

Encountering the Other

Rabbi Jill Jacobs

If there is a common thread in *Parshat Vayetze*, it is the overwhelming fear of the other.

As the *parasha* begins, Jacob prepares to meet with his estranged twin, Esau; the two have not seen each other since the episode in which Jacob stole Esau's birthright and Esau responded by threatening to kill his brother. Afraid that Esau still wishes to kill him, Jacob sends messengers ahead to spy on his brother and plies Esau with gifts in an attempt to pacify him. Esau seems similarly afraid of Jacob, who appears with a large entourage. In the end, this dual fear proves to be unjustified, as the brothers embrace and forgive one another for past grievances.

Somewhat later in the *parasha*, Dinah, Jacob's daughter, is captured and raped by the son of Sh'chem, the leader of a neighboring tribe. In including this rape narrative, the Torah presumably intends to caution against close contact with other nations. This portrayal of the other as a sexual aggressor is reminiscent of the pre-civil rights era image of African-American men preying on white women, used to justify anti-miscegenation laws. Perhaps Sh'chem similarly viewed the Israelite "other" as an aggressor. If so, this image would have been vindicated by the massacre that two of Jacob's sons carry out in retaliation for their sister's rape.

The intense fear of the other that permeates this *parasha* is tempered by the genealogy of Esau that ends this section. While the Torah is fond of long genealogies, these generally concern Jews or their ancestors. It is unusual, then, to find a long and detailed genealogy of Esau's descendents, who become the non-Jewish tribe of Edom.

Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon; Spain, 1194-1270) notes the inclusion within the genealogy of Amalek, who later becomes the arch-enemy of the Israelites. He suggests that Amalek, who is the son of a concubine, should not be considered a legitimate descendent of Esau and comments that "we are commanded, regarding the sons of Esau, not to hate them (Deuteronomy 23:8) and not to take their land (Deuteronomy 2:5). . .but the son of a concubine is not considered as one of the sons of Esau, and does not live with them in their land; about him, we are commanded to do the opposite: to hate him and to wipe out his name."

According to Ramban, it is important to know the names of Esau's illegitimate children so that we may know that we are permitted (or, in the case of Amalek, commanded) to hate these pseudo-descendents. Ramban's tone may be more negative than we might like; however, we can invert his comment and suggest that we need to know the names of Esau's descendents in order to be able to fulfill the commandment not to hate—and perhaps even to love—the other whom Esau personifies. As long as the "other" remains an unnamed aggressor, we can feel free to dehumanize him/her. As soon as

the “other” becomes an individual with a name and a family, we are forced to view him/her as an individual with emotions and needs.

Shadal (Rabbi Shmuel David Luzatto; Italy, 1800-1865) goes a step further in suggesting a series of parallels between the genealogy of Esau and the genealogy of Jacob that immediately precedes it. From the moment of Jacob and Esau’s birth, the Torah tells us only of the differences between the two brothers; now, Shadal suggests, the paths of their descendents indicate that the brothers are more alike than we would otherwise have believed.

Ultimately, what is most frightening about the “other” is that s/he reminds us of ourselves. Thus, it is fitting that another central moment of *Parshat Vayishlach* is the story of Jacob’s wrestling with an angel, commonly interpreted as Jacob’s wrestling match with himself. We are afraid of the “other” and s/he is afraid of us. Only naming and humanizing the “other” and, most importantly, recognizing the extent to which s/he is a reflection of ourselves can help us to overcome this fear.

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