The Embrace between Esau and Jacob—Is Reconciliation Possible?

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A few days ago, I was interviewed by Rabbi Harlan Wechsler, a retired Conservative rabbi from New York, who now lives in both Jerusalem and New York. For 10 years, he has hosted a radio program called "Rabbi Wechsler Teaches" for Serius XM Radio, an internet radio station in the USA.

He heard me speak at a book launch of my new book (*The Other Peace Process: Interreligious Dialogue, A View from Jerusalem*) at the Jerusalem Press Club, and as a result, he decided to invite me to be on his program.

Rabbi Wechsler begins each week's program with a *Dvar Torah*, a lesson based on a passage in the Torah portion of the week. The portion that Jews will read in their synagogues in Israel and around the world this week, known as *Vayishlach* ("God sent [messengers]"—Genesis, chapters 32-36:43) — describes the poignant story in Genesis in which Esau meets Jacob, after a long absence and a bitter earlier history, and they share a great moment of reconciliation.

Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him, and falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept. (Genesis 33:4)

This verse, which caught the attention of Rabbi Wechsler, has been an important one for me too for many years. Let me explain.

In the biblical narrative, Jacob and Esau struggled with each other even in the womb of their mother! They had a troubled childhood as quarrelling siblings (like other siblings in Genesis, such as Isaac and Ishmael, and Joseph and his brothers). Then they fought over the birthright. Jacob tricked Esau. Esau got angry. Then Jacob ran away to Haran for a long time.

And then, in this week's Torah portion, we find the fascinating story of momentary reconciliation between brothers!

At the beginning of chapter 33, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by 400 men! So, he was naturally afraid. He divided the children among his wives, Leah and Rachel, and prepared for the worst. Nevertheless, he went out to greet Esau and bowed 7 times, out of fear or out of respect, we don't quite know. And then, all of a sudden, we are surprised by the big moment of the encounter between them, when they embrace and weep together.

In the Torah scroll, from which we read in our synagogues, the word for "he kissed him" is marked with four asterisks on the parchment. This, of course, has led classical commentators to offer various interpretations of this puzzling text.

Was Esau's kiss genuine? Was his purpose in coming to meet his estranged brother to repair their relationship after so many years?

These are the questions that disturb our commentators as well as those of us who continue to try

to interpret the Torah today. According to the greatest Jewish medieval commentator, Rashi:

> There is a difference of opinion in this matter. Some interpret the asterisks to mean that he (Esau) did not kiss him wholeheartedly. (But there is another opinion). Rabbi Shimon Ben Yohai said: It is well known that Esau hated Jacob; however, his compassion was moved at the moment and he kisses him wholeheartedly.

Another classic commentary, *Bereshit Rabbah* (a classical rabbinical commentary on the book of Genesis), agrees that Esau's motives were not pure and does so by using a pun on the Hebrew word "to kiss". Instead of coming to kiss him, the commentary argues, Esau came to bite him, since this man Esau is essentially an evil person, and therefore he certainly cannot be trusted.

Yet another midrash, Avot D' Rabbi Natan, takes issue with the interpretation of *Bereshit Rabbah* and says: "Everything Esau ever did was motivated by hatred, except for this one occasion which was motivated by love."

Were the embrace and the kiss genuine? Was this a real moment of brotherly reconciliation? Could it have led to a totally new relationship between the two estranged brothers? Had the brothers changed?

Earlier in the Torah story, Jacob had struggled with God and become "Israel"? Yet, we wonder whether or not, in this encounter, is he still the old Jacob the trickster? Or has he fully become "Israel", the person who is genuinely prepared to struggle and live with God and his fellow human beings? On the other hand, we also wonder whether has Esau also gone through a transformation?

According to the great 19th century German rabbi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, considered by many as the founder of Modern Orthodoxy, who authored his own fascinating commentary to the Torah:

> This kiss and these tears show us that Esau was also a descendant of Abraham. In Esau, there must have been something more than just the wild hunter. But Esau, also, gradually lays the sword aside, turns gradually more and more towards humaneness, and not just Jacob on whom Esau has most opportunity to show that and how the principle of humaneness begins to affect him.

I find this to be a very helpful interpretation. It seems that both Esau and Jacob had to undergo profound personal transformations to make reconciliation possible. The same can probably be said for the current interlocutors in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or in any conflict with estranged brothers or peoples.

Then and Now

Contemporary readers of the Biblical story can only wonder: Was reconciliation between Jacob and Esau only momentary? Could it have worked for the long haul?

In the Biblical story, they go their separate ways. So at least the war between them ended. No more fighting. You live here and I'll live there. Separation becomes the operational modality. Not peace. Just an armistice.

So we ask: Is reconciliation between historical "brothers", i.e. peoples, possible in our day?

In the contemporary world, we have witnessed some unprecedented and hopeful processes of reconciliation. Let me give you some major examples.

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The most important one is the great reconciliation between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. (According to classical rabbinic thinking, the people of Israel were perceived formerly as “Jacob” and the Christian world was symbolized by “Esau’, who became Edom.) This is one of the great reconciliation processes in human history. The religious leaders of Christianity and Judaism actually embraced at Vatican II in the 1960s and since that time have been in genuine dialogue in a spirit of trust and mutual respect for more than 50 years. A second great act of reconciliation in our time was the visit of Sadat to Jerusalem, his speech in the Knesset, and his initiative to establish peace with Israel. In Israel this week, we marked the 40th anniversary of this historical visit, which led the way to the peace treaty with Egypt in March 1979 (just three months before my family and I moved to Israel, 38 years ago). This peace, even if it is very cold, has lasted for all these years.

A third act of reconciliation was, in my view, the handshake (not an embrace or a kiss!!) between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, at the famous signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn, on September 13, 1993. However, while the intentions were honorable, the reconciliation process has faded from sight, diminished greatly, and almost disappeared.

With the decline in the political peace process in recent years, we wonder: is reconciliation possible between brothers or peoples who have been in conflict for a long time?

Since it has happened in other conflicts in the world, in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina, to name just a few, I believe that it can happen between Israelis and Palestinians too. In order for this to happen, however, it will require some major transformations and some leaders who will approach this with maturity, wisdom and courage.

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