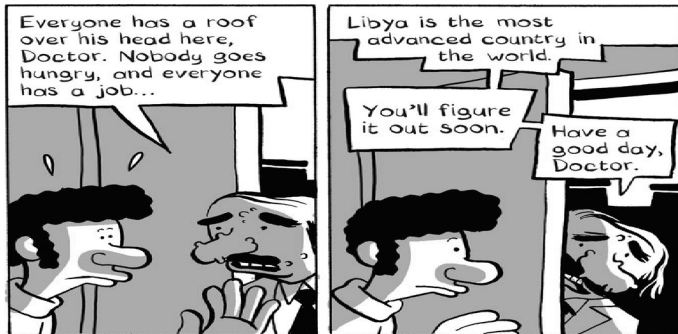




Homecoming

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From *The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978–1984: A Graphic Memoir*

In Parashat Vayishlah, Jacob returns to the Land of Canaan after a long absence and finds trouble rather than the comforts of home. He prepares to meet his estranged and potentially violent brother. He also wrestles with a mysterious Divine being, possibly Esau's guardian (Genesis Rabbah 77:3). After a tense reunion with Esau, he buys a parcel of land for his new home, but then his daughter, Dinah, is kidnapped and raped by the son of one his most prominent neighbors. In turn, his sons kill the entire male population of the town in revenge for the assault of their sister.

This is not the most propitious of homecomings. The strangeness of a return home is echoed for me in Riad Satouff's newly translated graphic memoir, *The Arab of the Future*. Sattouff's account of his early childhood in Libya and Syria can be read as a catalog of his father's disappointments following his homecoming to Arab lands.

Sattouff's Sorbonne-educated father was a dedicated secularist who returned to the Middle East with his French wife and young son with dreams of his own destiny. He seems to have believed that he would become instrumental in reshaping the Arab character along secular, pan-Arabist lines. He found only shame and regret. The absurdity of totalitarian societies has long been noted, but the casual violence and routine humiliation that Satouff recounts are truly shocking. The homecoming that Sattouff's book presents is enlightening, highlighting the barriers we must face if we wish to have peace. Let us hope we see it soon.

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Face to Face

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The tortured relationship between the twin brothers Esau and Jacob has been a significant element in the two previous *parshiyot* —Toledot and Vayetze. It is resolved in this week's *parashah*, Vayishlah. Although there is no peace treaty, the resolution is deeply desired by both brothers and reflected both in the undoing of the language that started the problem and in the brothers' truly seeing and acknowledging each other.

The rivalry between Jacob and Esau that reaches its dénouement here had started *in utero*. Their mother, Rebecca, who had so wished for a child, has a difficult pregnancy, with the twins running around, as it were, within her. Are they vying for position and power even then? God answers her plea with an oracle that in its ambiguity sets the tone for the fraught relationship between her sons. God's words conclude: "וְרֵב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר" (Gen. 25:23). The Jewish Publication Society translation is: "and the older (*rav*) shall serve the younger." Although that is one simple, straightforward meaning, and the one favored by Rebecca herself and adopted by the rabbinic tradition, it is not the only reading. In biblical Hebrew a verb's subject may precede or follow the verb. It could just as easily mean: "and the younger would serve the elder." Rebecca's understanding of the oracle leads her to favor Jacob and to collude with him to receive his father's blessing after Jacob had already bargained Esau, the first-born, out of the birthright.

The tension between the brothers, which results in Jacob's flight, is recounted in Toledot. Let me make clear that I have a lot of sympathy for Esau, who ends up with neither birthright nor blessing. His plaintive plea, "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, too, my father," followed by his sobbing is a deeply powerful moment (Gen. 27:38). As Meir Shalev points out, Esau's tone shifts from anger to begging as he realizes that his only source of support is his father, not his mother who has betrayed him. (*Beginnings: Reflections on the Bible's Intriguing Firsts*)

When Vayishlah opens, Jacob, who years earlier had left home at Rebecca's request because Esau had threatened to kill him, is returning at God's command with his large family and many flocks. Terrified, he strategizes about his forthcoming meeting with Esau. Begging for Esau's favor, he reverses the language of the oracle to Rebecca, telling his advance party to say to Esau, in his name: "כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב" thus says your servant Jacob" (32:5). The messengers also state that Jacob has many possessions, implying not only that he can take care of himself, but that he may give some to Esau. Their report: Your brother is approaching with 400 men. Scared, Jacob takes precautions, splitting his group in half, to ensure that some part of his family and possessions remain.

