

Jacob and the Struggle for Dialogue

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תתן אמת ליַעֲקֹב
Give truth to Jacob,
Michah 7:20.

A deep and disturbing undercurrent in the stories of Genesis is the relationship between those on the inside and those on the outside. The stories are often a battle of who to include and who to exclude. The generations of Israel were often built on austere choices. Who shall be remembered and who shall be forgotten. The pattern occurs in almost every generation. Thus, Abel is on the inside, whereas Cain is on the outside. Sarah is on the inside, and Hagar is on the outside. Isaac is on the inside, Ishmael is on the outside. Jacob is on the inside, Esau is on the outside. The list is long. But as the generations pass, as we shall see, this kind of black-and-white, binary thinking runs the risk of becoming too costly.

Hence an interesting question is where do the unwanted go? What happens to these outcasts? They do not just disappear. They may be forgotten but they themselves have not forgotten. Moreover, outcasts are dangerous because they have nothing to lose. Their rejection echoes across the generations. At the same time, the division is not black and white. The lines sometimes blur. And often it transpires that the ones on the inside are not always entirely on the inside, and the outsiders are not completely on the outside. As we shall see, some insiders are actually outsiders and some outsiders will do everything in their power to get back in.

Sefer Bereshit (the Book of Genesis) can be described as a series of monologues in search of a dialogue. Nowhere is this more evident than in the story of the Akedah. In one of the most chilling one-sided exchanges in the Bible, Isaac is described as the son who Abraham favoured: *Take your son, your only one, the one you love; Kach na et bincha, et-yechidcha, asher ahavta* (Bereshit 22:2). From the beginning, then, we learn of the divine origin of the practice of favouritism. Abraham complies without a word. As Abraham and Isaac ascend Mount Moriah, they do not speak. As he carries the wood intended for his own offering, Isaac clenches his teeth and he too wordlessly complies. They are described as walking together (*va-yilchuh shneyhem yachdav*, Bereshit 22:8). After the terrible deed, we learn, with heartbreaking sadness, that Abraham returns alone to his men and they go together (*ve-yashav Avraham el-na'arav va-yakumuh va-yalchuh yachdav*, Bereshit 22:19). Where did Isaac go? Where could he go? After the Akedah, the father and the son never speak again. The love was lost. Not strange perhaps. Can a father resolve to give up his son without destroying something essential? As the late poet

Yehudah Amichai notes, a father who rises early in the morning to kill his son, can only blame himself.

To understand what happens to Isaac, we need to look closely at the text. The next time we meet Isaac after the Akedah, we are told that Isaac returned from a place in the south called *be'er lachay roi* (*the well of seeing life*, Bereshit 24:62). What kind of place was it? In fact, the place is mentioned earlier in Bereshit. It was where Hagar found refuge after she was first thrown out of Abraham's house (Bereshit 8:14). Rashi on this *passuk*, based on Bereshit Rabbah 60:14, suggests that Isaac had gone to bring Hagar back to his father Abraham for him to marry her. It is possible that by bringing Hagar back to Abraham, Isaac achieved a *tikkun* – repair – and through that act, the kind of closure he needed in order to be able to receive Rivkah as his wife. The Ramban (Moses Nahmanides, 1194-1270) introduces another dimension. He suggests that the double use of the verb coming (Isaac "*ba miboh be'er lachay roi*") meant that Isaac used to go there frequently. From this we could infer that the *be'er lachay roi*, then, was the place where the outcasts went. Perhaps it was the only place where Isaac now felt at home. Isaac, then, is the insider who becomes a kind of outsider and who is then brought back inside, a pattern repeated in the story of Joseph. But Isaac does not remain in the periphery. The person who brings Isaac back into the fold is Rivkah.

