

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Words of Peace?

Avi Garelick Principal, Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School, JTS

Words of peace,
But no treaty,
Are a sign
Of a plot.

—Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

And [Esau] said, “Let us start on our journey, and I will proceed at your pace.”

—Gen. 33:12

Many wonder why Jacob concludes his peaceful summit with his brother Esau by lying and slipping away from Esau’s friendly grasp (Gen. 33:13-14). Does he never change? Does he never transcend deception? As Sun-Tzu wrote in the 6th century BCE, “The Way of War is / A Way of Deception.” And make no mistake, Jacob and Esau are at war.

In order to understand Jacob’s evasiveness from his place of weakness, we should also wonder about Esau’s restraint from his place of strength. Why does Esau not deliver on his long-promised slaughter, even while possessing the absolute advantage? Both Jacob and Esau have their own destinies in mind, and Esau knows this is a struggle for dominance, not destruction (Gen. 27:29). “Better take / an army ... Intact / Than destroy them. / Ultimate excellence lies / Not in winning / Every battle / But in defeating the enemy / Without ever fighting” (Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*).

Do fundamental antagonisms exist in our world? I don’t know for sure. With the future of our country so uncertain, it is tempting to believe that deep conflicts have a quick solution. But it could be fatal to perceive our enemies as potential friends, or to take peaceful gestures as a dependable treaty.

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וישלח תשע"ז



Wholly Jacob

Rabbi Joel Alter, Director of Admissions, JTS Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial School, JTS

Among the thrills in superhero movies is seeing the good guy take a pummeling and then stand unscathed in the next scene, ready again for battle. “Nobody else could survive that punishment,” we gush. The indestructible superhero comes to mind while reading of Jacob’s return to Canaan after living under Laban’s thumb, then wrestling with a mysterious man, then encountering Esau—a man who’s had twenty years to stew in a fratricidal rage.

It comes as a welcome relief when we read: “Jacob arrived *shalem*”—whole, complete, unscathed—“at Sukkot, which is in Canaan, when he came back from Padan Aram” (Gen. 33:18). In this spirit Rashi lays out how, upon his return to his homeland, Jacob is undiminished and uncompromised. Rashi comments that Jacob arrived home “*shalem* in body, as he had healed from his limp [acquired in the wrestling match with the angel], *shalem* in his financial resources, in that he lacked for nothing materially even after having given his brother such an enormous gift (32:14-17), and *shalem* in his Torah, in that he’d not forgotten in Laban’s home the teachings [he’d previously learned].”

On the second half of the verse Rashi goes further: “Like when a man who says to another, ‘I know a fellow who escaped lions’ jaws without a scratch on him [came out *shalem*],’ so was Jacob who arrived back from his journey to Padan Aram, from his encounters with Laban and Esau who attacked him along the way.” Two strong arguments support this reading of *shalem* in our verse. The first looks backward. Nahum Sarna writes, “It may mean ‘safe and sound’ and would thus resonate with 28:21, ‘If I return safe (*be-shalom*)’” (*JPS Torah Commentary*). God has provided the full measure of protection Jacob sought (seemingly as a condition for maintaining his loyalty to God) upon fleeing Canaan to escape his brother twenty years before. With *shalem* in our verse,

then, we see that Jacob has come full circle. While he has experienced much, suffered much, and gained much, God has ensured that Jacob was unbroken by his travails.

The second argument for this reading looks forward, to the deeply unsettling story of Dina. Now *shalem* is a fraught reference to Hamor and Shechem's characterization of Jacob's family that "these men come to us in peace," *shelemim* (34:21). Here Hamor and Shechem make the case to the men of their city to accede to Jacob's sons' demand that they circumcise themselves as condition for the (falsely proposed) peaceful union of the two clans. Our verse, in this reading, fortifies Jacob's honor before the shameful story that follows: *Jacob* came in peace; but *Shechem* raped Dina.

In this reading of *shalem*, whether looking forward or back, Jacob is a man of great integrity in both senses of the term: he is upright and he is whole.

An alternative reading sees Jacob's wholeness as a missed opportunity for growth. Our verse is immediately preceded by Jacob's peaceful reunion with his brother. As reunions go, it is decidedly heavy on the *disunion*, on the arms-length formality that signals from the first "It's so good to see you!" that Jacob cannot wait to part ways for good from Esau.

Jacob prepares with mortal dread to meet his brother. He has not forgotten that at 27:41 Esau vowed to kill him at the first opportunity, and he imagines that Esau's memory is as long as his own. Learning in 32:7 that Esau is "coming to meet [him] and has 400 men with him," Jacob concludes, not unreasonably, that his brother is bent on the bloody fulfillment of his vow.

Jacob's preparations are famously extensive: he divides his camp in two, to minimize his losses should he be attacked; he prays for God's protection; he sends some servants ahead with an extravagant gift for Esau; and he moves his family to safety across the Yabbok River. After this maneuver, in the middle of the night, Jacob has his bout with the angel, leaving him with a limp and a new name.

When the brothers' camps meet, Jacob arranges his family members strategically and then advances to greet his brother. His theatricality leaves me shaking my head: he bows low seven times as he makes his approach. While Jacob aspires to humble dignity with this grand gesture, I can only imagine that instead—as he's still limping from the wrestling match—he looks awkward, even ridiculous.

Esau, eschewing ceremony as ever, runs toward Jacob, and falls upon him in a bear-hug of an embrace. They both weep. Except for that brief emotional release, Jacob rejects every gesture and offer of reconciliation from Esau. Where Esau calls Jacob "my brother," Jacob calls Esau "my lord." Where Esau demonstrates that he is entirely reconciled to his destiny, satisfied with his wealth, and indicates no hostility toward his brother, Jacob insists that Esau accept a placating bribe. When Esau invites Jacob to travel with him to Seir, Jacob equivocates, saying that his slow-moving camp will follow Esau there. Instead, they head toward Sukkot (33:12-17).

In fairness, Jacob couldn't go to Seir. As the beneficiary of Isaac's blessing, Jacob's home was in Canaan, not Seir. He had to get back to where his destiny awaited. And so Jacob arrived *shalem* in Sukkot. But even in the time they had together, Jacob kept his brother apart. Jacob held his heart closed to Esau.

It didn't have to be that way. After all, we have another example of two men of separate destinies who nonetheless have an encounter of deep and lasting connection, of intimacy, of love: Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro. After the Exodus, Jethro meets up with Moses and the Israelites. Over a long night together, Moses regales Jethro with the tales of God's miracles, and Jethro emerges changed, praising Moses's God (Exod. 18:1-11). Yet Jethro remains himself. He neither abandons his god nor his place (18:27), though his vision and heart are enlarged by virtue of his encounter with Moses. At the same time, Moses (and the Israelites) are saved by the open exchange with Jethro, for Jethro advises Moses to establish a much-needed system for managing the people. Not so in Jacob's encounter with his brother.

When the wrestling angel bestows on Jacob his new name Yisrael, he says, "For you have striven with God and men, and won out" (Genesis 32:29). But what if Jacob had truly striven with Esau as he—as we—should strive with God, and with one another? Not evading encounter through manipulation, not holding his breath even in the midst of an embrace, not shaking his head "no" even as his mouth says "yes." What if Jacob had truly opened his heart to strive with and come to terms with his estranged twin? What if instead of arriving *shalem*—"sealed, unopened"—to Shechem, Jacob had arrived *shalem*—"reconciled and at peace"—from a relationship that had been so painfully fractured long ago? What then?