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Parshat Vayishlach: The Fear of the Known Rabbanit Dr. Ágnes Veto

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

The overarching theme of parasha *Vayishlach* is the renegotiation of Yaakov's relationship with his brother Esau. The renegotiation has tremendous ramifications: Yaakov will make peace with Esau and also, for the first time, lay a clear, unambiguous claim to his status as a first-born son and establish himself in the land. It's too much to ask that estranged brothers—even with the best of intentions— become intimate friends overnight. So when the parasha ends, and we see Esau leaving for the hill country of Seir, we still feel cautiously optimistic that some fuller reconciliation is to be anticipated. We also might feel relieved that, by quietly relinquishing his first-born status, Esau retroactively legitimizes Yaakov's theft of the *bekhorah*. I would like to draw attention to the ways in which Yaakov could have effected a fuller and more sustained reconciliation right away.

Everyone knows the rather wild midrash that suggests that the word *vayishaqehu* is dotted in the Massoretic text to intimate that Esau bit, rather than kissed Yaakov (according to R. Yannai, in *Bereshit Rabbah* 78:9.) However, in the very same paragraph, there is a lesser-quoted counter-opinion, that of R. Shimon. He maintains that Esau ran to greet Yaakov with a full and open heart—indicating that for once Esau was able to overcome his hatred of Yaakov, and was prepared not only to completely reconcile with him, but to become a close and intimate brother to him. It was Yaakov who resisted this overture, out of suspicion and paranoia, continuing to mistrust Esau when he desired to walk with him (*Bereishit* 33.12).

Yaakov's mistrust extended to an almost grotesque overprotection of his family. Rashi quotes the midrash in *Bereishit Rabbah* 76:9 that asserts that when Yaakov knew Esau was coming, he locked his daughter Dina up in a box, lest she meet Esau and he wish to marry her. There is an element of understandable concern on Yaakov's part here, but in general, this sorry episode demonstrates that Yaakov was so worried that Esau, the "bad man" would get his "good girl" that he was unable to think of the positive possibilities of this endogamous marriage— the prospective of further family healing and reconciliation. Ya'akov was out to protect himself, not to extend himself in Esau's direction.

That Yaakov acted too much out of his distrust of Esau is intimated in *Avodah Zarah* 8b, "For twenty-six years, Rome kept her treaties with Israel, but then turned and subjugated Israel. Originally, they followed the lesson of Esau's first offer, 'Let us travel onwards together and I will walk as your counterpart.' (*Bereishit* 33.12.) But then they followed the lesson of Yaakov's reply, 'Pass ahead, please, my master.' (*Bereishit* 33.14)" For the rabbis, Yaakov's reply represents not merely an unbrotherly response but also an embodiment of a simultaneously mistrusting and servile attitude towards the powerful. This is not to be emulated.

But we don't even have to turn to the Gemara. In the Torah itself, in Devarim, when Moses, at Horeb, recapitulates the history of the Israelites, he tells them that God gave Esau, "Mt. Seir to inherit, and [the vav conjunctive perhaps indicating a consequence] Yaakov and his sons went down to Egypt." Yaakov's mistrust and servility towards the powerful earned a measure-for-measure punishment, and his turning away from an other he knew and with whom he ought to have reconciled caused him to be delivered into the hand of an unknown other - The land of Egypt - where he and his descendants truly felt the heavy hand of mistrust and slavery. This verse is, in fact, so significant that it is the lynchpin of the Exodus account in the haggadah.

While the parasha's account of the meeting of Yaakov and Esau is cautiously optimistic and we can certainly find inspiration in Yaakov's ability to overcome his fear in wrestling the angel, we can also appreciate that this courage had limits and when it came to a real personal encounter where he had to struggle with the known and not the unknown, he could not fully rise to the occasion, failing both to trust nor apologize.

I wish us all the courage to be able to wrestle with the unknown, as Yaakov did, and the blessing to be able to fully reconcile even with the known, as he failed to do.



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