

# A ROAD TO RECONCILIATION

HOW CAN WE MAKE PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER?

## TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

#### **The Source Text: Genesis 32 – 33.**

In this portion, Jacob leaves his father-in-law's camp to set out on his own. He knows that he will need to cross the territory of his brother, Esau, whom he has twice betrayed (by stealing first his birthright and then his blessing). Understandably concerned that Esau will be unhappy to see him, Jacob sends ahead messengers bearing gifts, in hopes of gaining Esau's favor. The messengers return and say "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." Jacob is "greatly frightened" by this news, and decides to split his family and herds into two camps, thinking "If Esau comes to one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape." (Genesis 32:4-7).

Jacob then prays to God:

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Adonai, who said to me "Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you!" I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown your servant; with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet you have said, "I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count. (Genesis 32:10-13)

He then selects numerous herd animals, and sends them ahead with his messengers. "When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, "Whose man are you? Where are you going? And whose [animals are these ahead of you?" you shall answer, "Your servant Jacob's; they are a gift sent to my lord Esau; and [Jacob] himself is right behind us." He reasons, "If I ply him with gifts in advance, and then face him, perhaps he will show me favor." (Genesis 32: 18-21). He then lays down to sleep, and has his famous encounter with the mysterious being. He wrestles with this man or angel all night, wrenching his hip in the process. As morning nears, he refuses to let go of the being until it gives him a blessing. Instead, the being gives him a new name,

stating, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:29).

He rises, and limps forward to meet his brother:

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him, and they wept. Looking about, he saw the women and the children. “Who,” he asked, “are these with you?” Jacob answered, “The children with whom God has favored your servant.” [All of the women and children come forward and bow before Esau]. And [Esau] asked, “What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” He answered, “To gain my lord’s favor.” Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; let what you have remain yours.” But Jacob said, “Not 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 plenty.” And when he urged him, he accepted. (Genesis 33:1-11).

Then, just as they have reunited, they each go their separate ways. Esau offers to accompany Jacob, or to send men to go with him, but Jacob declines. Esau goes home to Seir, and Jacob heads off with his family. (Genesis 33:12-17).

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) When they meet, Esau at first declines the gift, saying “I have enough, my brother; let what you have remain yours.” Jacob insists, saying “I have plenty.” To what extent is the brothers’ realization that they have enough necessary to their ability to reconcile?
- (b) To what extent, in your own life, have you found that a feeling of self-sufficiency has led you to be more able to reconcile?
- (c) How essential is the “bowing low” that Jacob does? In order to reconcile, must we – or nations at war – be willing to bow low or make other gestures of honor and respect?

#### **From the sermon:**

The night before Jacob reunites with Esau, he wrestles, with an angel, with Esau, with himself? It is not clear with whom, but wrestle he does. I believe he is, in part, wrestling with all he has known about his brother and himself. He doesn’t want to continue the pattern, but how does

one start doing something new after living an entire life of doing the same thing over and over? How does one break out of a terrible pattern when all one knows is that pattern, when one has been carefully taught this their entire life? This is the wrestling, I imagine, Jacob and Esau go through the night before they meet and I can imagine Sadat and Begin went through something similar as they considered forging a new path of peace almost 40 years ago.

Like Sadat came to Begin and Israel, Jacob comes to Esau and Canaan, ancient Israel.

Jacob, in front of all, shatters his pattern of deceit and trickery and his family training and bows low to the ground in front of Esau – he is limping and stripped of artifice and Jacob finds a new self. He apologizes and Esau too finds a way to put his hate aside and brings out a dormant positive connection with Jacob. They embrace and weep and speak kind and caring words to each other and their extended families. The feud, the hate, is finally over.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Rabbi Salth suggests that the encounter Jacob has with the mysterious being the night before he meets his brother was critical to their reconciliation. Do you agree? If so, how?
- (b) We know from the text that Esau and Jacob apologize and reconcile but they do not form a long-lasting strong bond. Israel and Egypt too remain at peace but it is often referred to as a “cold-peace”.

There are other relationships such as that between Israel and Germany, post-WW II, where strong and deeply positive bonds have formed. Why do you think this is so between Israel and Germany? What might be helpful or necessary to go beyond reconciliation and repair to creating a strong and deep bond? What are your thoughts on the existence of “cold peace” relationships among some nations (and people) with each other?

- (c) How might your conclusions about what fosters reconciliation and/or deeper bonds be applied to challenges in our current world? How might they be applied to challenges and conflicts in your own life?
- (d) Both Jacob and Esau and Begin and Sadat have someone opposite them who is ready to consider reconciling. What happens when there is only one side ready to do so?