and delight to Esau.

7. The messengers returned They report back that Esau seems to have obtained independent intelligence about Jacob's movements.

coming to meet The phrase can convey either amity or enmity. Jacob is thus unable to decipher Esau's intentions.

four hundred men The standard size of a militia and, therefore, ominous (see 1 Sam. 22:2, 25:13, 30:10,17).

As this *parashah* opens, Jacob's return to the Land from Laban's house brings him to the same boundary where he dreamed and prayed 20 years earlier. Here he will undergo the single most important event in his life, the nighttime struggle with a mysterious stranger that concludes with his being given a new name, Israel, and a new sense of who he is as reflected by that name. He will be reunited with his brother Esau, as Isaac and Ishmael were reunited late in life (25:9) and as Joseph and his brothers will be reunited in the next generation.

5. I stayed with Laban The letters of the Hebrew word גרתי ("I stayed," *gartil*) are the same as those in תרי"ג ("*taryag*") with the numerical value of 613, recalling the 613 commandments of the Torah. This prompted Rashi to interpret Jacob's words to mean "I stayed with Laban but maintained my integrity; I was not corrupted by him."

7. your brother Esau Esau is viewed as the ancestor of the Edomites (36:1) who sided with the Babylonians in destroying the First Temple and as the prototype of later Roman and Euro-

dred men with him.”⁸ Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, ⁹thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape.”

¹⁰Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, ‘Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you!’ ¹¹I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹²Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. ¹³Yet You have said, ‘I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.’”

DEFENSIVE MEASURES (vv. 8–9)

8. Jacob was greatly frightened He is aware that retreat would violate his pact with Laban, and he cannot flee because he is encumbered with small children and much livestock.

two camps Jacob decides to minimize his losses in the event of an attack.

PRAYER (vv. 10–13)

10. Then Jacob said The opening words combine quotations from revelations at Bethel and Haran, which mark the beginning and end of Jacob’s 20-year exile (see 28:13–15, 31:3).

וְאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ: ⁸וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב
מְאֹד וַיִּצְרַר לוֹ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ
וְאֶת־הַצֹּאֵן וְאֶת־הַבָּקָר וְהַגְּמָלִים לְשָׁנֵי
מַחֲנֹת: ⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־יָבֹא עֲשׂו אֶל־
הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאֶחָד וְהִכּוּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה
הַנִּשְׁאָר לְפָלִיטָה:

¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי
אָבִי יִצְחָק יְהוָה הָאֵלֹהִים אֲלֵי שׁוֹב לְאַרְצְךָ
וְלִמְוֹלַדְתֶּךָ וְאֵיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ: ¹¹קִטְנִיתִי
מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל־הָאֲמֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ
אֶת־עַבְדֶּךָ כִּי בְמִקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן
הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הִיִּיתִי לְשָׁנֵי מַחֲנֹת:
¹²הֲצִילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֲשׂו כִּי־יִרָא
אֹנְכִי אִתּוֹ פֶּן־יָבֹא וְהִפְנִי אִם עַל־בָּנָיִם:
¹³וְאַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ הֵיטֵב אֵיטִיב עִמָּךְ
וְשִׂמְתִי אֶת־זֶרְעֶךָ כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־
שֵׁנִי יִסְפָּר מֵרֹב:

I will deal bountifully with you. This phrase, which does not appear in God’s promises, is likely an interpretation of “I will be with you” (31:3).

11. this Jordan Standing on the banks of the Jabbok River, Jacob can point to the Jordan, clearly visible in the distance.

12. Deliver me The plea lays bare the terror that seizes Jacob at this moment.

13. Yet You have said The prayer concludes with a recollection of God’s promises. At the moment of crisis, it is his concern with descendants that is uppermost in Jacob’s mind.

pean anti-Semites. One *midrash*, perhaps influenced by later Israelite encounters with Esau’s biologic and ideologic descendants, reads, “we went looking for a brother, but instead found Esau, armed and hostile in a very non-brotherly manner” (Gen. R. 75:7). Another has the opposite view: “We met him, and though he is Esau, he is still your brother” (Gen. R. 75:4).

8. frightened . . . anxiety Hebrew: *va-yiyra* . . . *va-yeitzer*, lit., “he was frightened and upset.” Jacob both feared that he and his family

might be harmed and was upset that he might harm his brother in self-defense (Gen. R. 76:2).

