

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Genesis Rabbah 78:9

וירץ עשו לקראתו וישקהו נקוד עליו אר"ש בן אלעזר מלמד שנכמרו רחמיו באותה השעה ונשקו בכל לבו, אמר לו ר' ינאי אם כן למה נקוד עליו אלא מלמד שלא בא לנשקו אלא לנשכו ונעשה צוארו של אבינו יעקב של שיש וקהו שיניו של אותו רשע ומה ת"ל ויבכו אלא זה בוכה על צוארו וזה בוכה על שיניו

Esau ran to greet him. [He embraced Jacob and, falling on his neck,] he kissed him; [and they wept.] (Gen. 33:4). [The word] 'kissed' is dotted [above each letter in the Torah's writing]. Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar said . . . it teaches that [Esau] felt compassion in that moment and kissed [Jacob] with all his heart.

Rabbi Yannai said to him: If so, why is ['kissed'] dotted? On the contrary, it teaches that [Esau] came not to kiss [Jacob] but to bite him, but our ancestor Jacob's neck became like marble and that wicked man's teeth were blunted. Hence, 'and they wept' teaches that [Jacob] wept because of his neck and [Esau] wept because of his teeth.

Rarely do I find a midrash like the one above that reflects love and hate, admiration and anger, in a single passage about how Jews relate to Christians. While the two rabbis quoted here agree that a peculiar scribal feature is crucial to understanding Jacob and Esau's reunion, they fundamentally disagree about what that detail signifies.

After noting that dots appear above each letter of "kissed" in this week's Torah portion, the text presents Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar's teaching that this scribal embellishment adds emphasis to the literal meaning of the kiss, indicating Esau's authentic affection toward his estranged brother. Until this point, the midrash focuses less on the conflict between the twins than on their reconciliation.

Rabbi Yannai, however, employs an ironic and biased appraisal of Genesis 33:4, which betrays his hostility toward Esau as the ancestor of Israel's adversaries the Edomites, who many Sages equated with their own enemies, the Romans. That historical reading of Rabbi Yannai's interpretation may help us grasp why he demonizes Esau ("that wicked man") and how this midrashic tradition helped to concretize anti-Christian sentiments among Jews experiencing pervasive Christian anti-Semitism.

In reading this midrash today, it behooves us to challenge Rabbi Yannai's radical rereading of this event by considering how the text first teaches us about the way in which Esau forgives and reunites with Jacob. We find a similar example of sympathetic commentary in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b) regarding Ishmael, whom God saved from dying of thirst because "a person is only judged according to his actions until that moment." This statement may offer insight into how Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar contradicts Rabbi Yannai by resisting the impulse to blame Esau for the actions of his offspring. We ought to emulate this approach in pursuing partnerships with our Christian and Muslim neighbors in America and abroad: people of faith with whom we might write a new chapter in the history of Abraham's descendants.

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Rabbi Marc Wolf

Vice Chancellor and Chief Development Officer
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu



Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yishlah

Genesis 32:4–36:43

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Robert Harris, associate professor of Bible, JTS.

The opening verses of this week's parashah recount Jacob's decision, upon returning home after 20 years of "living abroad," to get in touch with his brother, Esau. You may remember that they—ahem!—had not parted on the best of terms (see Gen. 25:27–34 and especially Gen. 27:1–41 for the gritty details). At the beginning of the parashah, it is not yet clear to what extent Jacob is motivated by fear, by friendliness, by craftiness—or by some combination of these and potentially other concerns. Let us read the first two verses of the portion:

Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows: "Thus shall you say: 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: "I stayed with Laban and remained until now (Gen. 32:4–5)

I would like us to focus on the phrase "I stayed with Laban" (literally, "with Laban have I sojourned"). The Hebrew phrase is *'im Lavan garti*, but for the moment let us think of that last word untranslated, and consider the phrase as "I had been a *ger*." I wish us to think of the words in this way because that is how Rashi begins his explanation of the passage:

I have sojourned (Heb. *garti*): I did not become an officer or a dignitary, but a stranger (*ger*). It is not worthwhile for you to hate me on account of your father's blessing, [with] which he blessed me (Gen. 27:29), "You shall be a master over your brothers," for it was not fulfilled in me.

You see, in this first comment (midrashically derived), Rashi understands the Hebrew verb *garti* as "I have lived as a sojourner/stranger"—*not* what the word means according to context, "I stayed / I lived." Note also that Rashi does *not* apply the Rabbis' typical (aka midrashic) understanding of the biblical Hebrew *ger* as meaning "convert/proselyte," the meaning of which, of course, cannot apply here.

So, here, Rashi would have us understand the verse as containing Jacob's

admission that the material rewards contained in Isaac's blessing—which Jacob had stolen from his brother—did not pan out: Jacob is returning to the Land as he left—a refugee, and one fearful of his brother's (justified) reprisals at that.

But Rashi's second comment—even farther from the contextual or plain meaning—is what, for some reason, intrigues me here even more:

Another explanation: *garti* has the numerical value of 613. That is to say: “I lived with the wicked Laban, but I kept the 613 commandments, and I did not learn from his evil deeds.”