A story. When Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to find a wife for his son Isaac, Eliezer makes the following plan. He will sit by the well of Nahor and wait for the daughters of the men of the city to come and draw water (Bereshit 24:14). Whoever of the girls who would volunteer to give drink also to Eliezer's camels, would be worthy and capable of being the future wife of Isaac. And soon enough, behold, Rivkah comes along with her pitcher upon her shoulder. The text pauses for a minute to mention her beauty and then continues with the plot. Eliezer asks her for a drink of water and Rivkah gives him a sip from her pitcher. Then she quickly adds: "I will draw for your camels also, until they have done drinking." And Rivkah runs to the task. Now, modern zoological sources inform us that a camel is capable of drinking up to 80 litres of water in one drinking session. The text explicitly states that Eliezer's ten camels drank until they were done drinking, meaning that Rivkah would have had to carry up to 800 litres of water. Clearly, she was the right woman for the troubled patriarch Isaac. All the same, it was not exactly love at first sight. The text states that when Rivkah lifts up her eyes and beholds her future husband, she literally falls off her camel (*va-tipal me-al ha-gamal*).

64 And Rivkah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she fell off the camel (Bereshit 24:64).

וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא אֶת־יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל׃

Isaac, the reduced patriarch, lifts up his eyes too and misses her. He sees only the camel.

63 And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide; and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming (Bereshit 24:63).

כַּן וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשִׁנְחָה בַּשָּׂדֶה לְפָנֵי עֶרְבַּ וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה
גַּמְלִים בָּאִים.

When Rivkah becomes pregnant she feels a battle is raging inside her. Her name bears this out: *Riv-kah* means ‘a battle within her’. She prays to G-d to release her from her pain and the Almighty then reveals to her that two nations are contained within her womb. She is told that the elder will serve the younger. For unknown reasons, Rivkah decides to keep this information to herself. The trauma of Esau and much else could have been avoided, had Rivkah only informed Isaac of G-d’s revelation to her.

Amidst much drama, the warring twins are finally born. Esau is the first-born. He comes out almost complete, with hair and the features of a grown boy. Appropriately, Esau’s name is a cognate of the Hebrew adjective *asoi*, which signifies ‘completed’. How appropriate a name was for a man who never underwent any process, never partook in any development and failed to rise to the challenges that life posed to him. Following in the heels of Esau, Jacob arrives, clutching his brother’s ankle (*ekev* in Hebrew). From the outset, the struggle with his brother defines his personality. In fact it defines both their personalities. Esau grows up to become the man of the field, the hunter, game was in his mouth (*tzaid be-phiv*). Jacob, on the other hand, is described as a quiet man, dwelling in tents (*ish tam yoshev ohalim*). He stays home and tends to the near, and he shows himself early on as a dreamer and the tradition considers him a man of faith. The two brothers are stark opposites, each defining themselves in opposition to each other. The matter is not helped by their parents both favouring one over the other. The text makes this clear. Isaac loved Esau. Perhaps he reminded him of his lost brother Ishmael who was cast out into the fields. Perhaps he was the strong man Isaac could never become. Rivkah, on the other hand, loved Jacob.

Rivkah loves Jacob so much that she will do whatever is in her power to ensure that he supplants his elder brother. In fact Rivkah refers to her two children as my son Jacob and his brother Esau. In the famous scene, Jacob breaks three of the Ten Commandments in one sentence (Bereshit 27:20), steals his father’s blessing and has to flee the rage of Esau. It is worth dwelling for a minute on the pain of Esau. First he cries. Tradition states that this cry could be heard all over the world. He is now an outcast. He roams around. He takes a wife, Adah, from the excluded descendents of the concubines of Abraham. Although Esau was rejected by the house of Abraham, he does not reject them. Tradition has it that he still respected his father to such an extent that we should learn about the value of *kibud av* (respecting one’s parents) from the story of Esau. The first-century Talmudic sage Shimon Ben Gamliel comments: “No man ever honored his fathers as I honored my fathers; but I found that Esau honored his father even more than I honored mine” (Devarim Rabbah 1:15).

