

## Vayishlach 5782

### Old Friends

This week's parashah opens with the reunion of Jacob with Esau after years of separation. We remember the brothers separated on the worst of terms - Jacob fleeing after Esau had sworn to kill him. So Jacob puts a great deal of planning into the reconciliation. He sends team after team of messengers bearing gifts; he splits his camp into two so that at least half can escape if Esau turns nasty. He himself approaches Esau bowing and grovelling, seven times.

But what happens?

וַיָּרֵץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרוֹ וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ:

Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.

In the best traditions of his grandfather, Abraham, Esau runs to greet his brother, and wraps him in a hug. And - impulsive as ever, it seems - he kisses him and weeps, just as Jacob did when he met Rachel. Surely this is one of the greatest scenes of reconciliation we know?

Yet a suspicion remains. There are dots over all the letters in the word *vayeshakehu* - This ambiguous pointing is the way the Torah suggests ambiguity. And our tradition has leapt on this, especially as if you place the Hebrew vowels differently, the word translates as Esau biting Jacob. And from there it's only a hop, skip and jump to identifying Esau - the red one - with Edom - the related word for the southern kingdom of Edom which the rabbis of the Talmud then use to refer to Rome. And we all know what the Romans did for us.

But this year, when we have been made so aware of our vulnerability even as we are worn out by contention, might be the year to invite an alternative reading.

I'm not the only rabbi playing with these ideas this week. I wrote to Rabbi James Stone Goodman after I saw his poem about the parashah, and asked for his permission to quote it. He gave it, and so here it is:

Vayishlah

I run to him I kiss him hug him,  
over my head  
a ribbon of light.  
I weep.

Any moment now might erupt --  
a memory that heals.

Holding his foot as we chuted toward the light  
when we hug  
I remember.

And again --  
over my head exploding

A ribbon of dots  
a ribbon of light.

jsg  
maqam saba<sup>1</sup>

And since we are imagining, let's allow ourselves to imagine, as well, that the brothers didn't part immediately after their reunion. The Torah gives us a scene of Jacob offering gifts and Esau refusing them, saying 'I have enough,' and then offering to accompany Jacob for a while at his own pace. In the Torah, Jacob persuades Esau to go on alone - perhaps that was all the reconciliation he could take.

But we all know that the Torah doesn't tell us everything there is to be told.

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<sup>1</sup> A *maqam* is a musical form. In the Eastern Jewish tradition each parashah has its own. For more, and to 'meet' James Stone Goodman, see [www.themaqamproject.com](http://www.themaqamproject.com)

One of the things many of us did during the pandemic was to turn back to old friends. Something about our isolation drew us to reach out to people we might not have seen for years - camp friends, school groups, college reunions. Many times we've thought about what gifts we can bring from the pandemic, and this may be one of them - that feeling of connection with people who knew us when we weren't quite the people we are today, who remember our youthful failings with affection, so that we can laugh ruefully together about them, hardly noticing that now we have wrinkles around our eyes.

If that is true for us, how much more true it would have been for Esau and Jacob.

So in honor of them, let's imagine them sitting together for a while before they have to part. Perhaps they even watch the sun go down and let their followers settle around them while they take a walk a little distance away to talk and reminisce and watch the stars that seem to have followed Jacob everywhere on his journey. Perhaps they talk about their mother and their father. Perhaps Esau, who as a hunter would have been familiar with anatomy, offers Jacob some advice about how to look after his newly injured hip. Perhaps they express their reconciliation in words, but perhaps it's just there in their behavior towards each other - a new respect born of old, shared memories.

This week I posted on facebook a clip from another duo who also broke up and reconciled. That duo, when they performed this song, didn't know what the future had in store and certainly would not have imagined their work as Torah commentary. And yet, that clip is a fitting commentary to close this musing on the scene of what happened after Esau kissed Jacob, after all.

Old friends  
Old friends  
Sat on their park bench  
Like bookends  
A newspaper blown through the grass  
Falls on the round toes  
On the high shoes  
Of the old friends

Old friends  
Winter companions  
The old men  
Lost in their overcoats  
Waiting for the sunset  
The sounds of the city  
Sifting through trees  
Settle like dust  
On the shoulders  
Of the old friends

Can you imagine us  
Years from today  
Sharing a park bench quietly?  
How terribly strange  
To be seventy

Old friends  
Memory brushes the same years  
Silently sharing the same fear

*Time it was,  
And what a time it was  
It was . . .  
A time of innocence  
A time of confidences  
Long ago . . . it must be . . .  
I have a photograph  
Preserve your memories  
They're all that's left you<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Old Friends/Bookends by Paul Simon; in honor of Art Garfunkel's 80th birthday.