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Yaakov and Esav: The Courageous Conversation

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Parashat Vayishlah opens with an anticipated reunion between twin brothers Yaakov and Esav, after at least twenty years of estrangement. The extended narrative is particularly instructive regarding personal and collective reconciliation following conflict.

After deceptively obtaining his father's blessing to Esav, Yaakov leaves home, fleeing his older brother's wrath. In the ensuing five chapters, Yaakov establishes himself in Haran, building a large family and acquiring wealth. We meet him now on his way back home. Sending word ahead to his brother of his impending return, he learns in response that Esav is, in fact, coming toward him, accompanied by four hundred men. Yaakov is terrified.

When the brothers finally meet, Yaakov famously and movingly says to his brother: רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, "seeing your face is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10). What transforms Yaakov's profound fear of Esav into a discovery of the Divine within him? The text itself gives us one big clue. It contains a *leitwort*—a particular Hebrew root word that appears repeatedly. Here, the *leitwort* is פנים/face, which is used over and over in Genesis 32 and 33, culminating in Yaakov's reference to his brother's face and the face of God.

A second clue might be found in the work of contemporary poet David Whyte, who speaks often of "the courageous conversation." By definition, the courageous conversation (with oneself or another) is the one we do not want to have—the conversation that is scary because it brings us right to the edge of our identity and difference. It highlights the border between what is "me" and "not me"; or perhaps, even more frightening, what is "me" and what we wish is "not me." *Viewed through the lens of these two clues, how might our narrative read?*

Anticipating the encounter with Esav, Yaakov fixates on his brother's wrath and seemingly murderous intent. Interpreting Esav's camp as an army arrayed against him, he stages an elaborate show of strength to impress and intimidate, sending extravagant gifts to propitiate or bribe. The text tells us what he was thinking:

..."If I propitiate him with presents in advance, and then face him, perhaps he will show me favor." And so the gift went on ahead, while he remained in camp that night. (Gen. 32:21–22)

Yaakov seems to fear fratricide at the hand of Esav, just as Cain killed Abel. ("Perhaps he will show me favor"/lit. "perhaps he will lift my face" faintly echoes Cain's fallen face and God's chiding him to uplift it.)

But is violence Yaakov's real fear? If we translate the same verses midrashically/hyperliterally, highlighting the repetition of *panim*/face, we may find something deeper:

כִּי־אָמַר אֲכַפְּרָה **פָּנָיו** בַּמִּנְחָה הַהֹלֶכֶת **לְפָנָי** וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן
אֶרְאֶה **פָּנָיו** אוּלַי יִשָּׂא פָנָי: כב וַתַּעֲבֹר הַמִּנְחָה עַל־**פָּנָיו** וְהוּא
לָן בַּלַּיְלָה־הַהוּא בַּמַּחֲנֶה

> "... "I will cover up his **face** with a gift going before my **face**, and only afterwards will I look at his **face**—what if he bears my **face**! And so the gift went on ahead in place of his **face**, while he himself remained in camp that night.

I suggest that Jacob truly fears precisely what the moment demands: the direct face-to-face encounter with his brother, the courageous conversation.

Understandably, faces unnerve Yaakov: he's a twin. The trope of twinship highlights the border between "me" and "not me" (or "me" and "what I wish was not me!"), but confronting that border is part of the universal human condition. Fully seeing the face of an other entails seeing the differences and similarities between other and self. In truly facing an other, we face our own face, including truths about ourselves we would prefer not to see. This is the essence of courageous conversation.

What enables Yaakov to have that courageous conversation with his brother? In his elaborate preparation, Yaakov

demonstrates what we often do when a courageous conversation is in order and we do not want to have it. He scripts the scene, trying to control the whole encounter in advance. The Torah allots nine verses to Yaakov's plans: the gifts to be sent, what he imagines Esav will say, how his messengers should respond. Unsurprisingly, that preparation offers Yaakov none of the calm and courage he seeks. Anticipatory control is both fantasy and evasion. It's an effort to avoid the deep face-to-face encounter, which entails uncertainty, presence, and openness to what may emerge. While "the gift went ahead in place of his face," Yaakov stayed behind.

Therefore, a second, different kind of preparation proves necessary: Jacob's famous wrestling match with the unidentified *ish* (Gen. 32:23–32). Read Yaakov's struggle in light of David Whyte's description of the path to courageous conversation:

> [W]hen your mind is actually naming things...it's almost as if it's keeping things at a distance by naming them... Your strategic peripheral mind is constantly trying to name things, constantly trying to have answers to everything... So when you feel that, then it's time to bring it back into the silence of the body ...
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> ...[T]he first step in deepening the conversation is to stop having the one you're having now. So not to reframe it, not to reimagine it, not to rehabilitate it, not to re-articulate it, just to stop having it and go into silence. And you don't do that from a puritanical mode or to keep people at a distance. You go there so you can drink from a deeper well. You can have another foundation from which to actually approach what's going on.
>
> ... That immediately by definition puts you into a relationship with the unknown. So the second element, the second step, ... is cultivating a friendship with what you do not know, getting used to not having easy answers.

Preplaying the conversation with Esav in his head, Yaakov was treating his brother as a mere player in his own internal drama. He needed to stop scripting the conversation, stop naming things (as his wrestling partner says, לָמָּה זֶּה תִּשְׁאַל לִשְׁמִי /"why do you ask my name?"), explore the silence of his body (physical wrestling), and befriend the uncertainty and ambiguity of the dark night. In doing so, Yaakov did indeed drink from a deeper well, discovering a new foundation from which to approach his brother.

When the two brothers finally meet, the dialogue is surprisingly sparse (Gen. 33:5–11). Perhaps Yaakov's "please accept my present" (קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּרְכָתִי, literally, "please take my blessing") (Gen. 33:11) hints at restitution for the blessing deceptively taken from his brother. But beyond that, there's no owning up to what happened and no apology on either side.

What kind of courageous conversation is this? While explicit coming to terms is sometimes necessary, perhaps what happens here is an encounter deeper than words. For the first time, Jacob is able to offer a generous presence: the face-to-face gaze, both revelatory and loving, containing within it an implicit apology, acknowledgment and acceptance, rendering words superfluous. I imagine it something like this Hasidic story:

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov overheard the following conversation at a village inn:

> "Do you love me, then?" asked one villager to the other. "Of course, I love you very much," replied the other. But the first regarded him sadly and reproached him: "How can you say you love me? Do you know my faults?" And then the other fell silent, and silent they sat facing each other, for there was nothing more to say.

In our narrative, we have no idea what happened later, other than that Yaakov and Esav went their separate ways (Gen. 33:12–15). Maybe they remained part of each other's lives, maybe not. We know that this story doesn't end in murder as the Cain and Abel story did, and that when their father Isaac died, the two brothers buried him together. That is progress built upon a courageous conversation.

This ambiguity about the future is part of the Torah's genius. True to our experience of life, it offers not a complete story (with a beginning, middle, and end) but rather a moment. A mere moment, but one which opens into a future—a new foundation upon which further moments might be built.

Shabbat shalom.

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