Esau and Adah then has a son, called Eliphaz. According to the midrash (quoted by Rashi in Bereshit 29:11), Esau sends his son Eliphaz to murder his brother Jacob. Eliphaz had acquired or inherited his father’s hunting skills and the task of killing Jacob was, on the face of it, an easy one. But when Eliphaz arrives with his knife in the night, Jacob, who spent his sleepless nights thinking, is waiting for him. Jacob persuades him that he should

take all his belongings, all his riches, because as he argues, a man is nothing if he is dispossessed. Eliphaz accepts the argument, and for this or perhaps for other more empathic reasons. In the end he was not capable of killing a man like Jacob. But the failure to repudiate his father's deceiver must have remained. Eliphaz takes Jacob's riches and finds a wife, Timnah. Tradition teaches that Timnah was a princess of non-Abrahamic origin. A talmudic midrash tells that the family of Abraham had rejected Timnah's offer of conversion to the G-d of Israel. The Talmud asks, "Who was Timnah?"

A propos, what is the purpose of writing, "And Lotan's sister was Timnah?" — Timnah was a royal princess, as it is written, Aluf [Duke] Lotan, Aluf [Duchess] Timnah; and by 'aluf' an uncrowned ruler is meant. Desiring to become a proselyte, she went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz the son of Esau, saying, 'I had rather be a servant to this people than a mistress of another nation.' From her Amalek was descended who afflicted Israel. Why so? — Because they should not have repulsed her (Masechet Sanhedrin 99b).

תמנע מאי היא? - תמנע בת מלכים הואי, דכתיב (בראשית ל"ז)
 אלוף לוטן אלוף תמנע. וכל אלוף - מלכותא בלא תאגא היא.
 בעיא לאיגיורי, באתה אצל אברהם יצחק ויעקב ולא קבלוה,
 הלכה והיתה פילגש לאליפז בן עשו. אמרה: מוטב תהא שפחה
 לאומה זו, ולא תהא גבירה לאומה אחרת. נפק מינה עמלק,
 דצערינהו לישראל. מאי טעמא - דלא איבעי להו לרחקה.

For unknown reasons, Timnah had been found unsuitable. She had then settled with becoming the concubine of Esau, an outcast from the tribe of Abraham. But the rejection must have lingered. It is not known whether this shared failure was what united Eliphaz and Timnah. But what is known is that the outcome of that union was none other than Amalek (Bereshit 36:12). The Amalekites, as is well known, were nomads who attacked the Hebrews at Rephidim in the desert of Sinai during the exodus from Egypt: "smiting the hindmost, all that were feeble behind," (1 Samuel 15:2). Rav Mordechai, in his 'Itturei Ha-Torah', notes that a key moral lesson of this story is that the Israelites were also guilty here, allowing the stragglers to be cut off. We were at fault since we allowed the weak ones to lag behind. It was only then that they became an easy target for the hateful Amalek. But the commemoration of Amalek is not a straightforward matter:

17 Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt; **18** how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were enfeebled in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not G-d. **19** Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy G-d hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the Lord thy G-d giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget (Devarim 25:17-19)

[מסעי] יז זכור את אשר-עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים: יה אשר קרה בדרך ויזנב
 בך כליהנחשלים אחריה ואתה עיף ויגע ולא ירא אלהים: יח והיה בהגות יהוה אליה |
 לך מקלאיביה מסביב בארץ אשר יהוה-אלהיה נתן לך נחלה לרשתה תמחה את-תכר
 עמלק מתחת השמים לא תשכח. פ פ פ

Why is there a double commandment to remember? Perhaps because we are obliged to remember the consequences of his hatred, what Amalek did to us, but at the same time

forbidden to forget our role in its inception. The complexity of this double commandment testifies to a moral maturity that seems to be missing in today's world.

What can be learnt from this? One lesson is that exclusion comes at a price. The acts of a single parent or son have devastating consequences generations later. No act of exclusion, however small, can occur without leaving deep scars on the individuals. And those individuals who were cast out will have nothing to loose as they build their infrastructure of hatred. We also learn that hatred is rarely mindless; *sinat achim* it almost never truly *sinat chinam*. Finally, we learn that every action has antecedents. Hatred is carried across the generations. When Esau realises that he has been wronged, that he is now the outcast, that his life has become a joke, he utters a most painful cry:

34 When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceeding great and bitter cry (Bereshit 27:34).

כְּשָׁמַע עֵשָׂו אֶת־דְּבַר אָבִיו וַיִּצְעַק וַיִּצְעַק גְּדֹלָה וּמְרָה עַד־מְאֹד

This cry, which midrashic sources state reverberated across the world, has an echo. In the Book of Esther, the same words are used to describe the cry of Mordechai upon hearing of Haman's and Achashuerus' edict to exterminate the Jews:

1 Now when Mordechai knew all that was done, Mordechai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry (Esther 4:1).