Forget for the moment the question of how could any character in Genesis observe the Torah when God's revelation at Mount Sinai did not take place until Exodus 20 (this is a trifling matter in the world of midrash!). Here, Rashi, via the midrash, points out that the biblical word *garti* has the same letters (and, hence, the same numerical value) as the traditional number of the Torah's commandments, *taryag* (613).

Now, whenever one turns to *gematria*, the number games based on the numerical values of Hebrew letters, one ought to keep in mind the warning of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra against ever going this route. Ibn Ezra offers a stinging rebuke to those who would use *gematria* in his comment on Gen. 14:14 (end): “Scripture does not speak in *gematria*, for [if it did] whosoever wishes may change the meaning of any word for good or evil!” In other words, one may have recourse to *gematria* only as a game—it is *never* the actual meaning of a text, because language, even (and especially) divine language in Torah, simply does not work that way. Rather, we should always apply the rabbinic rule for reading: “Scripture never escapes the hold of its context” (*ain mikra yotzeh midei peshuto*). In other words, when *reading* Torah (as opposed to, say, being a *darshan* of Torah), the text primarily means just what it says.

Nonetheless, when I read Rashi's second interpretation of the words “with Laban have I sojourned,” I want to know: what was in the mind of the *darshan* who first proposed this *gematria*? *Why* would he suppose Jacob would think that Esau would be reassured by his claim that while living with Laban, he—Jacob—had kept the mitzvot?!

We cannot know for certain, of course, because the midrash does not generally give us the mind-set of the authors of the various midrashic interpretations. However, we can ponder the question—and intuit an answer (shaky grounds, I know): Perhaps the *darshan* wishes us to think that Jacob, seeking to reconcile himself with the brother whom he has earlier wounded, at the very least *approaches* Esau sympathetically (guilt feelings?), as though the latter—living in the Land all during the time that Jacob lived in Aram—kept the commandments himself and would have been concerned that Jacob had not been loyal to the Covenant while in “exile”? You might say that my reasoning is far-fetched (a wonderful Yiddish word!), but, hey, we're living in the world of *gematria*—*everything* is far-fetched there.

Let's leave it as a question, then. For some reason or another, the *darshan* whose teaching underlies Rashi's second comment has Jacob reassuring Esau that he, Jacob, has kept the mitzvot while away. What do you suppose the reason was?

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

After a 20-year absence from home and family in the Land of Israel, Jacob journeys back. And like any of us en route home, anxiety and uncertainty (along with anticipation and joy) play core roles in such an experience. To what extent will old patterns of sibling rivalry and other familial tensions repeat themselves? Will we be able to break free of past hurts to move toward a more hopeful and joyful future?

Such is the mindset of our patriarch Jacob as he returns, on the verge of encountering his brother Esau—the same brother from whom he stole the blessing, the same brother that clearly had murderous designs against him for the deep pain inflicted. There is an elaborate and delicate dance that unfolds as Jacob approaches Esau: he sends messengers ahead, utters a prayer to God, and divides his family into two camps (lest one half be destroyed) so that there will be a remnant, and like any wise supplicant, he offers gifts. Notably, Jacob instructs his servants, “And you will add, ‘And your servant Jacob himself is right behind us.’” The verse goes on, “For Jacob reasoned, ‘If I propitiate him with presents in advance, then face him, perhaps he will show me favor’” (Gen. 32:21). The Hebrew root connected to the word for *face* repeats itself four times in this verse. What is the implicit message of the text?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

As *panim*, from *p-n-h* “to turn,” to take one's direction towards somewhere, really means in general, the trend, the direction, that somebody is about to take towards an object, and only from that the conception of *panim* (face) originates—as being that part of the body in whose position, movement, and glance is expressed . . . Here it means, “perhaps he will raise up my face which is now downcast. Let me look in the face again . . .” (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 502)

Faces reveal and conceal; faces invite closeness and suggest distance. It is much easier for Jacob to fix his countenance away from his brother Esau. To do so is to ignore “the Other”—albeit not freeing one's self from responsibility to “the Other.” Jacob's great challenge at this moment is looking his estranged brother in the eye and realizing the burden and pain of the past. And to do this, Jacob must *turn*—precisely as Rabbi Hirsch suggests. His face must literally change its orientation at this moment. By doing so, his posture (both physical and emotional), will be transformed. Evidence of the import of this message is found immediately after Jacob's encounter with his brother. Jacob urges Esau to accept his gift and movingly, powerfully declares, “For to see your face is like seeing the Face of God, and you have received me favorably” (Gen. 33:10). The Hebrew root for *face*, once again, repeats itself. And having wrestled with humans and divine beings, Jacob is now capable of shifting orientation. This “face to face” encounter between Jacob and Esau is not only about reconciliation between brothers and becoming “Israel,” it is about seeing the image of God in the estranged “Other” and moving a step closer toward peace.

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