10–13. Years before, as a young man leaving the land of Canaan, Jacob had prayed (Gen. 28:20–22). Some commentators see that youthful prayer as essentially a bargaining with God. “If God protects me and brings me home safely, then I will set up a shrine to God and set aside a tithe of all that God gives me.” Now he prays a more mature prayer. In place of bargaining, there is the realization that he has nothing to offer God and that God has already blessed him

14After spending the night there, he selected from what was at hand these presents for his brother Esau: 15200 she-goats and 20 he-goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; 1630 milch camels with their colts; 40 cows and 10 bulls; 20 she-asses and 10 he-asses. 17These he put in the charge of his servants, drove by drove, and he told his servants, "Go on ahead, and keep a distance between droves." 18He instructed the one in front as follows, "When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, 'Whose man are you? Where are you going? And whose [animals] are these ahead of you?' 19you shall answer, 'Your servant Jacob's; they are a gift sent to my lord Esau; and [Jacob] himself is right behind us.'" 20He gave similar instructions to the second one, and the third, and all the others who followed the droves, namely, "Thus and so shall you say to Esau when you reach him. 21And you shall add, 'And your servant Jacob himself is right behind us.'" For he reasoned, "If I propitiate him with presents in advance, and then face him, perhaps he will show me favor." 22And so the gift went on ahead, while he remained in camp that night.

23That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven

שני 14 ויגלן שם בלילה ההוא ויקח מן-הבא בידו מנחה לעשו אחיו: 15 עזים מאתיים ותישים עשרים רחלים מאתיים ואילים עשרים: 16 גמלים מיניקות ובניהם שלשים פרות ארבעים ופרים עשרה אתנת עשרים ועזים עשרה: 17 ויתן ביד-עבדיו עדר עדר לברו ויאמר אל-עבדיו עברו לפני ורוח תשימו בין עדר ובין עדר: 18 ויצו את-הראשון לאמר כי יפגשך עשו אחי ושאלך לאמר למי אתה ואנה תלך ולמי אלה לפניך: 19 ואמרת לעבדך ליעקב מנחה הוא שלוחה לאדני לעשו והנה גם-הוא אחרינו: 20 ויצו גם את-השני גם את-השלישי גם את-כל-ההלכים אחרי העדרים לאמר פדבר הנה תדברון אל-עשו במצאכם אתו: 21 ואמרתם גם הנה עבדך יעקב אחרינו כי-אמר אכפרה פניו במנחה ההלכת לפני ואחרי-כן אראה פניו אולי ישא פני: 22 ותעבר המנחה על-פניו והוא לן בלילה ההוא במחנה:

23 ויקם | בלילה הוא ויקח את-שתי

THE GIFT (vv. 14-22)

14. *spending the night there* At Mahanaim.

presents The Hebrew word *minhah* may mean a gift expressing friendship and respect—or a tribute in recognition of the donor's subordinate status. The ambiguity in its use here is intentional. Esau is free to interpret it as he wishes.

15-16. There are 550 beasts, a lavish gift.

17. *drove by drove* Each time, Esau is barely able to scrutinize the animals and interrogate the men, when the next drove arrives.

THE MYSTERIOUS ASSAILANT (vv. 23-33)

The narrative of Jacob's encounter with Esau is suddenly interrupted. The restless Jacob gets up during the night and decides to transfer his entire camp to the other side of the Jabbok.

23. *his eleven children* Jacob is about to become Israel, the personification of the tribal

with more than he had any right to claim—love, family, and material wealth. Jacob asks now only for God's help and protection, on two grounds: (a) God once promised him that he would be the father of a multitude, and that will

not happen if Esau kills him. He has to survive to carry out God's plan for him. (b) Because what he has to do is too hard for him to do unaided, he needs God's help.

children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²⁴After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions. ²⁵Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. ²⁶When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. ²⁷Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But

נָשִׂיוֹ וְאֶת־שְׂפָחָתָיו וְאֶת־אֶחָד עֶשֶׂר יְלָדָיו וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת מַעְבַּר יַבֵּק׃ ²⁴ וַיִּקְחֵם וַיַּעֲבֵרֵם אֶת־הַנָּחַל וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־אֶשֶׁר־לוֹ׃ ²⁵ וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר׃ ²⁶ וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף־יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע בְּפִי־יָרְךָ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבָקוֹ עִמּוֹ׃ ²⁷ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר

confederation. Only those directly involved in the evolution of the nation are mentioned. Dinah and the rest of his household are omitted.

the ford of the Jabbok This river, called by the Arabs "Blue River" (Nahr ez-Zerqa), is one of the most important rivers east of the Jordan. Flowing through a deep ravine on a meandering course, it joins the Jordan River at right angles about 20 miles (32 km) north of the Dead Sea. To cross at night with a vast entourage is dangerous. Flat stones or timber would be laid across the shallowest and narrowest part to afford passage.