וּמִרְדֵּכָי יָדַע אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה וַיִּקְרַע מְרַדְכָּי אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיִּלְבַּשׁ שָׂק וְאִפֶּר וַיֵּצֵא בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וַיִּצְעַק וַיִּצְעַק גְּדֹלָה וּמְרָה

Haman, of course, is referred to as Haman Agagi, a descendant of the Amalekite King of Agag (1 Samuel 15:8). From Amalek to Haman, there were sixteen generations. As the midrash points out:

Whoever maintains that the Holy One blessed be He is a foregoer of His just claims, may he forego his life! He is merely long-suffering, but ultimately collects His due. Jacob made Esau break out into a cry but once, and where was he punished for it? In Shushan the capital, as it says: And he cried with a loud and bitter cry (Bereshit Rabbah 67).

Among the *Rishonim* (the classical medieval commentators), Esau, who is referred to as Edom, became associated with Rome, much like the other outcast, Ishmael, later became synonymous with Islam. The Zohar and mystical sources in general have often considered Esau in a better light than have the classical commentators. The second-century rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, one of Rabbi Akiva's disciples, was one of the most vehement critics of Rome. Yet on the nature of the agony felt by Esau, he commented, "Redemption will only come when the tears of Esau are dried" (Zohar 2:66).

The story of Esau reveals the importance placed in Jewish thought on not taking one's inheritance for granted. Time without number, the Bible recounts how the younger, un-entitled brother surpasses the entitled firstborn. Birth order does not guarantee that one

will automatically inherit. The idea of *entitlement*, the notion of being owed something, is not meaningful in the context of Jewish thought. Each character of importance in the Bible is tested. No one is entitled to anything without having shown that they are worthy of the task. The idea of rights, of entitlement, which carries so much currency in today's world, is utterly foreign to the mindset of the Bible. Rather, the stress is on duty, on responsibility and on justice. What matters is, under the most testing circumstances, to do the right thing. In order to be chosen you have to choose. You are, to a large extent, your choices. What you haven't earned, you should not gain from. Perhaps that is why the Jewish tradition has not invented any rituals to celebrate birthdays. One's birthday is not something one has earned, and so in the Jewish tradition it is not worthy of much consideration. In Judaism, simply turning up is not enough.

Another story of outcasts. The brothers of Joseph were unable to speak to him: *And they were unable to speak peaceably to him; ve-lo yachlo dabro le-shalom* (Bereshit 37:4). This failure of communication is caused – and sustained – by the dangerous favouritism practised by Abraham and Jacob. After the brothers throw Joseph in the pit, they then sell him to the Medanites. Or rather, the text says, the Midianites pulled Joseph out of the well and they sold him to the Ishmaelites (Bereshit 37:28). Yet when Joseph arrives in Egypt, the text states that he was sold by the Medianites (*medanim*, Bereshit 38:26). It is clear that Joseph changed hands many times. But to whom did these hands belong? The three tribes, the Midianites, the Ishmaelites and Medianites, were not strangers. Or they had not always been strangers. They were in all three cases the outcast descendents of Abraham's concubines. The Midianites were descendants of Midian, the son of the union between Abram and his concubine Keturah (Bereshit 25:1-2). The Ishmaelites were the descendents of Abraham's union with Hagar (Bereshit 16:3). To add to the confusion, some commentators, for example the Midrash Tanhuma (Hayyei Sarah 8), identifies Keturah as Hagar. The Medanites were either synonymous with the Midianites or they were nomadic descendents of Ishmael. So we see that these strangers are none other than the arch-outsiders. They form a parallel universe of could-have-beens. Joseph, who was so favoured by Jacob, is now one of them. An object to be traded and forgotten.

