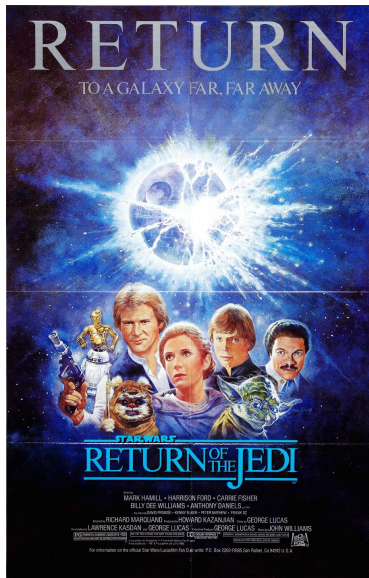


Esav is the Attacker: Lesson in Transformation

Vayishlah 5783



Star Wars has three trilogies within its nine episodes, but the first one I saw ended weakly with *Return of the Jedi*. But this week, we read the third episode of my favorite Torah trilogy. And, unlike *Return of the Jedi*, it does not disappoint.

In the first episode, Jacob/Ya'akov and his brother Esau/Esav are born and Jacob, whose name means "heel," acts like one, tricking his elder brother out of his birthright and deceiving his father into giving him the blessing meant for his brother.

In the second installment, we read how Jacob the trickster gets tricked by his father-in-law-to-be, Lavan, who swaps brides - one sister for another - at Jacob's wedding.

And today, we read how Jacob, despite his fear of his brother, faces his brother and ends up wrestling with a mysterious assailant.

Then, the two brothers reconcile in one of the most beautiful scenes of the Torah: Esav runs to his brother, hugs him as he falls on his brother's neck, and kisses him.

And the two of them cry.

It's quite a moment.

* * *



But while I always looked at the wrestling scene as the key to Jacob's transformation, in which it clearly plays a big part, today, I want to offer other ways of looking at this narrative.

Jacob's process of internal change is a more gradual shift - one where Jacob becomes more self-aware by cultivating certain personality traits.

It is not merely the wrestling scene.

* * *

Before Jacob's dark night of the soul, the wrestling, we see him developing his sense of gratitude and his humility, saying

קִטְנֹתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת-עַבְדְּךָ

"I am unworthy of all the kindness that You (God) have so steadfastly shown [me] (Your servant)." (Gen 32:11)

In this verse, we see Jacob approaching God with a sense of humility; it's not all about him and his needs. Jacob feels a sense of gratitude.

The Hebrew word he uses is instructive: "*katonti* - I am not worthy."

Literally, I have become small.

I am insignificant.



I am not sure I deserve the blessings I have been given.

Sforno, a 16th Century Italian commentator and physician, points us to our *tefilot* - our prayers – which are supposed to fill us with gratitude and humility.

When we wake up, we recite *Modeh Ani* - which speaks of being thankful and grateful for the gift of being given another day of life.

The entire *Shaharit* - morning service - then takes us on a journey to becoming aware of the world and people beyond ourselves, infusing ourselves with humility.

This culminates at the end of the *Amidah*, our central prayer, where we recite "*v'nafshi k'afar l'kol teheyeh* - let my soul become humble, like dust, before everything."

These spiritual practices are powerful.

I try to begin and end each day thinking of several things for which I am grateful. And then try to approach others with the same deep humility that Jacob begins to feel.

Modeh Ani Text

מִוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם שֶׁחָזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ:

I give thanks to You living and everlasting Sovereign
for You have restored my soul with mercy.
Great is Your faithfulness.

Even before the wrestling episode, Jacob has become aware of his misdeeds. Apologizing for his previous behavior, Jacob sends Esav gifts as a *kapparah* - an atonement for his actions. The Torah uses the same root as Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement. Here, Jacob says “*akhaprah panav* - if I appease him” or more literally, “if I atone to his face.”

This new element of “*panim* - face” is the *leitwort*, the key phrase of this narrative. It appears seven times before and during the wrestling episode and 20 times in the entire Torah portion.

The verse about atonement is illustrative. “If I atone to his face, with presents in advance, and then face him, perhaps he will lift his face [to me].” Face, face, face.

When we lift our faces to someone else, it means to show them kindness, to look upon them with warmth and love.

This phrase appears several times at the end of the nighttime experience.

Jacob names the place of the encounter *Peniel* - I have seen a Divine being face-to-face.”

So how does all this fit together?

What exactly happened to Jacob?

* * *

I want to offer a slightly different reading of the attack of the mysterious assailant, and I am grateful to our weekly Torah class, which helped me expand on this interpretation.

I want to posit that the attack is actually Jacob’s brother Esav, who has disguised himself so Jacob cannot recognize him. This is a dose of Jacob’s own medicine as Jacob first disguised himself as Esav to deceive his father.

In the wrestling match, Esav can see something has changed in his brother. And if the attacker is really Esav, it would explain why he wants to leave before sunrise; he does not want to be discovered.



Jacob releases him and Esav feels things are now “even” since Jacob limps away from the encounter. Whether this is a literal or metaphorical limp or both, Jacob has been given his due and does not deserve any other punishment.

And then I would put forth that somehow Jacob realizes that the attacker was his brother. And that Esav did not bring his 400 soldiers to kill him, but shared his pain and hurt by wrestling, perhaps a more normal way that two brothers would fight.

And then, finally, Jacob says that he has seen God - which was really his brother.

Seeing God here means seeing his brother’s loss - the pain he caused him. Each of them looked into the other’s face, and their deeper appreciation of one another transformed their relationship and themselves.

* * *

The details and nuances of the narrative offer us a model for our own lives.

Although Jacob is afraid of what will happen to him when he re-encounters Esav, he leans into being grateful for the blessings in his life. This leads him to humility and to really see Esav’s pain, his suffering.

And, in kind, Esav feels Jacob’s fear, his remorse.



Seeing each other in a new light sets up their formal reunion - the text states that when Jacob sees Esav approaching, he sees a different face - not the one who wanted to kill him, but one that is open to forgiveness.

Jacob does his part by bowing, a gesture of remorse, contrition, and humility.
Their emotional embrace and tearful reunion follow.

But this theme of seeing faces continues. Jacob declares that “to see you,
[Esav], is like seeing the face of God.”

* * *

For us as well, this can be helpful. We can approach each day with gratitude,
each person with humility, and see another person’s face to truly appreciate them, to
truly see them - this is how we can strive to live our lives.

For truly seeing someone is to see God.