25. Jacob was left alone He crossed the river repeatedly until all his people and possessions

had been safely transported. Now he is alone in the dead of night.

a man In verses 29 and 31 the person is described as "a divine being" (*elohim*). In the prophet Hosea's account, he is identified as an angel (Hos. 12:4). These terms are often interchangeable in passages dealing with angels.

the break of dawn As dawn approaches, the assailant, trying desperately to disengage himself, delivers a sudden, powerful blow.

26. Jacob's hip at its socket This is the cup-shaped socket in the hip bone that receives the head of the thigh bone.

was strained Or "dislocated."

27. dawn is breaking At this point, Jacob

23. the ford of the Jabbok The Torah may be punning on the term *ma-avar Yabbok*, the crossing or transit point of the Jabbok—and the transition of Jacob to becoming a different person. Also note the wordplay between Jabbok (*Yabbok*) and the word for "he wrestled" (*ye-avek*).

25. a man wrestled with him Who is this mysterious being? The classic commentaries are nearly unanimous in seeing him as evil, a malign force. He may have been Esau's guardian angel (Gen. R. 77:3). "Before encountering Esau in the flesh, his spirit struggled with the spirit of Esau" (N. Leibowitz). He may have been the demonic guardian of the river. His purpose seems to have been to weaken Jacob on the eve of his confrontation with Esau.

Or this may be an account of Jacob's wrestling with his conscience, torn between his human tendency to avoid an unpleasant encounter and the divine impulse in him that urges him to do the difficult but right thing. This position may find support in the text, "you have striven with beings divine and human" (v. 29), which can also be translated, "you have striven with God and with men." We can imagine Ja-

cob saying to himself, "Until now, I have responded to difficult situations by lying and running. I deceived my father. I ran away from Esau. I left Laban's house stealthily instead of confronting him. I hate myself for being a person who lies and runs. But I'm afraid of facing up to the situation." By not defeating his conscience, Jacob wins. He outgrows his Jacob identity as the trickster and becomes Israel, the one who contends with God and people instead of avoiding or manipulating them. At the end of the struggle, he is physically wounded and emotionally depleted. Nevertheless, the Torah describes him (in 33:18) as *shalem*, translated "safe" with connotations of "whole," at peace with himself (*shalem* is related to the word "*shalom*"), possessing an integrity he never had before (*S'fat Emet*).

Rashbam sees God as sending an angel to wrestle with Jacob to prevent him from running away as he may have been tempted to do, compelling him to do the right thing. And B. Jacob writes, "God answers a person's prayers if the person prays by searching himself, becoming his own opponent."

he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁸Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." ²⁹Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." ³⁰Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. ³¹So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." ³²The sun rose upon him

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֶשְׁלַחְךָ כִּי אִם-יְבָרְכֶנּוּנִי: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה-שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׂרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּנְכַּל: וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידֵה-נָא שְׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׁאַל לְשְׁמִי וַיְבָרַךְ אֹתוֹ שֵׁם: וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנֵי אֵלִים פְּנֵים אֶל-פְּנִים וַתִּנְצֵל נַפְשִׁי: וַיִּזְרַח-לּוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת-פְּנוֹאֵל וְהוּא

realizes that his opponent is a supernatural being.

28. What is your name? A rhetorical question that affords opportunity for the names "Jacob" and "Israel" to be mentioned together.

29. Israel Names in the Bible are intertwined with character and destiny. Jacob, purged of the name *ya-akov* and its negative associations, is assured that he will become the patriarch of a nation named Israel. The bestowal of the new name is the core of the blessing and the climax of the episode.

with beings divine and human The humans were Esau and Laban.

and have prevailed The name "Israel" in the Bible was popularly derived from *sarita* (you struggled), referring to Jacob's struggle and triumph in the face of overwhelming odds in this story. Its actual meaning is "God is superior."

The earliest two documents outside the Bible to mention Israel give ironic testimony of prevailing against the odds. The first, the victory hymn of King Merneptah of Egypt (ca. 1207 B.C.E.), reports that "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not." The second earliest document, the victory in-

scription of King Mesha of Moab (ca. 830 B.C.E.), declares "Israel has perished forever."

30. You must not ask my name! In the period before the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.E.) all angels are anonymous (see Judg. 13:17-18).

31. Peniel Literally, "Face of God."
meaning Hebrew: *ki*. See Comment to 4:25.

a divine being Hebrew: *elohim*. In Judg. 13, the one repeatedly called "an angel" is also referred to in Hebrew as *elohim* (v. 22).

