

THE KISS OF ESAU

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On leaving the house of Laban to return to the land of his birth, Jacob knows that he is going to have to confront the issue of his brother Esau's words which had sent him fleeing: *'the days of mourning for my father approach; then I will slay my brother Jacob'* (Gen. 27:41). Now, 20 years later, Jacob's fear of his brother's vengeance forces him to prepare for the fateful and inevitable meeting according to the prescribed formula for such confrontations: *tefilla* [prayer], *doron* [gift], and *milhama* [battle].¹ The story comes to a climax a full 34 verses later, when Esau finally appears to Jacob: *And Esau ran towards him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept* (33:4).

The description seems innocent enough. However, the Masoretic text is transmitted not only with letters and words but also with numerous other indicators to convey more depth than the words alone would provide.² Among them are dots which invariably appear over letters and words in the text. In this sentence there is a dot over every letter of the word "kissed [*vayishakeihu*]." The Midrash (Gen. R. 78:9)³ explains that if the letters of a word are greater in number than the dots appearing over the word, one interprets the dots; conversely, if the dots are in greater abundance than the letters, one is to interpret the word. If the dots are equivalent in number to the letters, then they come to teach some novelty. Some commentators hold that they diminish the word, others that they add to the word.

Rashi brings the Sifri (Behaalotkha 69)⁴ which entertains two interpretations of the meaning of the "kiss" – one maintaining that the kiss was wholehearted, the other that it was not. The latter view⁵ holds that the dots come to diminish the word, and thus indicate that the kiss was not sincere. The former view is espoused by R. Shimon Bar Yohai who explains that there is an accepted principle that "Esau hates Jacob," and therefore it would be expected that his kiss would be insincere. However, the dots are meant to teach that

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there is something novel here, and must be that at this particular moment Esau was aroused with brotherly compassion and his kiss was sincere.⁶

The Midrash (Gen. R. 78:9) has R. Shimon b. Elazar taking essentially the same position as R. Shimon Bar Yohai, teaching that where the number of dots and letters are equivalent, the dots come to add to the text,⁷ and from this we learn that Esau had pity and kissed Jacob with all his heart.⁸ R. Yannai demurs, for if the word keeps its simple meaning of "kiss" (sincere or not), the dots then are effectively meaningless. He thus proposes that Esau wished to "bite" Jacob – the word "kiss [*vayishakeihu*]" and the word "bite [*vayishakheihu*]" differing in only one letter.

Ibn Ezra dismisses the explanations of the dots as being "child's play"⁹ and states in no uncertain terms that the plain meaning of the text is that Esau merely kissed Jacob. Apparently, Ibn Ezra was so convinced that the *pshat* of the word is that the kiss was just a kiss that he did not feel compelled in the least to explain the dots.

The plain words of the text state that Esau simply kissed Jacob and this, as Ibn Ezra noted, is certainly *pshat*. That being said, the dots, which are meant to impart some further meaning, must be explained. On a midrashic level, R. Yannai's words are most compelling, for the nuances of sincerity ascribed to the dots by the other *darshanim* could really be argued from the text itself.¹⁰ Thus the dots do not help to resolve this dispute one way or the other.

On the other hand, if they entirely alter the act, that is a novelty that could justify the dots. Note that many more words would have to be spent to explain that Esau, in his act of kissing, actually turned aggressive. Furthermore, the dots themselves serve as a kind of graphic imprint of the bite itself.

To gain full insight in to R. Yannai's position, it is instructive to analyze his complete statement, which does not end with his interpretation of the kiss.

R. Yannai said, . . . [the dots] teach that he didn't come to kiss him but rather to bite him, but Yaakov Avinu's neck turned to marble; and thus the teeth of that wicked one were blunted. Thus, when the text says "and they cried" – this one cried over his neck and this one cried over his teeth.

The first question that must be addressed is: Why would the midrash explain this event in such an extraordinary way for which there is no evidence in the actual text? The answer is that the midrash is not meant to teach the simple

meaning of the text, but rather is addressing a deeper issue. It is means to teach an extra-textual value based on the dots, which are an inherently non-textual element.

The dots are what provided R. Yannai the latitude to explain that Esau was intent on biting Jacob. Now, given that the text which follows does not have them wrestling on the ground but parting on amicable terms,¹¹ it is safe to assume that no damage was done by this bite. R. Yannai must then explain what happened to thwart Esau's aggressive impulse. He explains that Jacob was miraculously fortified and consequently Esau was miraculously incapacitated. The message is that it would take nothing short of a miracle to save Jacob from an attack by Esau. And thus writes the Ramban (Vayishlach, Introduction): "This section was written in order to inform us that the Holy One, blessed be He, delivered His servant, and He redeemed him from the hand of him that is stronger than he, and He sent an angel and saved him"

Perhaps, then, this is the intent of the midrash; for midrashic texts which are clearly outside of the natural order and without textual support provoke the reader into apprehending their deeper intent that teaches a timeless lesson, something fundamental about man and his world. The rabbis teach, "*maaseh avot siman l'banim*"¹² [the acts of the fathers are a sign for the children]" meaning that acts and events relating to the forefathers of the nation serve as a paradigm for their descendants. Indeed, Ramban (Gen. 32:9) quotes Genesis Rabbah (76:3) and states: "The rabbis saw in this narrative a hint to future generations."¹³

In this case, a lesson is being taught about the dynamic between Esau, "*ish tzayid* [hunter]" versus Jacob, "*ish ohalim* [man of the tents]." In an earlier verse, Isaac says: '*The voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau*' (27:22). The midrash (Gen. R. 65:20) teaches the idea that Esau's strength is in his physical prowess, whereas the power of Jacob is in his voice used for prayer and the service of God. Though this statement contrasts the two characters on an individual basis, R. Yannai elaborates on the interaction between them. As stated before, his point is: In any frontal confrontation between Esau and Jacob, it will take a miracle to save Jacob.

