

Ya'acov and Esav by Gabi Peretz

If we were to look at Sefer Bereishit as a literary work, we could realistically say that Parshat Vayishlach represents the climax in Ya'acov's story, in all its turbulent manifestations. The bizarre encounter with the divine being who bestows a new name upon Ya'acov. The return to Eretz Canaan, after spending more than two decades with Laban, the loss of Ya'acov's beloved Rachel (setting the stage for an intense attachment with his youngest sons Joseph and Benjamin and the sibling conflict this generates). It also contains one of the most troubling chapters in Bereishit and perhaps the entire Torah, Maaseh Shchem, the rape of Dina and the terrible vengeance that ensues. But it is upon none of these meaty topics that I will dwell on. Instead, I will focus on Ya'acov's reconciliation with his brother Esav.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Ya'acov's stealing of Esav's birthright is one of the most defining in the patriarch's life. It sets the stage for a life riddled with Mirma – with fraud and deception. These are the words that Yitzhak uses after the incident:

וַיֹּאמֶר בָּא אֶחָיִךְ בְּמִרְמָה וַיִּקַּח בְּרִכְתְּךָ

This is the first time the word Mirma appears in Bereishit, the root of which Resh/Mem/Heh is used only twice more in Genesis and always in connection with Ya'acov.

Now, let us first think about what this deed does beyond wronging Esav. In a sense, Yitzhak and Rivka have built the first happy, loving home in Genesis. Yitzhak is the first man we hear of who loves his wife. And Rivka is the first mother where it is stated that she loves her son Ya'acov, with a parallel strong attachment between Yitzhak and Esav. Ya'acov's deception, goaded by Rivka, in a sense destroys the family forever. The warm bonds are torn asunder for good, Ya'acov must flee, never to see his adoring mother again, who is essentially written out of the text, for we never hear of her death or of someone mourning for her passing. Once he reaches safety in the house of Laban, his life will continue to be marked by mirma, by deception and the strife it creates, and always under the shadow of this feud with his elder brother.

In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the account of Ya'acov's life in the Torah falls short of the lives of the other patriarchs. Yet it is Ya'acov who is seen as the father of our people. We are not Bnei Avraham, Bnei Moshe, Bnei Yitzhak but the House of Ya'acov, the Bnei Israel. He is the great, tribal forefather. And the only way that the tradition can make sense of this is to use Midrash to gloss over or embellish the glaring flaws in deceiving Ya'acov and turn poor Esav into the ultimate villain and as the physical embodiment of our oppressors and vanquishers, of Rome.

Now in Vayishlach, after initial tension and much anguish (which I posit is the result of a guilty conscience on Ya'acov's part), there is a reconciliation between the brothers. "Esav ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept."

For his part, Jonathan Sacks believes that after his wrestling match with the divine being, Ya'acov undergoes a change of personality, a transformation. He gives back to Esav the blessing he took from him. The previous day he had given him back the material blessing by sending him hundreds of goats, ewes, rams, camels, cows, bulls and donkeys. Now he gives him back the blessing that said, "Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you." (Gen. 27:29) Ya'acov bows down seven times to Esav. He calls Esav "my lord", (Gen. 33:8) and refers to himself as "your servant". (33:5)

This scene of sibling reconciliation wasn't entirely welcomed by the rabbis. After investing Ya'acov with such goodness and Esav with such evil, they do not like the idea that bygones can be bygones. The Rambam explains that Ya'acov's refusal to continue his journey with Esav is because he wants to avoid fraternizing with his elder brother. The reconciliation has not really taken. Ya'acov has done what it is right, but he wants to move on and get away as quickly as possible. The Rambam sees this as an encapsulation of exile and the Jews' uneasy relationship with more powerful rulers and peoples.

Nechama Leibowitz points out that Esav's display of affection is seen as suspect. When R. Shimon ben Eliezer: explains this as Esav's compassion being aroused at that moment and that he kissed Ya'acov with all his heart, R. Yannai says: Why then is the word pointed above? But we must understand that he came not to kiss him (nashko) but to bite him (noshkho). Whereupon the Patriarch Ya'acov's neck turned to marble, setting that wicked man's teeth on edge. What then is the implication of the phrase: "And they wept." This one wept on his neck and the other, on (account of) his teeth (Bereshit Rabbah 78, 12). Allow me to say that this portrayal of Esav as inherently violent and evil seems somewhat bizarre, considering he is the child of Yitzhak and Rivka, grandson of Abraham and Sarah. He is not a stranger. He is not Rome.

Rabbi Sacks prefers to dwell on the positive elements of the encounter, on how this reconciliation made Ya'acov whole. But did it? The scene is set for the conflict in Vayeshev. The toxic sibling rivalry that poisoned the first half of Esav and Ya'acov's life is passed onto the next generation. Let us not forget that when he meets Pharaoh and he asks Ya'acov how old he is, the patriarch sums up the days of his life as "Me'at veRaim" – few and hard.

Before I conclude, I will end with a few historical observations. First off, the original, didactic component of the story of Ya'acov and Esav was meant for a Canaanite context: it could have explained the divide with neighbouring, kindred peoples who were very close to us yet also inexorably different, who worshipped other gods, kept other customs and who were meant to remain alien despite cultural and linguistic similarities. If one holds by Professor Finkelstein's theory that there was no sojourn in Egypt, no Yetziat Mitzrayim, and the Israelites were a Canaanite hill country people that always dwelled in the land, then this recurring theme of sibling rivalry does make sense: it resonates within a context of a distinct tribal consciousness emerging. Once exile sets in, however, this context loses meaning. The story is interpreted by the rabbis to apply to the fraught conditions of a dispersed people. Esav is not really kin but a hardened foe. Unlike Rabbi Sacks, I wonder if these latter rabbinic and Midrashic embellishments obscure the flawed and very human nature of Ya'acov and take us away from the original intent and meaning of the narrative.