Let us at last return to the chosen one, the undisgraced Jacob. What happens to him? He spends his nights thinking. He seems stuck. He seems defined by external events. He doesn't seem to be able, on his own, to become what he is capable of. What is holding him back? We can only guess. Psychologists who study twins have made the following observation. In many cases, each twin over time develops a strong internalised image of the other twin. This internalisation is stronger in twins than in other sibling relations. If the two brothers had defined themselves as opposites all their life, this also constituted their greatest limitation. It was their limitation because they both inhabited essential qualities as leaders. The decisiveness of Esau, the passion and strength were all needed in the son that was to replace Isaac, the aging patriarch. But decisiveness is futile unless one has a clear plan of action and a worthy goal to strive for. This was Jacob's strength. But we could imagine how Jacob must have despised resoluteness and strength, qualities that Jacob so clearly associated with Esau's persona.

What does this quest for wholeness consist of? "Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator," writes Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his 1956 address, *Kol Dodi Dofek (My Lover's Voice Knocks)*. Soloveitchik distinguishes between two dimensions of human existence: the *man of fate* and the *man of destiny*. The "I" of fate is subject to fate, they are living an existence of compulsion, an existence of the type described by the Mishnah, "Against your will do you live out your life" (Avot 4:29). An existence devoid of meaning, direction and purpose, but subject to the forces of the environment. Against this passive category of being, Soloveitchik posits the "I" of destiny. This is an active mode of existence, one wherein man confronts the environment into which he is thrown, where he struggles with his fate and his selfhood.

Man possesses the ability to impress his own individual seal upon his life and can extricate himself from a mechanical type of existence and enter into a creative, active mode of being. Man's task in the world, according to Judaism, is *to transform fate into destiny*; a passive existence into an active existence; an existence of compulsion, perplexity, and muteness into an existence replete with a powerful will, with resourcefulness, daring, and imagination (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, p. 56).

The American psychologist Eric Erikson, writing in a similar vein, has coined the term 'psychosocial integration'. Erikson believed that individuals have an innate drive towards integration and the forging of social bonds. Erikson saw this process as a life-long struggle and it is only when integration is achieved that people can flourish both as individuals and as members of a culture. The opposite of integration Erikson called 'dislocation'. The dislocated individual is one who fails to make bonds with others and is unsuccessful in finding meaning and purpose in their life. And of course, the original dislocated individual is the outcast.

The chosen and the unchosen need each other to define and clarify their own identity. And even when they go separate ways, each keeps the other within him. Thus Abel has his Cain inside him as a destructive part of himself. Cain is never really completely on the outside; his sign is kept preserved inside everybody. Hagar is expelled from the love relationship with Avram, yet Sarah always carries the jealousy and the insecurity inside her. Ishmael the competitor is cast out, but he continues to influence the internal reality of the house of Abraham. Psychologists sometimes refer to this latent existence as the repressed unconscious: the parts of us that we expel from our conscious presence. However, despite being outside our conscious picture of ourselves they continue to influence us as long as they represent unresolved conflicts. And unresolved conflicts demand their toll. The Cains, the Hagers, the Ishmaels and the Esaus may be on the outside, but they stay inside us as our latent, inner selves.

The required change in Jacob was carried out by way of a vow and a promise. The vow is a commitment on Jacob's part to integrate his personality, to become, in a word, *whole*. The promise was that if he did, his name, and thus, in biblical terms, his destiny, would be changed from Jacob to Israel. Although Jacob was not an outcast, he might have been changed by the exclusion of his brother. Jacob's vow to change comes after his dream of the ladder:

16 And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said: 'Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.' 17 And he was afraid, and said: 'How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven.' (Bereshit 28:16-17).

20 And Jacob vowed a vow, saying: 'If G-d will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in wholeness, then shall the Lord be my G-d (Bereshit 28:20-21).

