

Parshat Vayishlach

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This parasha is the climax of the conflict between Jacob and Esau, a story that has been building for several weeks in our cycle of Torah reading. Jacob and Esau fought so much even during their mother's pregnancy that Rebecca complained to God. God told her that she held two nations in her womb, and that the older would serve the younger. Esau was born first, but Jacob followed immediately, clutching Esau's heel. When they were youths, Esau carelessly sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. That must have been some soup! Years later Isaac intended to bless his firstborn, Esau. At their mother's urging, Jacob posed as Esau, and stole what would have been Esau's blessing. Esau said that as soon as Isaac was dead, he was going to kill Jacob, so Rebecca arranged to put him out of harm's way, by sending him far away to her brother, Lavan. Now, more than twenty years later, God brings the two brothers face to face again.

In today's parasha, Jacob is afraid of meeting his brother, Esau. Jacob had cheated Esau out of his birthright and out of their father's blessing. He knows that Esau wanted to kill him the last time he saw him. Jacob has faith in God, but he's not sure that God will protect him. So he pleads with him, "Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau." Jacob is afraid that Esau will destroy him and his family. So Jacob sends messengers ahead toward

Esau to tell him that Jacob is returning with gifts. The messengers return, telling Jacob that Esau is approaching with four hundred men. Naturally, Jacob is afraid that Esau is still angry with him. So Jacob sends gifts ahead of him to soften up Esau. Then, in the middle of the night, he sends his wives and children across the Yabbok River. In a way, Jacob has to cross a river too. He has to be able to face Esau.

Jacob is stuck in the middle. He has not gone toward Esau, nor has he gone away from him. Then, when he's trying to make a decision, suddenly, he is forced to fight a mysterious figure in the dark of night. In all of Jacob's previous confrontations, he has either run, or made peace. This moment, this contest in the dark with the mysterious figure, is the crucial point when the future of the nation of Israel hangs in the balance. Jacob, a man of peace, finally stands his ground, fights and *wins*. And who is he fighting? His opponent is no mortal being, nor an angel. His opponent says, "No longer shall you be called Jacob, heel-grabber, but rather Yisrael, God-fighter, for you have wrestled with *God*, and with men, and you have prevailed." Jacob knows exactly whom he has fought. He names that place, Pnei el, which means face of God, for he has seen God face to face, and lived to tell the tale. Jacob is still fearful, but less so. He now has the courage to face Esau. And Jacob reminds himself that God has promised to take care of him.

In addition to all the gifts he had sent ahead, Jacob undoes Isaac's so-called blessing on Esau. Isaac's blessing on Esau had been, "You will live by your sword, [and] you will serve your brother." Jacob instructs his servants to inform Esau that Jacob is *Esau's* servant now. The tense moment passes when Esau greets Jacob with open arms, yet Jacob is still wary. Jacob uses the supposed weakness of his children and livestock as an excuse to follow from behind even after Esau had invited him to go ahead. But from then on, Jacob and Esau behave as brothers. Even when Isaac finally dies, they bury their father together. Then, instead of finally taking his vengeance on Jacob, Esau migrates to Seir, to make room for Jacob's people and flocks.

This is quite a story, a saga of division and reunion. Why didn't Jacob know better than to steal his brother's birthright and blessing? He wanted to believe his mother, and he wanted what was due his brother. He was a willing accomplice in the theft of the blessing. Also, Jacob knew he was Rebecca's favorite, and he probably wanted to stay in her favor. Rebecca let him think that he would be protected by saying, "Any curse that may befall you will be on me."

Why couldn't Jacob and Esau have been equally blessed? It is obvious that Jacob was fated to become the leader of the Jewish people. But God had a problem. By the practice of primogeniture, *Esau* should have been the leader of the Jewish people. But the younger brother, Jacob, was a more suitable candidate.

God *had* to find a way to put Jacob first. God needed Jacob to have Esau's blessing, and birthright. In this way, Jacob would rightfully be the forefather of the Jewish people.

Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? Perhaps God saw some qualities in Jacob which would make him a better leader than Esau for the Jewish nation. Jacob was a peaceful man who stayed among the tents; he was not a solitary hunter off in the fields. God could see that someone who lived among other people *understands* other people. In this way, Jacob was a more appropriate choice than Esau, the hunter, to be the forefather of God's chosen people.

After all that Jacob had taken from Esau, why didn't Esau kill Jacob when he saw him, or after their father's death? He certainly could have – he was stronger, and had many more men at his command. We have to remember that Jacob had been gone for more than 20 years. During this period of time, Esau must have softened, while Jacob became all the more anxious. Despite all of the times that Esau had been wronged, he still accepts Jacob as his brother. And Jacob tells Esau, "I am *your* servant."

God had told Rebecca, "Two nations are in thy womb...and the elder shall serve the younger." Jacob was destined to be the father of the Jewish people, no matter what would happen between him and his brother. Why didn't Esau take

vengeance upon Jacob? Because they were family. When they met again after over twenty years apart, time had changed both brothers' circumstances and their feelings. Once enough time had gone by, they were left with the fact that blood is thicker than soup.