

Seeing the Face of God – Parashat Vayishlach

There once was a rabbi who was asked by his students, “Master, how should one determine the hour in which night ends and day begins?” One student suggested, “Is it when a person can distinguish a sheep from a dog in the distance?” “No,” said the rabbi, “It is not.” A second student ventured, “Is it when one can distinguish a date tree and a fig tree from afar?” “It is not that either,” replied the teacher. “Please tell us the answer,” the students begged, “How should one determine when night has ended and day begun?” “It is when you look into the face of a stranger and see your sister or brother,” said the rabbi. “Until then, night is still with us.”

How beautiful is this Hasidic tale which surely can be read on more than one level! For *halakhic* (Jewish legal) purposes, it is sometimes necessary to know when nighttime has turned into day – as, for example, in the famous story from the Passover haggadah of the rabbis of B’nei Brak who studied the Exodus all night long until one remarked that it was time to recite the morning Shema . On a literal level, the Hasidic teaching tells us that when there is enough light to discern the features of another human being standing before you – when you can differentiate between the face of a stranger and the face of a sibling – *then* it is bright enough to be considered morning and any commandments to be performed by day may be observed. Until that time, it is still night.

I believe there is another, deeper, level of meaning to the Hasidic story, however, a meditation on bringing peace and healing that is found in the rabbi’s poignant response to his students. “It is when you look into the face of a stranger and see your sister or brother,” said the rabbi. “Until then, night is still with us.” It is only when we look at someone we do not know and see them as a fellow child of God, a person worthy of inherent dignity and respect, that we can overcome the darkness that so often

plagues modern society. Until we feel a sense of responsibility for the stranger, a sense of connection to the other, night – indeed – is still very much upon us.

We'll return to this notion of seeing the face of a stranger in just a few moments, but first I want to talk about the most famous kiss in all of Torah – the one that Esau gives his brother, Jacob, in this morning's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*. Many of us will remember the story well – how Jacob and Esau, estranged for 20 years after Jacob stole both birthright and blessing from his brother and then fled to Haran to escape Esau's murderous rage, have now come together to reconcile and make amends. There are many clear signs that point to Jacob's understandable ambivalence at this moment of reunion – he is kept up the entire night wrestling with an angel that many commentators see as a stand-in for his guilty conscience, he sends ahead an enormous stockpile of gifts in order to incline Esau favorably towards him, he arrays his family on the day of the meeting with least cherished wives and children first – presumably because those in the back are more likely to be safe should there be a violent altercation. And what happens when the two siblings finally meet face to face after two decades? As it says in Genesis 33:4, "Esau ran to greet [Jacob]. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept."

Now being that this is the Bible, with all its intrigue and family dysfunction, the ancient rabbis could not quite let the story end there – on a seemingly lovely note of forgiveness and repair. Rather, they point to a visual oddity in the text – the presence of a series of dots above the letters in the word *vayishakehu* – and he kissed him. Such markings are generally designed to call readers' attention to a feature of the narrative, and what the rabbis imagine here is somewhat extraordinary! As it says in Bereshit Rabbah, a

collection of midrashim (rabbinic legends) from the first century CE: “R. Yannai said: “[The dots] teach that [Esau] didn't come to kiss [Jacob] but rather to bite him, but our father Jacob's neck turned to marble and thus the teeth of that wicked one were blunted. Thus, when the text says ‘and they cried’ – this one [Jacob] cried over his neck and this one [Esau] cried over his teeth.”

In other words, the rabbis see the dots as a wink, as it were, or a set of quotation marks around the word in question, indicating that we should not read “kiss” as friendly and innocent but rather as conveying a Dracula-like thirst for blood. Jacob may be ambivalent about this upcoming reunion, explain the rabbis, but he has every right to be for his brother has in no way buried the hatchet and is rather looking for revenge. It is important to note that the reading of the rabbis contradicts the *p'shat* (plain meaning) of the text in every possible way – the Torah itself suggests no malice on Esau's part and instead indicates that the brothers hug, kiss, cry, exchange gifts and pleasantries, and ultimately part ways. But the fact that Esau was seen by the rabbis as being the progenitor of Edom, the nation of Rome which persecuted the sages so terribly during the first century of the common era, led them to create as uncharitable an interpretation as possible for Esau's behavior – even contravening the text itself in order to do so. They use the dotted markings to flip the story of Jacob and Esau on its head!

There are many reasons that I dislike the rabbinic reading of our *parasha*, primarily because it upends a hopeful message about the repair that is possible even in the most tortured of relationships and replaces it with a message of vengeance. And so I place strong emphasis on the actual words of Jacob as recorded in the Biblical text which bring us back to our Hasidic tale and brotherly affection and notions of genuine reconciliation and forgiveness. After Esau turns down Jacob's lavish offerings, demurring

that he has quite enough material comfort already, Jacob says to him: “No, I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Genesis 33:10). Jacob has been suspicious of Esau; Jacob has been jealous of Esau; Jacob has been afraid of Esau, but this is all in the past. Once Jacob confronts his brother, looks into his eyes and smells his familiar scent and feels the comforting weight of his embrace, his resentment falls away. He looks at his brother’s dear face and sees the face of God.

“It is when you look into the face of a stranger and see your sister or brother,” said the rabbi. “Until then, night is still with us.” Jacob has experienced the deepest of darkneses – betraying others and being betrayed in return, becoming ostracized from his family, being hated for just cause, being ashamed and afraid and alone. When he looks into the face of a stranger the night before his reunion with Esau, encamped at the Jabbok River, he sees not friend but foe in the visage of the angel – he demands to know his identity, he wrestles him, he is left damaged and limping. But when Jacob looks into Esau’s face, this stranger for twenty years whose grayed hair and furrowed creases leave him looking not at all like the boy of his youth, still he sees his brother, his twin, the one with whom he shared a womb and a childhood and a set of devoted – if very much imperfect – parents. He sees the face of love, the face of God, and suddenly the darkness lifts. Jacob and Esau part ways after their reconciliation and reunite again only for the burial of their father, Isaac, at the ripe old age of 180. Still, I like to believe that both men left the encounter with their psychic loads significantly lightened. Once Jacob saw his brother in the face of a stranger, night finally faded into day.

I would imagine that we have all had our own Jacob and Esau encounters – periods of estrangement from those with whom we once felt close, moments of shame over how we’ve treated another, tender places of pain left over from how another has treated us. We’ve had to look into the face of someone

who feels very much the stranger and decide either to suspect or to trust, to reject or to try again, to push away or to see the other as our sister. On this Shabbat of *Parashat Vayishlach*, may the story of two courageous brothers encourage us to trade in our vampire teeth for good and to go for a genuine display of affection instead. When we look into the face of a stranger and see instead a sibling, the darkness often fades.

Raiti fanecha cirot p'nei Elohim – To see your face is like seeing the face of God.

May our encounters with the other similarly bring us light, peace, and an enduring sense of the Divine.

Shabbat Shalom!