

Our *parsha v'yishlach* talks about reconciliation, and its manner of discussing it presents all the ambiguities around this important moment in relationships. Every relationship undergoes strain at some juncture. Some of our most intimate relationships - including those with our spouses and children - may demand reconciliation even more than any other kinds of relationships simply based on how high the frequency of action between the parties is.

My first take on the reunion of Jacob and Esau at the beginning of this week's *parsha* immediately moved me, and I was drawn to

depict it to you as a model of reconciliation, which necessarily involves forgiveness.

I've already shared with you the difficulty of discussing Jacob and Esau because the entire rabbinic enterprise is arrayed against Esau as the embodiment not only of Edom, one of ancient Israel's neighbors, but also as the Roman Empire, which destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Esau as a stand-in for Christianity during the medieval period sharpened an already sharp polemic against Esau.

Concomitant with the sharpness of the rabbis' criticism of Esau is there extolling of Jacob. As one of our congregants has reminded

me for the past two weeks as we enter the Jacob portion of Genesis, which will last until the end of the book, Jacob comes off badly on a first reading. Nevertheless, because Jacob is Israel, the rabbis go to great lengths to highlight his positive qualities and downplay his negative qualities.

In other words, if you're dealing with a wicked person like Esau, how else can one expect a Jacob to act?

Esau has always been an emotional character. When Isaac informs him that the blessing has been given to Jacob instead of him, the Torah states,

כְּשִׁמְעַ עֵשָׂו אֶת־דְּבַר־יְהוָה וַיִּצְעַק צְעָקָה גְדֹלָה וַיִּמְרָה עַד־
מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר לְאָבִיו בְּרַכְנִי גַם־אֲנִי אָבִי

“When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst
into wild and bitter sobbing וַיִּצְעַק צְעָקָה גְדֹלָה
וַיִּמְרָה עַד־מְאֹד 27: 34

I find not being moved by that display of
emotion extremely difficult.

When Esau and Jacob meet again upon
Jacob’s return to the land of Canaan, Esau, once
again leads with emotion:

וַיָּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרַאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרוֹ וַיִּשָּׂקֵהוּ

וַיִּבְכוּ:

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

(33: 4)

As I mentioned, I was so impressed by this display of warmth and eagerness - running, hugging, falling upon the neck - a point to which I'll return - kissing, and crying that I was ready to declare before you this encounter as the penultimate moment of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Book of Genesis so far.

Knowing, however, how the rabbis feel about Esau, I had to give them their say and see how they understood this encounter.

Rashi, the great medieval commentator, is clearly of two minds on the matter and brings a source that causes us to be skeptical of Esau and also one that views his behavior as genuine.

Rashi states,

AND HE KISSED HIM — Dots are placed above the letters of this word, and a difference of opinion is expressed in the Baraitha of Sifré (בהעלותך) as to what these dots are intended to

suggest: some explain the dotting as meaning that he did not kiss him with his whole heart, whereas R Simeon the son of Johai said: Is it not well-known that Esau hated Jacob? But at that moment his pity was really aroused and he kissed him with his whole heart. (Sifrei Bamidbar 69.2)

The oddity of dots over the word for “he kissed him” creates an opportunity for interpretation. One interpretation is that the dots undermine the authenticity of the kiss. A second opinion, however, of R Simeon the son of Johai

claims that Esau kissed Jacob with “his whole heart.”

What may be the undercurrent of this difference of opinion speaks to the ambiguity of reconciliation in general. Each of us has probably experienced a reconciliation that did not withstand the test of time. Perhaps we were moved emotionally in the moment - as Esau was - to reconcile with someone who harmed us, but afterward when we had sobered up - so to speak - we wondered whether we had just been carried away. Or perhaps, the reconciliation did not

include repentance in one of the parties and the conflict re-opened almost immediately.

To speak to our contemporary situation and drawing from the classic use of Jacob as a stand-in for the Jewish people and Esau as a stand-in for Christians, within twenty years after the Shoah, a sea change occurred in the opinion of Christians of all kinds toward Jews. Preaching that had gone on for centuries that had cast Jews negatively, wickedly, or worse were cast aside. A new era of relations began between Christians and Jews that all of us have lived through. Never

before have Christians and Jews experienced so little animosity and so much friendliness.

Nevertheless, in the last fifteen years, we have also read about how many churches have started to side with anti-Israel forces in the conflict between Israel and her neighbors. Some even support Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. This is clearly a form of back-sliding on what was an astounding moment of reconciliation.

Returning to Esau and Jacob, I want to present to you what are to me the strongest reasons for thinking their reconciliation was

genuine and the strongest reasons for why it may not have been.

Strengthening the case for a genuine reconciliation relies on the presence of one word in verse 4 of chapter 33 that I quoted to you earlier: וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְנָאָרָו

“And he fell upon his neck.” Not only is the image moving and displays great intimacy, but I noted where the word צַוְנָאָרָו, which means “neck” appeared recently in the Torah.

As Rebecca prepares Jacob to deceive Isaac, she enacts two moves that will aid him. The first is she prepares the dish she knows Esau was

going to prepare. The second is that she covers “the hairless part of the neck with the skins of the kids” (27: 16). The word for neck in this verse is צְוֵנָאֵר. Esau’s falling on Jacob’s neck takes on a more profound meaning when we consider that it was through Jacob’s neck that he was able to deceive their father Isaac. The part of the body connected with the hurt of the deceit inflicted upon Esau is the very part he touches when he embraces Jacob.

Weakening the case for a genuine reconciliation and introducing ambiguity into this charged encounter relies on three elements.

First, Rashi comments - again on 33: 4 - using Genesis Rabbah that “Esau’s pity was aroused when he saw Jacob prostrating himself so many times” before they actually met. Jacob’s genuflecting showed that he was deferential to Esau, and that is what brought about Esau’s emotional embrace of Jacob. This is what I would refer to as imperfect forgiveness. Showing signs of submission before another should not be necessary to gain forgiveness.

A second factor weakening the case that the reconciliation with Jacob was genuine was the retinue that accompanied Esau. Jacob had sent

messengers ahead of him, and when they returned, they reported that Esau was accompanied by 400 men. That's quite intimidating and once again appears to mitigate the quality of the reconciliation. Perhaps, Esau was ultimately seeking submission.

A third factor is that we have to remember Esau's promise upon leaving Isaac's room. "He said to himself, 'Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob'" (27: 41).

By the time of their meeting at the beginning of *Vayishlach*, Isaac is still alive. Esau still has

time to follow through on what he had promised himself.

As I said, I began my engagement with this scene moved by the encounter between the two brothers. Hungry for an example of reconciliation, I was eager to praise this moment as a model for us all. As I took Rashi's commentary into account and examined a few other elements of the narrative, I could see how one could uphold the first opinion that Rashi cites, which is that Esau was not genuine when he reconciled with Jacob.

Each of us faces the challenge of reconciliation in our own lives. We argue with our loved ones; we reconcile with them; and then we reconcile again. When is true reconciliation ever attained? Reconciliation may be more ambiguous than we'd like to think; nevertheless, that ambiguity should not inhibit us from always seeking reconciliation at every opportunity that we have.