

I would swallow every star
 If you told me
 Your tears come from Heaven.

When you broke your back
 Under the work of fighting suns
 You broke it for her.
 You were screaming
 Like the jackals at sunset.
 And in my dreams,
 I stretched my body
 And covered the summer sky.
 And I never scratched
 Not even once
 At my burnt skin.
 If only I could be your huppah.
 I would wrap you in the songs of our fathers
 And rock your tired muscles to sleep.

When you snuck off
 Under the secrets of the night,
 You looked away from her.
 You were trembling
 Like the date palms in the summer wind.
 And in my dreams,
 I threw you to the ground.
 You struck my face.
 I kissed your hip.
 If only I could be your walking stick.
 I would wrestle you for eternity
 If I knew that once,
 Just once,
 You would lean on me.

This poem seeks to give voice to an otherwise silent character. While there is power in Leah's silence, there is also a deep sense of injustice. Putting her in the faceless character of Jacob's angel (Gen. 32:25–33) represents this struggle between the powerful and powerless. It is my hope that I have given a little air to our matriarch's comforting wings.

Vayishlah 5781

וישלח תשפ"א



Having It All

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

After twenty years of estrangement, Jacob and Esau encounter one another yet again. Time has somewhat softened the bitterness and pain of the injustice done to Esau in Jacob's theft of the blessing. And Esau has come to his senses, realizing that the murder of his brother will not right the wrong committed under the aegis of his scheming mother. Still, at the beginning of our parashah, Jacob is so uncertain and fearful of the encounter between him and his brother that he plans for the worst—dividing his family into two camps (lest one be destroyed, the other half will survive) and wrestling with the mysterious assailant (which portends his coming to terms with the misstep he committed so many years prior). Clearly, given what Jacob experienced in Laban's home, the blessing received from Isaac has yet to come to fruition.

The moment of reconciliation between the two brothers is destined to be a liminal milestone that allows each of them to move forward with a full heart. Jacob seeks to repair the breach by bestowing gifts on Esau and his family. Ultimately, Esau, after gently refusing, will accept Jacob's gift. What does this material exchange teach us about these characters? And to what extent does this moving encounter give us a window into the journey that Jacob has been on over the last twenty years?

Regarding the encounter, the Torah relates:

And he [Esau] asked, "What do you mean by all this company which I have met?" Jacob answered, "To gain my Lord's favor." Esau said, "I have *much* (*rav*) my brother; let what you have remain yours." But Jacob said, "No, I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me

favorably. Please accept my present which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have *everything (kol)*.” And when he urged him, Esau accepted. (Gen. 33:8–11)

Note well Esau’s reply to Jacob’s attempt at paying reparations for the damage from twenty years before: Esau acknowledges that he has *much*. Jacob on the other hand makes a similar statement, but rather than the Hebrew *rav* employs the Hebrew *kol*—as in Jacob has everything.

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter, author of the *Sefat Emet*, shares a beautiful commentary on this difference in language:

The meaning of “all” seems to indicate more than Esau meant when he previously said, “I have much” (Gen. 33:9). But how can any person say “all”? Surely there were some things that he didn’t have! But for one who is attached to the Divine, whatever he has is “all.” For everything contains a point of divine life. In that point all is included. Thus the Midrash says, “all are considered blind,” with regard to Hagar who found the well. This means that all is really found everywhere, because everything contains that godly life. That is why God is called *shalem* because every point of divine energy contains all. (Trans. Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth*, 52)

According to this beloved commentator, Jacob’s statement is not simply about his material wealth but about a deeper worldview reflecting his relationship with the larger world and with God. Those who can root themselves in and attach themselves to the Divine have a sense of wholeness and equanimity. They relate to their own lives and the people around them with fullness and joy (even though they clearly lack certain things, like every human being). It is a posture of gratitude that people like Jacob project to the world. In contrast, the one who has *much* may be incessantly acquisitive—seeking more and more and failing to live within more modest constraints. A posture of *much*, the *Sefat Emet* writes, derives from “human hands”; a stance of *all*, of the unity connecting everything, has its roots in the Divine.

Esau and Jacob, seemingly from the beginning, represent two different and opposing worldviews. Esau, recall, is described as “a man ensconced in the

art of hunting, a man of the field,” *אִישׁ יָדַע צִיד אִישׁ שָׂדֵה*, and Jacob is called a “simple man, who sits within his home,” *אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֶלִים* (Gen. 25:27). Esau’s way of life is far more deeply connected with the physical and human realm, while Jacob seems to be the character more deeply connected with the spiritual and divine aspects of life. Though many of us fall into one category or other, most of us find ourselves, at different points, wandering between these two poles. Sometimes we are more deeply connected to the physical, and sometimes we resonate with the Divine. But when all is said and done, it is the posture of *kol*, everything, that we seek and desire.

Last week, we celebrated Thanksgiving—a time which typically (in non-pandemic years!) is devoted to family reunions and appreciation. How different the world would be if we could embrace a posture of unity, wholeness, and satisfaction. To eschew acquisitiveness and go forward with an attitude of generosity of spirit is indeed what our world needs today—especially now. May we be inspired by this sacred reunion between brothers and hold fast to the view of Jacob all the days of our lives, approaching our world and God with a sense of fullness and peace.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”l).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Leah’s Song

Rabbi Yonatan Dahlen, JTS Alumnus (RS ’16)

When you fell in love
Under a copper sky,
I saw you with her.
Sweat on your gentle lip,
You were weeping
Like the wadi in the rainy season.
And in my dreams,
I caught your tears.
Each one
Before it could hit the dust at your sandals.
If only I could be your tear catcher.