

Dear Chavraya,

There is ample cause in Jewish history to warrant suspicion and wariness of the "other," of non-Jews. Psychic scars run deep and are transmitted from generation to generation. On Tisha B'Av, memories are awakened as our own of the suffering wrought by the Babylonians with the destruction of the first Temple some twenty-five hundred years ago, and of the second Temple by the Romans some two thousand years ago, images made vivid through mournful chant and wrenching words. Of exodus and exile, cycles of redemption and dispersion, brought out of Egypt, free at last, and in chains sent away from the Land, and from Spain and Portugal, from Arab lands and from the lands of Europe. In the fading number of Holocaust survivors, a number still to be seen upon a wrinkled arm, pages missing from a family album, mass graves still to be seen, and of those remembered with no graves at all. Bearing silent witness, the physical scars remain as well. The words echo and compel, *zachor, gedenkt*, remember.

How do we remember though, and to what purpose? Memory has been the means of our survival, whether remembering the words of Sinai and the keeping of Shabbos, or the evil deeds of Amalek. Suspicious and wary, we can turn within, as we often have, keeping our distance. We can speak of the "goyim," emphasizing otherness, "us and them," a perfectly fine word meaning "nations," turned pejorative in the way of its saying. So we have lashed out, the powerless seeking catharsis, as in the Pesach Seder, "pour out Your wrath upon the nations." In order not to ignore a painful part of our people's story and the tragic ways of its expression, rather than leave them out, I tend to say those words of jagged edge in an undertone, followed with full voice, words drawn from a medieval Haggadah, "Pour out Your love upon the nations."

What begins as the cathartic cry of the weak, can over time become a twisted expression of racism, a rejection of the other simply for who they are. Closing our hearts to the possibility of goodness, and our eyes to the hand extended, we lose an opportunity for human connection. When there is cause for wariness, can we bravely extend our own hand and strive to raise up the other, diminishing the fear in each of us? Whether expressed through the building of walls or in cultivating the way of the fist, failure to build bridges between ourselves and others undermines the essence of who we are as a people. How tragic, if through memory we would take with us only the pain, surviving as a people empty and shattered, leaving behind the message we are meant to carry and to realize -- the oneness of humanity, a unity envisioned in the creation of people in the image of God, Who is One. The choice is ours, as it has always been, whether to succumb to the psychic and physical scars, or to transcend them, to reject or be open to the possibility of relationship.

These dynamics play out in archetypal fashion in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*. Jacob is returning home to the land of Canaan after twenty year's absence, having fled the anger of his brother Esau who had threatened to kill him for having stolen the birthright and blessing of the first-born. Dividing his children and their mothers, and the flocks he has acquired, into groups, all of them bearing gifts, Jacob hopes to appease his brother, who he has been told is approaching with four hundred men. Appearing to spontaneously put aside his

plan to approach Esau last, perhaps recognizing the cowardice and cruelty of putting others in danger first, even according to a hierarchy of love, Jacob went up ahead “until he came close to his brother.” Telling most poignantly of the reunion, of fear transformed, the Torah says, *and Esau ran to meet him, fell upon his neck and kissed him; and they wept/va'yishakeyhu va'yivku*. Above the six Hebrew letters of *va'yishakeyhu/and he kissed him*, there is a dot above each letter, even as the word is written in the Torah scroll itself.

Such dots, appearing above a few other words in the Torah as well, are offered by the rabbis as an invitation to interpret the word, to enter and wrestle with something deeper than meets the eye. In the playful way of tradition, when there are more letters without dots than dotted ones, we are to interpret by combining the letters without dots, but when there are more letters with dots than without, then we are to interpret by combining the letters with dots. In our case, *va'yishakeyhu* has an equal number of letters and dots. We are then left with a choice as to how to interpret, whether at face value or in another way. The interpretive choice that rises from this word becomes the very choice we have been wrestling with, whether to accept the hand of the other as sincere or to remain suspicious and reject it.

In a single midrash, we are given two different responses, the same ones that continue to play out among us today, reflecting two very different views of people and possibility. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says of the choice offered by the same number of letters and dots, *“it teaches that Esau’s compassion was aroused in that moment, and he kissed him with all his heart.”* Questioning why there would be any dots at all if the word is to be interpreted at face value, the midrash continues with the view of Rabbi Yanai, *rather it comes to teach us that Esau did not come to kiss him, but to bite him*. In the Torah text itself, Esau in fact urges Jacob to keep the gifts, that he has enough. But to Esau’s urging that the brothers go on together, Jacob finds reason to decline, blighting the possibility of deeper connection.

In a stirring commentary, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch would disagree with both Rabbi Yannai and Jacob himself, amplifying in a voice so loud and clear the words of Rabbi Shimon. Reflecting on Esau as the hunter, the one who knows the art of weaponry, Hirsch writes from mid-nineteenth century Germany, *this kiss, and these tears show us that Esau was also a descendant of Abraham.... Esau gradually more and more lays the sword aside, turns gradually more and more towards humaneness.... It is only when the strong, as here Esau, fall round the necks of the weak and cast the sword of violence far away, only then does it show that right and humaneness have made a conquest*.

Hirsch’s insight into the dynamics between Jacob and Esau at the time of their reunion points to an essential element of nonviolence, recognition of the other’s humanity. While praising the change that is taking place in Esau, Hirsch is also giving credit to Jacob, however much we might fault him. In a moment of spontaneous joy, Jacob, wounded in his thigh from his night wrestling with an angel, limps toward his heavily armed brother who is surrounded by a retinue prepared for battle. Unarmed and vulnerable, knowing of his brother’s promise

to kill him, Jacob bows to the ground seven times in approaching his brother. Without diminishing the change that is also occurring in Esau, Jacob has acted in such a way as to allow Esau to respond in kind: *and Esau ran to meet him, fell upon his neck and kissed him; and they wept.*

The possibility of transformation lies in the way that we approach the other. Whether it is with open arms or a clenched fist, whether to put down the sword, as it was for Esau, or the well rehearsed inner defenses that preclude reconciliation, as it was for Jacob. There is a fine line between the way it has always been, and the way that it could be. The fineness of that line and the narrow span between potential and real is contained in that one word of six dotted letters *va'yishakeyhu/and he kissed him*. The word for kiss and for weapon in Hebrew is formed of the exact same root, *NaShaK*. A kiss, a touch, a meeting together -- *n'shikah*; weapons, arms, a means of defense -- *neshek*. It is all in the way that we approach the other.

As Jews, we have at times been wary of the other, ancient wounds that are carried, limping like Jacob toward wholeness. If Jacob's way in that moment of transformation brought out the best in Esau, the deceiver now reaching out, vulnerable and revealed, he was yet too fearful to remain in his brother's embrace. A way had been opened, though, a start had been made, a seed of hope planted in the possibility of another way. Acknowledging the pain that has been, our calling is toward oneness, to reach out with courage and faith and see the sword put aside, recognizing the capacity for change in the other as well as in ourselves. In the day when reunion blossoms into reconciliation, the warmth of a kiss and of tears upon each other's cheek, we shall accept the hand extended and walk on together.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor