

# Jacob: The Tactician or the Coward

Welcome back to those who were on the JJC Congregational Israel Trip. We look forward to hearing more about your trip, including a special presentation by Steve on a Shabbat morning.

One of the highlights as expressed to me by Richard was being at the Kotel on Friday evening and seeing 100 Israeli soldiers with M16s and Uzis davening. This image stuck with me: the prayer to G-d while at the same time the belief that one must protect him/herself at all costs. I thought of the Yom Kippur War when Israel was surprised by 5 Arab countries and how this can never happen again.

This leads into this week's Torah portion. In anticipation of his militant brother Esau, the one who said "Let the mourning period for my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob."<sup>1</sup> Jacob prepares cattle, donkeys, sheep and male and female slaves in order to placate him. Instead of being "at peace," Jacob's messenger reports "Esau is coming

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 27:41

to meet you, and there are 400 men with him.”<sup>2</sup> Jacob panics: in his anxiety he divides his family into two camps, thinking “If Esau comes to one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape.”<sup>3</sup>

In my Questions for the Week, I asked if Jacob’s move was one of a strategic military tactician or of a coward. One could argue that Jacob was wise, knowing that nothing could be taken for granted with his spur-of-the-moment brother. He put Rachel and Joseph last, his favorite wife and his favorite son.<sup>4</sup> As Ibn Ezra comments, he hoped they would escape for he loved them.<sup>5</sup> Like any good general he goes first, running up to Esau and then bowing before him. Rashi comments that Jacob went first because “if this evil man wants to fight, let him fight me first.”<sup>6</sup> It appears that Jacob was intentional and smart as he went out to meet his impulsive brother.

One could argue, however, that Jacob was a coward. He brought multiple gifts in an attempt to placate his brother. He behaved extremely

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 32:7

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 32:9

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 33:2

<sup>5</sup> ד"ה ואת רחל ואת יוסף אחרונים Ibn Ezra on Genesis 33:2

<sup>6</sup> ד"ה והוא עבר לפניהם Rashi on Genesis 33:3

obsequiously, bowing low to the ground 7 times.<sup>7</sup> He forced his wives, concubines and children to all bow low before Esau, as if to say ‘We will serve you as you wish.’ Jacob indicates that he brought the lavish gifts in order to curry favor with his brother and begs Esau to take them even after he refuses.<sup>8</sup> This manner of groveling and subservience to his brother does not show Jacob as a strong leader but rather a weakling coward.

This appears to be the turning point in the Jacob story: after his encounter with Esau it’s all downhill. His sons Shimon and Levi deviously murder the men of Shechem after Jacob cuts a deal with him. Jacob’s firstborn Reuben sleeps with his concubine Bilhah, a sign that he wants to take over for daddy. All of the brothers gang up against Jacob’s favorite son Joseph, offering Jacob false comfort as he deals with misery and wretchedness. I wonder if the brothers saw Jacob’s obsequiousness

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 33:3

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 33:8

and thought ‘Daddy’s weak; it’s my turn to take over for him.’ Perhaps this is why Jacob describes his years as “few and hard”<sup>9</sup> to Pharaoh.

The point is that things are never as cut and dry as they appear *prima facie*. I always thought Jacob was a brilliant strategist but now I see him as more of an anxious coward. While we should not judge someone until we’ve been in his/her shoes and there is always the danger of the ‘Monday morning quarterback’, Jacob’s example does give us cause to pause. In the end we might not have an answer, or maybe we can see Jacob as both a brilliant general and a fearful coward. This, however, is what makes his story so compelling and why I hope each of us will continue to study it year after year.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 47:9