

When Making Up is Hard to Do:
Vayishlah 2001

The outpouring of sentiment across the world over the death yesterday of George Harrison is linked on one level, to a recognition by many, that 40 years, a generation, in the Torah's reckoning, has passed so quickly. In a profound way, it means that all of us who still thought and wanted to hold onto the allusion that we are Peter Pan must admit to ourselves that we are in fact, growing up and growing older. We are reminded, once again, that yes, we are mortal.

And part of our sadness can be attributed to realizing that it also means the death of any shred of hope that the world's greatest band would ever join together for a reunion.

This is disappointing, for we all like fairy tale endings, where everyone gets back together and lives happily ever after. Up until the time of their death, I admit, I still fantasized that Lucy and Ricky, Lucille Ball and Ricky Arnaz, would get back together. I even held out hope that Sonny and Cher would reunite.

Some of you may have seen the fascinating article in last week's Washington Post, about the last two surviving Jews of Afghanistan, Isaac Levy and Zebolan Simentov. In all of Afghanistan, it seems there are only two Jews - - and wouldn't you know it: they don't talk to each other. They can't stand each other, and are mortal enemies, each denouncing the other to Taliban authorities as a traitor.

It seems to be the setup to a joke. But there is no punch line. It is true, and since it is true, it is sad and unfortunate.

It is sad because part of human nature is the desire to see people reconcile and live in peace with each other.

Our tradition enforces this value. Pirke Avot tells us that it is a great mitzvah to make an enemy into a friend. We are told to emulate Aaron, to be pursuers of peace between people.

The notion of teshuvah was reinterpreted, by our sages to refer not just to repentance, but also to entail, turning. Turning, not just towards God, but to each other, to teach how important it is to heal shattered, broken relationships. The Yom Kippur Mahzor cites the phrase of the prophet that in the days to come, the hearts of parents will be turned towards children, and of children towards parents.

So, in light of the thrust towards overcoming estrangement, and of the emphasis on reconciliation in our tradition, I have often been puzzled by the story told in this week's parasha, and especially by the reaction of our rabbis to it.

On the surface, it would appear that Esau is interested in reconciling with his brother, Jacob. Let us not forget that Jacob, after all, is the one who had manipulated the situation, causing his brother to relinquish to him, both the birthright and their father's blessing. As a result of these actions, he must flee his native land to live in Haran with his mother's family. We pick up the story this week, after twenty years of exile, as he is about to return to his native land, the land of Israel.

Jacob is so worried and nervous about the encounter with his brother, that he takes the precautionary act of dividing up his retinue, of sending gifts and messengers to appease his brother. He prays and prepares for the worst.

Yet if we look at Esau, he appears eager to meet his brother, is happy to see him, and embraces and kisses him. In fact, he is the one who says, to Jacob, let us proceed together from here, and Jacob is the one who declines the offer.

Yet, despite this, and all that Jacob has done to trick Esau, our rabbis voice no disapproval of any of Jacob's actions. If anything, the midrash criticizes Jacob for appeasing Esau so much, and for appearing so subservient to him, as how he bows to him when they first meet, and refers to his brother as "my lord".

It is almost as if the rabbis do not want to see a reconciliation. And this is the key to understanding the insight of our sages.

Although each brother must now realize that the mental images they had been carrying all these years were not accurate, one midrash says that Esau cannot be trusted, despite all of his outward gestures, for, "everything he ever did was motivated by hatred."

They point to two other factors as well, which mitigate against the possibility of terminating the estrangement. When Esau says, "yesh li rav: I have much". This is in contrast to Jacob's comment, "yesh li kol: God was gracious to me, and I have all." Although both seem to indicate they are well off, the subtle difference in the choice of words, according to the Talmud reveals a different perspective. "I have much," Esau says, and seems to imply, but not necessarily enough. Jacob's response indicates that he is content, in that all that he needs, he has. The midrash adds and "whatever it is that God has not given me, I do not need."

Not only, then is their world view different, there is one other difference. Jacob realizes that Esau still wishes to dominate Jacob.

So, we see, our Torah and rabbis are telling us, there may be times and circumstances, when reconciliation, while still ideal, may not be practical, or even desirable.

I think of what is currently going on in the Middle East. There are those who say that Israel should just accommodate the demands of the Palestinians. But by all their actions, they have not shown that they have relinquished or abandoned their basic desire to dismantle the Jewish state.

And I recall the advice I once gave a woman estranged from her father. I urged her to make the effort to reach out and communicate with him. She did, and subsequently wrote me a note thanking me for meeting with her and telling me how terrible my advice was. I was humbled, and learned the lesson of this week's Torah portion is teaching us – reconciliation is not always possible.

Rabbi Abraham Twersky once wrote, "Our sojourn in this world is rather brief. We can dissipate our time foolishly pursuing a mirage, an unattainable goal, or we can have the good judgment to be satisfied with what we have, and be grateful to God for giving it to us.

May we each know this blessing.