יז וַיִּיקָץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָל יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יי וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר
מִהֲנוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה בֵּי אִם־בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

הָהוּא בֵּית־אֵל וְאוֹלָם לִנּוּ שִׁם־הַעִיר לְרֵאשִׁינָה כ וַיִּדַּר יַעֲקֹב נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר אִם־יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּלִי
וְשָׁמְרָנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנִתְּוִלִי לֶחֶם לֹאֲכַל וּבִגְד לִלְבָּשׁ נא וּשְׁבַתִּי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל־בֵּית
אָבִי וְהָיָה יְהוָה לִי לֵאלֹהִים:

How full of awe is this place; Ma norah ha-makom ha-ze, can also read: How terrifying is this place! This was the very place where his father Isaac lay ready to be sacrificed by Abraham. It was there that Jacob began to understand the devastating precedent of the previous generations. Abraham himself had been attempted sacrificed by his father Terach. The midrash links Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, to fire (*or*). The midrash describes how Nimrod, who Terach looked up to, threw the young Avram into a fiery furnace (Bereshit Rabbah 38:13). Through his faith he miraculously survived. As a test of his faith, Haran, Abraham's brother, was also thrown in the furnace and he was burnt to death (Rashi on Bereshit 11:28). It is at that spot that Jacob vows now to break the deep-rooted pattern. Abraham may have left Ur Casdim, but it never completely left him. Now it is up to Jacob to extinguish the fire.

The divine promise of what Jacob could expect should he succeed comes in another episode of nightly reflection. On the banks of the river Jabbok, Jacob struggles with a mysterious angel. The midrashic commentaries suggest that the angel was *sar Esau*, the guardian angel of Esau (Bereshit Rabbah 77:3). An internalised image of sorts. Jacob struggles not only with that image but the very assumptions that underpin his identity as well. That is why the outcome is so crucial. The text says that the two struggled all night:

25 And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. 26 And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. 27 And he said: 'Let me go, for the day breaketh.' And he said: 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.' 28 And he said unto him: 'What is thy name?' And he said: 'Jacob.' 29 And he said: 'Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for thou hast striven with G-d and with men, and hast prevailed.' (Bereshit 32:25-28).

כה וַיִּתְּרַךְ יַעֲקֹב לְבָדוֹ וַיִּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר כו וַיִּירָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּצַע
בְּכַיִּירוֹכּוֹ וַתִּקַּל כַּיִּירֹךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבֶקוֹ עִמּוֹ לו וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ כִּי
אִם־בְּרַכְתֵּנִי כה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִה־שִּׁמְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לו וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹל שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל
כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוֹכַל

The first thing we notice is that Jacob is alone. It was only in that existential frame of mind, like the existential readiness of Abraham (Isaiah 51.2), that he was able to confront the angel. At the break of dawn, the two adversaries are still locked in an embrace. They are tired, drained. Jacob is wounded. His hip is injured, perhaps as a sign of his present *dislocation*. Or perhaps it is only when he is willing to battle and be bruised and still not give up that the blessing is released. Perhaps, like Moses who has to take off his shoes and feel the hard earth in the presence of the burning bush, he needs to be made vulnerable before he can achieve greatness. The two have measured their strengths and neither vanquished the other. The peaceful outcome involves a deep change of Jacob's character. For the first time, he is able to go beyond his previous rigid self-definition. Before the battle between Jacob and the angel, one brother's victory necessarily meant the other brother's defeat. There was no room for anything else. Thus where Abel was victorious, Cain was left in ignominy. Where Isaac was victorious, Ishmael was cast out into the wilderness. This pattern of thinking reaches its apotheosis in the way Jacob himself favours his son Joseph over his other ten sons. The partiality of Jacob towards Joseph is no doubt the strongest reason for the hatred that the brothers feel towards him. It is this hatred that drives them to leave him for the Ishmaelites, an act that eventually causes the exile of Israel in Egypt. But the partiality of Jacob towards Joseph is part of the time of Jacob's life before the battle at Peniel. Up until now, Jacob had always defined himself in apposition to his brother. But after the nocturnal struggle with his brother's guardian angel, what we have called Jacob's internalised image of his opposite, he is finally able to let go of that earlier binary definition.