I have seen . . . face to face The idiom "face to face," used only of divine-human encounters, may describe either an adversarial experience or one of extraordinary intimacy. Here the deliberate ambiguity reflects the menace and the promise inherent in the furious struggle. This is the biblical way of expressing the intensity of an encounter with the divine presence—the overwhelming nature of the mysterious contact with God.

32. The sun rose Jacob's flight from home was marked by the setting of the sun (see Gen. 28:11). Fittingly, the sunrise greets him as he crosses back into his native land.

27-28. unless you bless me The blessing must be one I will have earned in my own right, not by guile (Rashi). The angel asks Jacob, "What is your name?" The last time he sought a blessing—when his father asked him "Who are you?"—he answered that question falsely. "Now that you are prepared to testify truthfully

as to who you are, you have shed that previous identity and are prepared to take on a new one, Israel."

The name *Yisra-el* may be interpreted to mean "one who struggles with God." Through the ages, Jews have struggled to understand what God means in their lives and have con-

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

32:33 to this day This biblical verse underlies the requirement in kosher slaughter that the sciatic nerve be extracted (Sephardic practice) or that the entire hind quarter of the animal be considered unfit for consumption by Jews (Ashkenazic practice).

as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip.³³ That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle.

33 Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids,² putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last.³ He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother.⁴ Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.⁵ Look-

צִלַע עַל-יָרְכוּ: ³³ עַל-פֶּן לֹא-יֹאכְלוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-גִּיד הַנֶּשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר עַל-כֶּף הַיָּרֵךְ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי נָגַע בְּכַף-יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּגִיד הַנֶּשֶׂה:

לב וַיֵּשָׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה עֹשׂוּ בָא וְעִמּוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וַיַּחֲץ אֶת-הַיְלָדִים עַל-לֵאָה וְעַל-רָחֵל וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַשִּׁפּוֹחוֹת: ² וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-הַשִּׁפּוֹחוֹת וְאֶת-יְלִדֵיהֶן רִאשׁוֹנָה וְאֶת-לֵאָה וַיְלִדֶיהָ אַחֲרָיִם וְאֶת-רָחֵל וְאֶת-יוֹסֵף אַחֲרָיִם: ³ וְהוּא עָבַר לִפְנֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה שִׁבַע פְּעָמִים עַד-גִּשְׁתּוֹ עַד-אַחֲיו: ⁴ וַיִּרֶץ עֹשׂוּ לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צוּאָרוֹ

33. the children of Israel The reference is to the entire people, not only to Jacob's sons. This is the first time that the phrase occurs in the Bible.

to this day These words are written from the perspective of a later age.

the thigh muscle Jewish tradition identifies this term (*gid ha-nasbeh*) with the sciatic nerve.

RECONCILIATION (vv. 1-11)

1. four hundred men A reminder of Esau's possible hostile intentions. The earlier report is now reality.

He divided The division of people and effects, mentioned in 32:8, had been a tactical precaution in case of flight. Now Jacob is arran-

ging mothers with their children for formal presentation to Esau.

3. bowed low . . . seven times This symbolic act in the ancient Near East denotes submission to a superior authority. Ironically, this is the reversal of Isaac's blessing to Jacob that his mother's sons would bow to him (27:29).

4. he kissed him Esau's undoubtedly sincere kiss—he seems genuinely moved by Jacob's extravagant gesture—signals the conclusion of the chain of events precipitated by that other kiss, Jacob's deceitful kiss, recounted in 27:27, which played a crucial role in the original blessing.

and they wept Jacob's tears are a release from emotional tension, although his anxieties are not entirely eased.

tended with God, insisting that God live up to the divinely proclaimed standards of justice and kindness.

CHAPTER 33

1-2. In this arrangement, Jacob betrays his feelings of whom he is prepared to sacrifice if necessary and whom he is determined to protect. This favoritism toward Rachel and Rachel's son Joseph will lead to serious problems in subsequent chapters. But can any parent hide his or her predilection for treating some children differently from others? Children long to

have their parents recognize their individual strengths and talents, to be treated uniquely, not equally.

4. he kissed him The commentators are divided as to whether Esau's hugs and kisses and kind words were genuine. (The Masoretic text has dots over the words "he kissed him," indicating that there is something unusual about them.) Some are reluctant to credit Esau with any decent motives (Gen. R. 78:9). One *midrash* says, "everything Esau ever did was motivated by hatred, except for this one occasion which was motivated by love" (ARN 34).