

# The Lost Matriarch: Supplement H

---

## Midrash on the Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau

*And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept. (Gen. 33:4)*

After all of his nervous anticipation, not to mention his twenty years in exile, Jacob's final meeting with Esau is almost anticlimactic in its absence of force or violence. Jacob may have had to spend the prior night physically wrestling with the mysterious stranger until receiving a wound in his thigh, but his subsequent wrestling with his brother is accomplished strictly through very courteous exchanges of words. Jacob introduces his family, the brothers engage in elaborate diplomatic speeches, and Jacob lavishes rich gifts upon Esau. It seems significant that the word that Jacob finally uses to urge his gifts on Esau is not "gift" or "tribute," but rather "blessing" (*beerchti*, Gen. 33:11). Is Jacob trying to make up for the blessing he previously wrongly took from Esau?<sup>1</sup>

But perhaps the most significant wording in the biblical description of their meeting comes when Esau appears to take the initiative in their reconciliation, and the brothers finally embrace. It's as if they have switched characters. (Yet another switching of characters that recalls Jacob appearing for his brother in the tent of blessing, or Leah appearing for her sister in the wedding tent.) Jacob has assumed the role of the calculating warrior, dividing his camps, strategically arranging his family, and preparing for the best or worst that his brother might attempt. At the same time, Esau seems to have appropriated the mantle of the man of peace. Esau runs to meet Jacob. Esau embraces Jacob. Esau falls on Jacob's neck and kisses him. Only then does Jacob respond, when the brothers both weep. The biblical text seems to paint a touching picture of genuine reconciliation and the reformation of Esau's character.

Midrash, however, dissects this pivotal scene so that it becomes almost a Rorschach test of the Rabbis' attitudes towards Esau. When the text states that Esau fell on Jacob's neck and kissed him (Gen. 33:4), the traditional Hebrew text is written with small dots over the word for "and kissed him." In the Torah, such dots over a word show that there's something unusual about the word, but the Rabbis are divided over the implication here. Some commentaries conclude that the dots are simply for emphasis (like modern underlining or italics) to make it clear that Esau had sincerely forgiven and reconciled.<sup>2</sup>

The typical commentaries, however, apply the standard rabbinic interpretation to the dots over the word "and kissed him"—such dots in the Hebrew Bible text are generally meant as an alert to the reader that the word should not be taken at face value. (The modern English language convention would be to use quotation marks, to state that Esau "kissed" him.) Especially for those commentators who are eager to portray Esau as the essence of evil and the symbol for Israel's contemporary enemies (Edom, which stood for Rome in the eyes of the early commentators), the dots become a convenient hook on which to hang the conclusion that Esau had not reformed, and his kiss was not a kiss.<sup>3</sup>

Midrash even presents an elaborate alternative version for Esau's supposed kiss of peace: When Esau fell upon Jacob's neck and "kissed" him, Esau was actually trying to bite Jacob's neck, and was thwarted only because God intervened to make Jacob's neck as hard as ivory or marble, so that Esau broke his teeth in his attempt to bite Jacob. Thus, their subsequent mutual weeping was not a sign of mutual reconciliation. Jacob wept because he feared that there would be no end to Esau's vengeful attacks upon him, while Esau wept from the pain of broken teeth and the frustration of having failed in his revenge.<sup>4</sup>

We can also note that every element of this apparently simple sentence resounds with echoes from Jacob's life:

## **Running**

In Canaan twenty years ago, Jacob ran away from Esau. Now back again in Canaan, Esau runs towards Jacob.

## **Embracing**

The crucial step in Jacob's taking Esau's blessing was when his father had Jacob approach so that Isaac could embrace (and feel) him. Later, Laban also embraced Jacob. Both of those events were marked by insincerity and trickery by one of the parties. Now Esau embraces Jacob, perhaps suggesting the same lack of sincerity.

## **Kissing**

There have been kisses at many critical junctures in Jacob's life. Isaac gave Jacob a kiss of identification in the tent of blessing. Jacob's first kiss on meeting Rachel at the well signaled the start of the lifelong rivalry between Rachel and Leah. The return kiss for Jacob's kiss at the well did not come from Rachel, but later, from her father, Laban. The Rabbis interpret Laban's purported kiss of welcome as a deceptive attempt to probe for hidden treasure. The counterpart to Laban's kiss of welcome occurred when he kissed his daughters and grandchildren farewell upon parting (an act which, considering Laban's initial purpose in overtaking Jacob, likewise seems insincere). And perhaps the most intriguing kisses in Jacob's life were the unreported kisses that the Rabbis presume he must have exchanged with Leah on their wedding night, giving rise to the wonderful midrashic explanations of how Jacob could have spent the entire night in the wedding tent without realizing that his bride was Leah, and not his beloved Rachel. Now Esau kisses Jacob, and the text itself uses a dotted word to warn readers that they must consider closely what is really happening.

## Neck

Rebekah's scheme to deceive Isaac and secure the blessing for Jacob turned on placing animal skins on Jacob's smooth neck, to fool her blind husband's sense of touch. Isaac in turn used that image of the neck when he gave his secondary blessing to Esau. Isaac prophesied that, although Jacob would initially have dominion over Esau, the relationship would eventually be reversed, and Esau would gain power and throw the yoke of servitude off his neck. Now the symbol appears again, when Esau falls upon Jacob's neck.<sup>5</sup>

The biblical text itself doesn't follow up on these suggestive terms. It does, however, make clear that the most that Jacob and Esau's reconciliation (sincere or not) could achieve is not that they would live together in peace as brothers, but only that they would live apart and leave each other in peace. (Later in the story, midrash cannot accept the reality of even this limited decency on Esau's part. The Rabbis supplement the biblical text with tales of subsequent treachery and war by Esau and his sons against Jacob and his sons, which continue until Jacob's eventual burial.)

Jacob prudently declines Esau's offer to accompany him with troops, and the brothers separate. Esau returns to his home in Seir, the mountainous region outside of the Holy Land. Jacob doesn't follow him as he had promised, but instead takes his family in another direction. His path leads eventually to settling in Shechem, where the following chapter of the text will be devoted to the story of Dinah, which midrash manages to link to Jacob's deceptive conduct in the brothers' reconciliation.

## NOTES TO SUPPLEMENT H

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Jacob's gifts to Esau an attempt to compensate for taking the blessing: R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 114.
  - <sup>2</sup> The dots above the word "kissed" are for emphasis: *Etz Hayim Torah/JPS*, 203-4, d'rash n. 4; *Hachut Hameshulash* 655 [citing Kimchi]; Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 229.
  - <sup>3</sup> The dots above the word "kissed" are a warning: *Etz Hayim Torah/JPS*, 203-4, p'shat n. 4; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 78.9.
  - <sup>4</sup> The dots above the word "kissed" suggest that Esau wanted to bite, not kiss: Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, 188; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 303; *Hachut Hameshulash* 655 [citing Kimchi]; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 78.9.
  - <sup>5</sup> The symbol of the neck: R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 113-4.