

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

Ramban begins his commentary to the sidra with the following passage:

This chapter imparts the message that the Holy One blessed be He delivered His servant and redeemed him from the hand of the stronger and sent his angel to deliver him. It further teaches us that he did not rely on his own righteousness but made every effort to help himself. There is also another message in this chapter—all that happened between our ancestor and his brother Esau will continually recur in our dealings with the descendants of Esau...

Ramban followed the line of interpretation adopted by our Sages who regarded the Patriarchs as models to be emulated by their descendants and their experiences as the archetype of what would befall their children. These two ideas were expressed in the phrase: "The deed of the forefathers is a sign for the children."¹

Many parallels in Jewish history have been found by our commentators to the encounter between Esau and Jacob. Just as Jacob was taken as a symbolic name for the Jewish people, so Esau was said to represent Rome, the power that destroyed the Temple and scattered the remnants of Israel.

At the end of the meeting between the two brothers, Esau urged Jacob to accompany him. The latter however declined the honour and made various excuses. This is also expounded in the symbolic sense as prefiguring the course of Jewish history:

Jacob wished to avoid fraternising with his brother and our Sages extracted a message from this: When Rabbi Yannai went to meet the authorities, he used to take heed of this chapter and did not have the Romans escort him on his way. Once he paid

no heed to this chapter and had the Romans escort him. Whereupon he did not reach Acre till he had sold the coat off his back. (Ramban)

Ramban explains that Rabbinic tradition regarded the story of Esau's encounter with Jacob in our sidra as: "the chapter of exile"—the archetypal pattern of Israel's diaspora existence. When Rabbi Yannai had to go to Rome to treat with the Roman authorities—the "kings of Edom," he would take as his model, his ancestor Jacob's method of dealing with Esau. He therefore refused to accept the offer of the powers-that-be to provide him with an escort since, "they only befriend a man for their own purposes and confiscate his worldly goods."

The historic parallel in our chapter is obvious: Jacob the puny one confronted by the mighty Esau, and attempting to placate him. Let us make a closer study of one remarkable verse in this encounter:

וַיֵּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרַאתוֹ וַיִּחַבְקֵהוּ וַיִּפַּל עָלָיו
צוּאָרוֹ וַיִּשְׁקָהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ.

And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept (33, 4)

It was not only the vowel points over the phrase "and kissed him," in the Hebrew, that has excited attention but also the unusual display of affection, so uncharacteristic of Esau:

"וישקהו" — בקוד עליו. א"ר שמעון בן אלעזר: בכל מקום שאתה מוצא הכתב רבה על הנקודה [האותיות הבלתי מנוקדות מרובות על המנוקדות] — אתה דורש את הכתב, הנקודה רבה על הכתב — אתה דורש את הנקודה. כגון לא כתב רבה על הנקודה ולא נקודה רבה על הכתב, אלא מלמד שנכמרו רחמיו באותה שעה ונשקו בכל לבו. אמר לו ר' ינאי: אם כן למה נקוד עליו? אלא מלמד שלא בא לנשקו אלא לנשכו ונעשה צווארו של יעקב אבינו של שיש וקרו שיניו של אותו רשע. ומה תלמוד לומר "ויבכו"? אלא זה בוכה על צווארו וזה בוכה על שיניו.

Said R. Shimon b. Eliezer: wherever you find that the letters outnumber the vocal points, you expound the letters; where the points outnumber the letters, you expound the points. Here

the letters do not outnumber the points, nor the points the letters. This teaches that Esau's compassion was aroused at that moment and he kissed him with all his heart. Said R. Yannai to him. Why then is the word pointed above? But we must understand that he came not to kiss him (*nashko*) but to bite him (*noshkho*): Whereupon the patriarch Jacob's neck turned to marble, setting that wicked man's teeth on edge. What then is the implication of the phrase: "And they wept." This one wept on his neck and the other, on (account of) his teeth.

(Bereshit Rabbah 78, 12)

ביקש עשו לנושכו ונעשה צווארו של שיש, לכך נקוד על "וישקהו", שלא היתה נשיקה של אמת. "ויבכו" — למה בכו? משל למה הדבר דומה: לזאב שבא לחטוף את האיל. התחיל האיל לנגח, וכנסו שיני הזאב בקרני האיל. זה בוכה וזה בוכה. הזאב בוכה שלא יכול לעשות לו כלום, והאיל בוכה שלא יחזור ויהרגנו. אף כך עשו יעקב: עשו בוכה על שנעשה צוואר יעקב כשיש ויעקב בוכה שמא יחזור עשו וינשכנו. על יעקב הכתוב אומר (שיר השירים ז, ה): "צוארך כמגדל השן". ועל עשו נאמר (תהלים ג, ח): "שיגי רשעים שברת".

