

Torah Reflection on *Parashat Vayishlah*

Genesis 32:4 – 36:43

November 24, 2007

14 Kislev 5768

The last time they saw each other emotions ran high. The entire family was torn apart by rivalry, envy and deceit. Back in Genesis 27, Esau discovers that Jacob has taken not only his birthright, but his blessing as well. Isaac trembles violently; Esau sobs bitterly; and Rebecca sends Jacob away in order to save his life. Esau's final words are, "I will kill my brother Jacob" (Genesis 27:41).

Is reconciliation possible when strife runs so deep? What would it take for twin brothers Jacob and Esau to recover from the wounds of their past? From their rage and their fear? What would it take for them move toward forgiveness and healing?

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob and Esau prepare to see one another again. Esau is accompanied by four hundred people. Jacob has prayed, sent gifts and carefully arranged his company, suggesting that he is skeptical that his brother will receive him peacefully. He now steps out alone and approaches Esau. Defenseless against Esau's strong show of force, Jacob bows seven times. The tension is palpable. Jacob's show of humility and vulnerability could be Esau's perfect opportunity to exact revenge and fulfill his old promise to kill his brother.

Instead: "And Esau ran toward him and he hugged him and he fell on his neck and he kissed him" (Genesis 33:4).

What does it mean that Esau "fell on his neck"? First, we should note that other important scenes of reconciliation and forgiveness include this unusual idiom. When Joseph, in Egypt, finally identifies himself to his brothers who had presumed him to be dead, he and Benjamin weep upon each other's necks (Genesis 45:14). So too, when Joseph is finally reunited with his father Jacob (Genesis 46:29), Joseph falls upon his father's neck. Falling upon one's neck, then, is an indication of the tremendous relief that comes with meeting a long lost loved one. It is an act that symbolizes the dramatic nature of a reunion when reconciliation was thought to be impossible.

Further, the neck itself holds particular significance for Jacob and Esau. The term Hebrew term *tzavar* (neck) appears several times throughout their story. Back in Genesis 27, when Rebecca dresses Jacob so that he will feel like Esau, she places skins around his hands and upon the "smooth part of his neck". After Isaac gives Jacob the blessing, Esau pleads with Isaac "Have you only one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!" Isaac responds:

From the fatness of the land will be your dwelling; and from the dew of the sky above
According to the sword you will live; and your brother you will serve.

And it will be that you will have dominion; and you will break his yoke from off of your neck. (Genesis 27:39-40)

In other words, the neck is the very same body part that Jacob once used to trick his father and to supplant Esau. The neck further symbolizes the dominion that Jacob holds over Esau (i.e.,

the yoke upon his neck). Yet, it becomes the climax of the reconciliation in our scene. This symbol of guile, power, and dominance is transformed in the course of the brothers' reunion. Jacob literally "sticks his neck out" as an offering of vulnerability. And Esau resists the tempting opportunity to kill his brother as he promised. He responds instead with compassion and a kiss. Once Esau kisses Jacob's neck, he finally breaks free from the yoke upon his own.

Commentators have long debated the true nature of this reconciliation. They have noted that at the end of the scene, though Jacob has promised to meet up with Esau, he heads off in the opposite direction. Many have doubted the sincerity of one or both brothers. Still, it is clear that they come at least to a truce. In this realistic portrayal of how moments of reconciliation often work, they have moved from discord to concord, if not quite accord. Esau has set aside his murderous rage, Jacob returns to the land of his family without fear and the brothers are able to move toward healing. The final mention of the two of them in the same place occurs in Genesis 35:28 when they bury their father together.

We should note that in the scene that immediately precedes the reconciliation, Jacob wrestles with the mysterious being who changes his name from Jacob (the supplanter) to Israel (the one who struggles with God). However, the text refers to him as Jacob throughout this chapter. Perhaps Jacob does not truly begin his transformation until he allows for his own vulnerability and makes room for Esau's response. Having wrestled with a Divine being, he also faces his human brother and the actions of his own imperfect past. Only after he has demonstrated willingness to be confronted by his brother face to face is he called Israel. Still, the text continues to use the names Jacob and Israel interchangeably. Transformation, like reconciliation, is often incomplete at first. Both are gradual processes. Though they may be built upon significant moments, they nonetheless require continued effort and growth.

Perhaps we too are more able to struggle with God when we are open to genuine encounters with those around us. Perhaps we too must return to past hurt that we have either caused or sustained in order to facilitate moments of reconciliation. Perhaps we truly become Israel when we continually work toward transformation and healing.

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