But first Jacob needs to make peace with the real Esau. To appreciate the importance of this, we have to remind ourselves of a key feature of *tshuvah*, of repentance. The Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

Offences committed by man against his fellow – are not remitted him until he makes restitution to him and appeases him (Hilchot Tshuvah 2:9).

When Jacob finally meets Esau, their meeting is as surprising as it is touching. The scene is decked for battle. In Stephen Crane's evocative image: "The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting." Here is how the meeting between the two brothers, who had been fighting each other all their life, is portrayed:

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

11 Take, I pray thee, my blessing that is brought to thee; because G-d hath dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.' And he urged him, and he took it (Bereshit 33:11).

16 So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir. **17** And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him a house, and made booths for his cattle. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth. **18** And Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan (Bereshit 33:16-18).

ד וַיִּבְרַח עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיִּחַבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְּאָתוֹ וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ׃

י" קחנא את-ברכתי אשר הבאת לך כייחנני אלהים וכי ישלייכל ויפצרובו ויקח:

י"ז וישב ביום ההוא עשו לדרך שעירה י" ויעקב נסע סכתה ויבן לו בית ולמקנהו עשה סכת עליכן קרא שם-המקום סכות. י"ח ויבא יעקב שלם עיר שכם אשר בארץ כנען

In an exceedingly magnanimous deed, Esau forgives Jacob. The hatred and the fear is gone. The brothers decide to finally leave each other in peace. It is a reconciliation but it is too late for true brotherly love. But Jacob continues that day to Shechem. The text says: *And Jacob came in peace to Shechem; va-yavo Yaakov shalem ir Shechem*. As we know, *shalom* can mean both peace and wholeness. Thus the promise of the angel was fulfilled. These two experiences – both the wrestling with the angel, and the meeting with Esau – enabled Jacob to travel to this place in peace, and in wholeness. That wholeness was won only through struggle, through loss, and through a radical transformation. Crucially, the release comes only after Jacob has been forgiven by the brother that he had wronged. And as Nechama Leibowitz remarks in her celebrated commentary on Bereshit, it was only after Jacob says to Esau, *Take, I pray thee, my blessing; Kach-na et-birchati* (Bereshit 33:11) and after his brother accepted the blessing, that the Almighty could reveal Himself to Jacob and announce the fulfillment of the promise made by the angel: *Your name shall no more be called Jacob but Israel; Lo yikareh shimcha od Yaakov ki im-Israel* (Bereshit 35:10). Instead of engaging in the petty struggle with his brother, he had managed to reach the level where his struggle was with the existential matters, with *being* itself. To the extent we are defined by our adversaries, Jacob has come a long way.

The change that Jacob brings about, amounts to what can be called a New Model of Jewish leadership. Up until this point, the world of the Bible was starkly divided into two categories: the Chosen and the Disgraced. Jacob, however, blesses all his sons, instead of bestowing authority on a favoured one only. When the dying Jacob blesses his sons, the text says: *And this is what their father spoke to them, as he blessed them; ve-zot asher diber lahem avihem, va-yevarech otam* (Bereshit 49:28). Jacob is about to die. He decides to bless all his sons. The verb used is the *diber* of dialogue– not the hard *va-yomer* of the akedah. Hence Jacob creates among his sons the first power-sharing pseudo-democracy in history. He bestows different tasks on each of his sons and they are all expected to share in the future of the Jewish people and the history of the land of Israel. We cannot say for sure whether it was that battle that made the decisive change in Jacob's life. Jacob experienced many traumas in his life. His favoured son, Joseph, the one he loved more than all his children (*Israel ahav et-Yosef mikol banav*, Bereshit 37:3) was torn from him. His favourite wife, Rachel, whom he loved, died, according to tradition, on account of his own deeds. It was perhaps the years when he refused to be comforted after the descent of Joseph to Egypt that slowly caused him to change his way of thinking. What we know is that the Jacob we meet at the end of his life is a very different man than the one who deceived his brother.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) exclaims in his 1814 poem, *The Holy Longing*: “Die and be reborn! Unless you understand this you will never be more than a sorry guest on this dark earth.”