Esau sought to bite him but his neck turned to marble. This is the reason for the points, indicating that his kiss was not a sincere one. Why did they both weep? To what may this be compared? To a wolf which came to snatch a ram. Whereupon the ram began butting it with his horns, the wolf's teeth becoming entangled in them. Both of them wept; the wolf on account of its impotence and the ram for fear its enemy might try again to kill him. So too here with Esau and Jacob. Esau wept because Jacob's neck had turned to marble and Jacob, for fear that Esau might return to bite him. Regarding Jacob we have the text: "Thy neck is as a tower of marble" (Song of Songs 7, 5); regarding Esau: "Thou hast broken the teeth of the wicked" (Psalm 3, 8). (Tanpuma Vayishlah 4)

Two views are expressed regarding Esau's conduct, an optimistic one, that saw a revolutionary change for the better, and a pessimistic one that detected the old Esau behind it. Here are two more citations; expressing opposing views:

כשעבר יעקב לבוא בארץ כנען, בא אליו עשו מהר שעיר בועף אף וזמם להורגו, שנאמר (תהלים לו, יב): "זמם רשע לצדיק וחורק עליו שניו". אמר עשו: איני הורג את יעקב אחי בחצים ובקשת, אלא בפי אני הורגו ומרצץ את דמו, שנאמר: "וירץ עשו לקראתו ויתבקחו ויפל על צווארו וישקהו ויבכו" — אל תקרא "וישקהו" אלא "וישכהו", ונעשה צווארו של יעקב כעצם

השן... כיון שראה עשו שלא עלתה בידו תאוותו, התחיל כועס וחורק בשיניו, שנאמר (תהלים קיב, י): "רשע יראה וכעס, שניו יחרק ונמס".

When Jacob came to the land of Canaan, Esau came to meet him from mount Seir full of fury, bent on killing him as it is written. "The wicked plotteth against the righteous, and gnasheth at him with his teeth" (Psalm 37, 12). Said Esau: I shall not slay Jacob with bow and arrows but I shall rather slay him with my mouth and suck his blood, as it is said: "And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept." Read not: "and kissed him" but: "he bit him!" Whereupon Jacob's neck turned to marble... as soon as Esau perceived that he had not accomplished his desire, he became furious and gnashed his teeth, as it is stated: "The wicked shall see and be vexed; he shall gnash with his teeth and melt away" (Psalm 112, 10). (Pirke derabi Eliezer)

"וישקהו" — נקוד. יכול שהיתה נשיקה של אהבה? ר' שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: והלא כל מעשיו של עשו בתחילתו של שנאה היו? — חוץ מזה, שהיא של אהבה.

... Could this have been a kiss of love? R. Shimon b. Eliezer said: But surely all Esau's deed were motivated by hate—except this one, which was inspired by love! (Avot derabi Nathan)

The optimistic view, reflecting perhaps the overtones of nineteenth century emancipation and liberalism, is again propounded by Rabbi S. R. Hirsch:

The allusion to weeping is a sure sign that what we have here is a revelation of genuine humanity. A kiss can be superficial but an outburst of tears is a strong presumption in favour of sincerity. Esau betrays his Abrahamic origins and shows himself as not merely a cruel hunter. Otherwise he could never have reached such a leading position in the development of mankind. The sword alone, brute force cannot accomplish this. Even Esau gradually relinquishes his sword and begins to feel the chords of human love. It is Jacob who usually provides him with the opportunity for showing his innate humanity. When the strong respects the strong, this is discretion. But when the strong, i.e. Esau falls on the neck of the weak, of Jacob, and casts his sword away, then we know that humanity and justice have prevailed.

We shall not quarrel with Hirsch who didn't know what we know today about the "sword" turning into holocaust and not love. Let us cite in contrast a later Jewish sage, one of the first protagonists of the return to the homeland through the Lovers of Zion movement. He detects, in our chapter, a call to leave the diaspora and rebuild the Holy Land:

Both wept, implying that Jacob's love too was aroused towards Esau. And so it is in all ages. Whenever the seed of Esau is prompted by sincere motives to acknowledge and respect the seed of Israel, then we too, are moved to acknowledge Esau: for he is our brother. As a parallel we may cite the true friendship that existed between Rabbi Judah Hanasi and the Roman emperor Antoninus, and there are many similar instances.
(Ha'amek Davar)

The head of the famed Volozhin yeshiva, author of the foregoing was not impressed by the weeping of Esau but by that of Jacob, who, in spite of all that he had suffered at the hands of his brother, was ready to let bygones be bygones, so long as the smallest gesture of sincerity was forthcoming.

But cannot the text itself provide a clue to the character of Esau's display of affection? Benno Jacob in his commentary to Genesis endeavours to discover such a clue, by carefully comparing all the texts that speak of similar meetings:

Jacob and Rachel:

And Jacob kissed Rachel and lifted up his voice and wept
(Genesis 29, 11)

Joseph and Benjamin:

And he (Joseph) fell on the neck of Benjamin his brother and wept
(Ibid 45, 14)

Jacob and Joseph:

And Joseph harnessed his chariot... and he presented himself unto him, and fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while
(Ibid 46, 29)

Moses and Aaron:

And he (Aaron) went, and met him... and kissed him.
(Exodus 4, 27)

With the foregoing contrast our passage:

And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and wept.

None of the other encounters are accompanied by such a display of effusiveness. Benno Jacob suggests that this description of Esau's running, embracing, falling, kissing and weeping is suspect. Indeed the patriarch himself does not believe its sincerity and immediately afterwards declines Esau's offer to escort him. Jacob went his own way, alone. Esau turned to Seir. Jacob's home was elsewhere in the land of Canaan, but the day would come when Esau, and there are many types of Esaus, would come to Jacob to Mount Zion.

Questions for Further Study

1. Why did Jacob drop his first plan of action (32, 8-9): "And he divided the people... into two camps. And he said: If Esau come to the one camp, and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape." Our Sages commented (see also Rashi ad loc.) that he prepared to employ three means of combatting Esau: gifts, prayer and battle. Yet we do not find that he made any preparations for battle, nor did he divide the people into two camps. He divided his children according to their handmaids, each mother with her children. What was the reason for this change of plan?
2. What caused Esau's change of heart—the gifts or something else?
3. Cf. Esau's and Jacob's remarks:
And Esau said: I have enough, my brother...