Furthermore, though we have explained why a miracle in general was employed to explain the encounter, a thorough analysis of the midrash demands

that the character of the miracle be addressed. The first question demanding attention is: Why was the miracle specifically that Jacob's neck was hardened? Perhaps this is an allusion to Jacob's descendants, who are later repeatedly referred to as *a stiff-necked people*.¹⁴ S.R. Hirsch explains that God chose the Jewish people specifically because of this trait.¹⁵ He explains that being obstinate and "stiff-necked" means not bending to external influences – an essential trait for a people who are to carry a message of morality to a not-so-accepting world.¹⁶

And, finally, there is the detail of Esau's teeth being blunted. Yad Moshe on the midrash explains that the last three letters of the word "*vayishakeihu*" spell "blunted [*kahu*]." Upon hearing the term "blunted teeth" one is immediately reminded of the Wicked Son in the Haggadah. Indeed, the midrash itself here states: "And the teeth of the wicked one were blunted." Perhaps the midrash is again¹⁷ telling us that Esau, the "wicked son" in the flesh, will have his teeth blunted when he attacks Jacob's mission – so long, of course, as Jacob remains stiff-necked in fulfilling it.

In attempting to understand R. Yannai's explanation, it would be remiss not to mention the historical context in which he made his comments. He himself applied this narrative to his dealings with the Romans, as the midrash (Gen. 78:18) relates:

Before embarking on a journey to the Roman ruler, R. Yannai would review this section of the Torah and he would not take Romans with him. One time he did not review this section and he took Romans with him, and he had not yet reached Acco when he was compelled to sell his cloak for bribery money.

Ramban (on Gen. 33:15) explains that "R. Yannai would not accept the company of Romans as an escort for they draw no man near to them other than for their own interest and take liberties with people's belongings." Thus he was always wary that the kiss was really a thinly veiled bite.

In conclusion, the line between *pshat* and *derash* is sometimes broad, sometimes fine, and sometimes merely dotted, but there can be no question that both are indispensable elements necessary for transmitting the values which make up our complete tradition.

NOTES

1. *Tanhuma* (Buber) Vayishlach 6. Rashi (Gen. 32:9), Ramban (Gen. 32:9).
2. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 16, entry: Masorah; esp. 1.2.2.1. Extraordinary Points (p. 1407).
3. Also Genesis Rabbah (48:15).
4. Also Yalkut Shimoni (Behaalotcha 722).
5. Maskil Ledavid attributes this opinion to R. Shimon ben Elazar, though this is not evident in the Sifri text.
6. Similarly Radak (Gen. 33:4).
7. This explanation, that "the dots are coming to add to the text" is an emendation provided by the Etz Yaakov (on Genesis Rabbah 78:9).
8. Etz Yaakov explains that the dots effectively doubled the word, thus making the intent of the text to imply that Esau really kissed him with all his heart.
9. R. Asher Viezer, *Torat Hayim*, Genesis 33:4, n. 26.
10. In analyzing the text some have seen support for insincerity and others found support for sincerity. For example, Benno Jacob (in Nehama Leibovitz [Genesis, p. 376-7]) compares all the texts which entail similar encounters between kinfolk and finds that Esau's unrestrained expression of emotion marks his motivations suspect. In contradistinction, Ramban (Gen. 32:8) writes that initially Esau "kept his wrath in his heart However, in the end, when he saw the great honor that Jacob bestowed him and how he prostrated himself before him . . . his mercy was aroused."
11. Though no blood is shed, Jacob does refuse to be escorted by Esau (Gen. 33:13-15).
12. *Tanhuma*, Lech Lecha, 9. Ramban (Gen. 12:6). Baba Kamma 97a.
13. Also Ramban (Vayishlach, Intro.): "There is yet in this section a hint for future generations, for everything that happened to our father with his brother Esau will constantly occur to us with Esau's children."
14. I wish to express my thanks to my son Asaf Yehuda Navon (2nd grade Orot Etzion school) for this novel interpretation.
15. S.R. Hirsch (Exodus, p. 613-4) explains that the Jewish peoples' being stiff-necked and obstinate, not only was known to God but, in fact, He specifically chose the Jewish people for having this trait.
16. S.R. Hirsch (Exodus, p. 651) explains that once God could educate the most obdurate of nations to follow his ways, He would have won them over forever as His people. He (Exodus, p.542) explains that though the character trait of obstinacy can be quite negative, it also provides its bearer with "the firmness of character which keeps itself in opposition to lies, delusions, and false opinions."
17. As it did explicitly in Genesis Rabbah (65:20).