As a fitting conclusion we can now see the aging Jacob, blessing his grandchildren. Jacob is the first Jewish grandfather; some midrashic sources even refer to him as *Grandfather Israel; Israel Sava*). Both Jacob's father Isaac and Isaac's father Abraham died before their grandchildren were born. But Jacob is blessed with grandchildren in his lifetime and this event alone might have caused him to re-evaluate himself. The dying Jacob places his two grandsons, Ephraim and Menasseh, in front of him. The boys are only still young and no doubt unaware of the fateful consequences such blessings carried in the past. And just at the moment of blessing, as Jacob stretches out his hands towards the boys, he crosses them. Each grandson receives the blessing intended for the other, but that does not matter. Because Jacob knows that the time when history was divided between the blessed and the outcast, when exclusivity necessarily meant exclusion, had passed. The time of true dialogue, of the inner kind as well as between members of one family, the time of sharing and of building on differences, had arrived:

14 And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands wittingly; for Manasseh was the first-born. 15 And he blessed Joseph, and said: 'The G-d before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the G-d who hath been my shepherd all my life long unto this day, 16 the angel who hath redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named in them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.' 17 And when Joseph saw that his father was laying his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he held up his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head unto Manasseh's head. 18 And Joseph said unto his father: 'Not so, my father, for this is the first-born; put thy right hand upon his head.' 19 And his father refused, and said: 'I know it, my son, I know it; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great (Bereshit 48:14-19).

ד וישלח ישראל את ימיו וישת על ראש אפרים והוא הצעיר ואת שמאלו על ראש מנשה שכל את ידיו כי מנשה הבכור ויברך את יוסף ויאמר האלהים אשר התהלכו אבותי לפניו אברקם ויצחק האלהים הרעה אתי מעוזי עד היום הזה וימלאך הגאל אתי מכליך יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי ושם אבותי אברקם ויצחק וידעו לרב בקרב הארץ [גליטין] ז וירא יוסף כי נשית אביו יד ימיו על ראש אפרים וירע בעיניו ויתמר יד אביו להסיר אתה מעל ראש אפרים על ראש מנשה יח ויאמר יוסף אל אביו לא יכן אבי כי יזה הבכר שים ימינה על ראשו יט וימאן אביו ויאמר ידעתי בני ידעתי גם הוא יהיה לך וגם הוא יגדל

Epilogue

Rabbi Yossi says in the name of Rabbi Haninah (Masechet Brachot 46b):

Abraham established (*takken*) the Shacharit prayer, for it is written, *And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood* (Bereshit 19:27). It is not a matter of standing, for he was praying (*tfila*). As it is written, *Then Phinchas stood up and wrought judgment (va-yiflal)* (Tehillim 106:30).

תניא כוותיה דרבי יוסי ברבי חנינא: אברהם תקן תפלת
שחרית - שנאמר (בראשית י"ט) וישכם אברהם בבקר אל המקום
אשר עמד שם, ואין עמידה אלא תפלה. שנאמר (תהלים ק"ז)
ויעמד פינהם ויפלל

Isaac established the Minhah prayer, for it is written, *And Isaac went out walking (lasuach) in the field toward evening* (Bereshit 24:63). As it is written, *A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea (sicho)* (Tehillim 102).

יצחק תקן תפלת מנחה - שנאמר
(בראשית כ"ד) ויצא יצחק לשוב בשדה לפני ערב, ואין שיחה אלא
תפלה, - שנאמר (תהלים ק"ב) תפלה לעני כי-יעטף ולפני ה' ישפך
שיחו

Jacob established the Ma'ariv prayer, for it is written, *And he lighted (va-yifgah) upon the place, and tarried there all night* (Bereshit 28:11). As it is written, *Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession (al tifgah) to Me* (Yirmiyahu 7:16)

יעקב תקן תפלת ערבית - שנאמר (בראשית כ"ח) ויפגע במקום
וילן שם, ואין פגיעה אלא תפלה, שנאמר (ירמיוה ז') ואתה אל תתפלל
בעד העם הזה ואל תשא בעדם רנה ותפלה ואל תפגע - בי.