

The Face of Reconciliation

Esau and Jacob were born to struggle. Twins conceived through the miracle of prayer, they fought one another even in their mother's womb. God tells Rebecca, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from your body shall separate; one people shall be stronger than the other; and the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Seizing his destiny, Jacob tricks Esau into selling his birthright; and Jacob fools their father into giving him the blessing meant for his brother. Esau plots violent revenge, promising to kill his brother after Isaac's death. When Jacob flees the Promised Land for his mother's home in Haran, he leaves behind a brother beleaguered and aggrieved.

In this week's *parashah*, Jacob returns to Canaan, four wives and a dozen children in tow.¹ At last word from home, Esau wanted to kill him; so Jacob sends messengers ahead אֶל-עַשְׂוֵה אֶת-יְהוָה, "to Esau, his brother" (Gen. 32:4). A midrash succinctly notes, "Though Esau, he was still his brother" (Genesis Rabbah 75:4). This man who, from Jacob's point of view, had vowed to murder him remains his kin; and Jacob seeks to appease him with obeisance and gifts.

Rabbinic tradition understands this story as not only a family drama but also a saga between nations. After all, in Rebecca's prophecy, God refers to each brother as a "people." Thus, many midrashim portray Esau as a symbol for the Roman Empire; and later, when the Romans adopt Christianity as their civil religion, Esau comes to represent Christianity as well.² These midrashim often emphasize and exaggerate Esau's wickedness, far exceeding the Torah's own characterization. But by villainizing Esau, the sages of antiquity could face their fears of persecution while at the same time elevating the meager Jewish people to a stature equal to the prevailing—and often threatening—authorities of the day.

And it is perhaps this very association that makes Jacob's overtures of peace all the more stunning. In the Rabbinic imagination, the empires that torched the temple or incited the Crusades are to be feared, yes, but there also remains hope of reconciliation. After all, despite his worries and his fears, Jacob is embraced with enthusiastic

¹ Gen. 32:23 mentions "his eleven children" or "his eleven boys." Genesis Rabbah 76:9 asks, "Where then was Dinah?" and concludes that Jacob hid his only daughter from Esau in a chest.

² See Louis Ginzberg's comment in the "Jacob" chapter of *Legends of the Jews, Volume 1*: "The use of the names Edom, Seir, Esau, and similar ones, to describe Rome is very old, and was probably coined at the time of Herod, whose designation "the Idumean" was applied to his masters, the Romans. When Rome adopted Christianity, the same appellations were transferred to the Christians and Christianity" (p. 254, note 19). He cites there numerous instances of the identification of these national terms with the Roman Empire, though he does not cite sources wherein these terms are applied to Christendom.

friendship by his long-estranged twin: “Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept” (Gen. 33:4). To be clear, one line of Rabbinic interpretation is skeptical even of this heartwarming scene: “Rabbi Yannai taught …: [Esau] wished to bite him, but the Patriarch Jacob’s neck was turned to marble, and that wicked man’s teeth were blunted and loosened. Hence, *they wept*” (Genesis Rabbah 78:9). But another Rabbinic view stays closer to the text: “Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar said … he kissed him with all his heart” (*ibid.*). In this reading, which I much prefer, the power imbalance is forgotten, as are all threats of violence and past actions of deceit. Esau and Jacob make peace, embracing at last in friendship and love.

In the Torah, the brothers proceed to introduce one another to their households. And then, with astonishing clarity, Jacob tells his twin: “**רָאָתִי פָנֵיךְ כָּرָאת פָנֵי אֶלְקָדִים**” “To see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10). We know from all the way back in the Torah’s first chapter that all human beings are created in the image of God.³ But Jacob, whose own face resembles his brother’s so closely, can finally see with undimmed eyes the divine humanity of his once-fearsome foe.

And this, of course, remains the challenge for all of us. The Rabbis suggested in their own day that the Jews could make peace with the empires that barely tolerated them. How much the more should we look for the divine in the faces of those we might be tempted to see as enemies. Whether we speak of today’s divides between religions, races, or political parties, the Torah encourages us to look past old wounds and to accept—when it is freely given—a friendly embrace and a brother’s kiss.

There are no perfect solutions, though, and even a heartfelt peace has its limits. Following their touching reunion, Jacob still keeps his distance from Esau. “‘Let my lord go on ahead,’” he tells his brother, “‘until I come to my lord in Seir.’ … So Esau started back that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed on to Sukkot” (Gen. 33:14, 16-17). From this we might learn the importance of boundaries and distinction. We are not all the same, and we cannot all live the same way. Even people at peace can belong to different groups, and those distinctive differences are as sacred as the divine image in each individual’s face. Indeed, to truly see God in another person requires seeing them for who *they* are, not for the part of *me* I see in them. Separate identities have integrity, and true peace honors the dignity of those differences.

Jacob and Esau do come together one last time, reuniting once more in the presence of their father: “[Isaac] was gathered to his kin in ripe old age **וַיָּקֹבֵר אָתָּה עַשְׁׂנָה**, and he was buried by Esau and Jacob, his sons” (Gen. 35:29). In the presence of the one whose favoritism tore them apart, these 120-year-old⁴ twins find common

³ See Gen. 1:27 and also 5:1.

⁴ Isaac was 180 when he died (Gen. 35:28) and 60 when his sons were born (Gen. 25:26).

purpose in laying their parent to rest. In our own experience, it is, sadly, at times of catastrophe or distress that we force ourselves to overcome the barriers that keep us apart. We pray that the times we need such solidarity are rare, and we strive to cross the bridges we build more frequently than did our ancestors, Esau and Jacob.

In this era where division and discord are pervasive and severe, let us strive to follow in the footsteps of Jacob and Esau. Let us take inspiration from our Rabbinic sages, who taught us to seek peace even with those who might have caused us great harm. And let us seek always to see in the faces of those close to us as well as those farther away the image of the face of God.