



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Vayishlach: Antisemitism in a Tolerant Age

Parshat Vayishlach opens with Jacob's intense fear of Esau's murderous intentions. Jacob fears, "he will strike me down, mother and child alike." (32:12)

In traditional Jewish commentary, this encounter becomes paradigmatic; Esau becomes the eternal figure of the non-Jewish aggressor, powerful and murderous, whereas Jacob is the personification of the Jew, vulnerable and at the mercy of the gentile. In this spirit Ramban writes:

This Torah portion is written to tell us ... that everything which befell our father (Jacob) with his brother Esau will occur to us repeatedly in our relations with the children of Esau. [Rome and the entire Christian world are seen as heirs to the title "Edom" and are thus seen as Esau's "children".]

When the great 2nd century leader Judah the Prince needed to lobby the Roman government, he based his mode of appeal on Jacob's address to Esau. (Genesis Rabbah 75:5)

But how do the acrimony, fear and distrust between Jacob and Esau end? When the two brothers meet:

Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept. (33:4)

So, by inference, does that mean we can envisage reconciliation, an end to hate and a return to love between Israel and the nations? Surely, on the basis of this model, we are being told that the pursuit of Jacob ends in love!

The Midrash (as quoted by Rashi) is far more suspicious of Esau:

He kissed him: Heb. וישקוהו. There are scribal dots over the word. There is controversy concerning this matter in a *Baraitha* of *Sifrei* (Beha'alothecha 69).

Some interpret the dots to mean that Esau did not kiss Jacob wholeheartedly.

Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai said: It is a well-known tradition [*halakha*] that Esau hates Jacob, but his compassion was moved on this occasion, and he kissed him wholeheartedly.

In ancient manuscripts, scribal dots above a letter are a notation to show that the annotated word is somehow misplaced, written in error, and that it is slated to be erased. Since these dots appear over the word “And he kissed him,” the Rabbis suggest something is awry about Esau’s kiss.

The first option: The kiss was insincere.

The second option: “Esau hates Jacob,” but in this given moment Esau was temporarily moved and showed genuine love.

Interestingly, both opinions cited by Rashi are unprepared to accept that Esau ever really loved Jacob, and that the two brothers might have genuinely reconciled. More extreme, the scholar Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a vocal opponent of Roman rule, quotes the statement: “It is a tradition [*halakha*] that Esau hates Jacob,” which has become a timeless axiom expressive of the indelible persistence of Jew-hatred, what is known today as anti-Semitism, throughout the ages.

I must admit that personally I have always resisted and rejected this vantage point. Maybe it is my liberal tendency, thinking hatred can be overcome. But beyond that, reading the *peshat* (straightforward reading) of the biblical text you will be impressed that Esau seems to bear Jacob no ill will. Ibn Ezra disagrees with Rashi and affirms this perspective, noting that both Esau and Jacob cried which indicates the sincerity of the reconciliation. Do we really need to blacklist Esau and imagine he is the embodiment of evil?

And extrapolating and inferring from their personal story, is anti-Semitism a virus that is borne in every generation, waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting Jewish community, or is Jew-hatred itself an aberration that flares in the hands of maniacs but far from a fixed feature of human society?

Here begins our discussion

- Can Esau and Jacob reconcile in the biblical story? Can you sustain Rashi’s reading?
- Or do you accept Ibn Ezra’s view that Esau sincerely loved his brother, and that Jacob’s fear was merely his empty fears (or his guilt of stealing Esau’s blessing)?
- The midrashic tradition sees the clash between Esau and Jacob as foreshadowing a history of Jewish persecution. Is anti-Semitism a fact of history, called by the historian Robert Wistrich “The Longest Hatred,” inexorably bound to repeat itself?

- We live in an unprecedented age of global tolerance towards Jewish communities, in which western countries mark the Holocaust, protect our Jewish communities and support the State of Israel. What do you think of the timeless axiom: “It is a halakha: Esau Hates Jacob?” Is it a dangerous xenophobic pronouncement that maligns the tolerant societies in which we live, or is it a savvy statement of the harsh reality of Jewish history from Haman to Hamas, from Pharaoh to Nasrallah?

Shabbat Shalom!