In that dark night, Jacob prays, referring to himself as the servant of God (32:11) and begging God to fulfill the divine promise to protect him, made when God told him to return to Canaan. He makes his preparations, sending ahead sheep, goats, and camels, divided into three groups, each led by a person who, when he meets Esau, is to say to him: "This is a gift from your servant Jacob. He is right behind us, for he reasoned, 'If I propitiate him with presents in advance, perhaps he will show me favor'" (32:21). This idiomatic translation hides the four-fold appearance of the word *panim*, face, in that verse. Here is a more face-ful translation: "For he said: If I forgive his face with the gift that is walking before my face and after that I will see his face, perhaps he will lift up my face." As my sister Marcia Kaunfer pointed out, there are a lot of faces here. Simply put, Jacob is panicked at coming face-to-face with Esau. The men with the three-part gift set out that night.

But Jacob spends his night differently. First he gets his wives, concubines, and children across the ford of the Jabbok. Then he orders his remaining possessions across, while he remains alone on the other side where he famously wrestles with a figure, perhaps human, perhaps divine; perhaps internal, perhaps external; perhaps beneficent, perhaps maleficent. The text is, as my colleague Dr. Stephen A. Geller argues, intentionally ambiguous ("The Struggle at Jabbok: the Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *JANES*, 1982). Whatever transpired that night, Jacob saw it as an encounter with the divine, even going so far as to name the place Peniel which can be construed as the face of God, "for I have seen a divine being [perhaps even God] face to face, and my life has been saved" (32:31) Jacob, terrified to see his brother's face, has seen God's and come through the experience with minimal damage.

The next morning, when Esau approaches with his 400 men, Jacob fears the worst, so he assigns the children to their mothers and sends them ahead in order of his feelings for the mothers: concubines, Leah, Rachel. He goes *lifneihem*, ahead of them, literally, before their faces. Esau runs towards him and embraces him and kisses him and they weep. After Esau meets Jacob's family, he inquires about all the flocks he had passed. Jacob says that they are a gift. Esau responds, using the key word of the original oracle: "יֵשׁ-לִי רַב אֲחֵי" I have much (*rav*), my brother," (33:9) subtly reminding Jacob that he, Esau, is the elder, to whom all blessing should flow. But Jacob nervously begs him to take the gifts, saying, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God" (33:11). Jacob continues, asking Esau, "Take my blessing" using the charged word "*berakhah*." Finally Esau agrees to take the gift. Only fair, as Jacob had stolen Esau's paternal blessing.

When, however, Esau suggests that they continue on their way together, Jacob begs off, citing the size and complexity of his party. He needs to tend to the children and the flocks. Although some would see Jacob as having been transformed by his nocturnal struggle, his response to Esau's invitation is deceitful; his promise to catch up with Esau at his home in Seir is a ploy to avoid further contact. After Esau leaves, Jacob sets off in another direction.

Reflecting on this text, I am struck by the careful crafting of the episode and the way that it uses language to mitigate some of the flaws in the relationship between these twins. Although the history of treachery and threat can never be erased, the meeting reduces the tensions between the brothers, who meet again only to bury their father. They do not have to become the best of friends, only to avoid their previous state of war.

While Jacob and Esau do not completely "face history and themselves," they do face each other. Jacob does not explicitly ask for forgiveness, nor does Esau renounce aggression, but, once they see each other's faces, they essentially call off the open animosity and rivalries and agree to peaceful co-existence, a sort of adult parallel play. Particularly for Jacob, who is the more articulate, there is the powerful and moving experience of seeing the face of the divine, first in the mysterious figure and then in his brother. Would that, as individuals, ethnicities, religions, and nations we could do the same.