

In this week's parsha, Jacob and Esau reconcile. Reconciliation implies mutual forgiveness. It does not mean that each party is equally guilty, but it does mean that each has contributed to the conflict in some way. The animosity between Jacob and Esau dates back to the womb and grew during the early part of their lives. Esau was angered by Jacob deceiving their father Isaac into giving him the blessing, and Jacob was angered that he had to leave his home because Esau had threatened to kill him. Now, after twenty years apart, they await a new encounter.

Stepping back for a moment, we can see how this moment of reconciliation fits under the preeminent theme of the Book of Genesis, sibling relationships. Not for nothing is one of the first acts in the Torah one of fratricide. Sibling relations feature prominently throughout Genesis: Abel and Cain, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Rachel and Leah. In subsequent parshiot, we will read about the relationship of Joseph to his brothers.

The reconciliation of Jacob and Esau becomes paradigmatic of reconciliation at large. With that in mind, we might ask, What does this moment of reconciliation teach us? Considering the role that forgiveness plays in reconciliation, we will also have to opportunity to learn about the Torah's view of forgiveness.

Jacob saw Esau approaching and "bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother" (33:3). The first behavior that Jacob exhibits is submission. In response, the Torah tells us, "Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and then they wept" (v. 4). This is one of the most moving scenes in the Torah. Layered within Esau's behavior are several elements that tie back to earlier parts of the Book of Genesis.

"Esau ran" demonstrates his eagerness to reconcile. The use of the word "to run" appears in two significant previous contexts. The first is Abraham's response to the three angel-guest-strangers who approach his tent after his circumcision (18:2). The second is Rebecca's response to Abraham's servant when he arrives at the well she frequents (24:20).

"He embraced him and falling on his neck": The use of the word "neck" takes us back to the encounter between both Jacob and Isaac and Esau and Isaac. When Jacob goes to Isaac to receive the blessing, the Torah states, "And [Rebecca] covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids" (27:16). When Esau receives the blessing allotted to him from Isaac, Isaac says, "See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earth...when you grow restive, you shall break [your brother Jacob's] yoke from your neck" (27:39-40).

The role of the "neck" in the embrace between Jacob and Esau carries allusions to Jacob's act of deception, and Esau's breaking free of his service to Jacob.

"He kissed him and then they wept..." Tears will play an increasingly important role in the Book of Genesis moving forward. Up until now, two remarkable scenes involving tears are 1) Esau's response to Isaac after he finds out Jacob received the blessing designated for him: "When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing..." (27:34) and 2) Jacob's reaction to seeing Rachel at the well after he has escaped from the land of Canaan. This second scene also involves kissing: "Then Jacob kissed Rachel and broke into tears."

Tears now arise in a third context – the reconciliation of Jacob to Esau.

Contained then, in this moment, are several other moments experienced by the patriarchs and the matriarchs. The moment of reconciliation continues. Throughout, Jacob maintains a posture of submission, referring to Esau as his lord. Esau, for his part, does not seem overly interested in Jacob's gifts.

In their conversation Jacob says something that is moving and significant and speaks to what is divine about forgiveness and reconciliation. "To see your face is like seeing the face of God" (33:10). This is a larger statement about the experience of forgiveness that we have to take note of. Perhaps it can even inspire us to take initiative in our own lives to reconcile with those we are estranged from, particularly if they are our siblings. Each of us have relationships characterized by estrangement. This parsha shows us the sweetness of reconciliation.

Then something shocking happens in our parsha that baffles us, at least initially. Esau suggests that they travel on together, and Jacob politely declines: "Let my lord go ahead of his servant" (v. 14). Why this sudden break in the enveloping emotion of forgiveness? Esau even makes the offer a second time, and Jacob declines again.

One would think that after reconciling, Jacob and Esau would enjoy a restored relationship involving mutual trust and companionship, but the Torah stops short of depicting that. Esau goes one way, and Jacob goes another. Of course, I trust the Torah, and I think it's telling us something important about forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean that you go back to the way things were. You start over, but you start over from a new point in time, not an earlier point before the strife began.

What this reminds me of is the famous declaration about the Shoah, "Forgive but never forget." It is a dictum that is inscribed in my mind and in my heart. Occasionally, I wonder what it means, and I ask myself whether forgiving demands forgetting. Can one remember and still forgive? Of course, the Shoah is an extreme example. Strife, reconciliation, and forgiveness take place in thousands of circumstances that are not anywhere near the enormity of the Shoah. Nonetheless, I see the statement "forgive but never forget" as an important statement about forgiveness that certainly shapes how we view this important human act, forgiving.

Jacob understood what he had done wrong, which is why he submitted before Esau, but he also remembered that Esau had threatened to kill him and was the reason why he had spent the last twenty years under the exploitative hand of Lavan. He was keen on ending the strife between him and Esau, but he realized that for the sake of his own life and the life of his children and wives, he had to maintain an independent existence from him. Esau's attitude toward reconciliation is characterized by the effusion and emotionality that we've come to expect from Esau. The same goes for Jacob. The sobriety and prudence that governs his behavior in this episode is at one with the young man who persuades his brother to sell his birthright for a bowl of lentils.

Reconciliation is first and foremost an end to strife. It, secondarily, involves forgiveness. Beyond that, however, the Torah seems to indicate that forgiveness does not demand amnesia. One is permitted to remember what went wrong without defining the relationship by that. Admittedly this is difficult, and some of you may find this take on forgiveness and reconciliation

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unsatisfying. I wonder what you think and how this incident speaks to your own experiences of reconciliation and forgiveness. Perhaps this moment in the Torah sheds new light on our own experiences.