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ESAU'S FACE AND THE FACE OF GOD

At the heart of this thesis is one provocative line in the biblical story of the reunion between the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. Jacob says to Esau, the classical *rasha*, in Genesis 33:10, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of *Elohim*." The thesis consists of five chapters. The first delves into the context and issues of the verse. The next three describe and analyze nearly sixty Jewish interpretations on it, and the last brings into the picture the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and his theory that God is active in the face of the other as the source of our obligations to one another.

The commentators that I have brought to this thesis include the authors of the early *midrashim*, Rabbinic era personalities such as Rashi and Ramban, medieval bible interpreters, kabalistic and Hasidic mystics, and contemporary Jewish thinkers. The interpretations are categorized as to how the individual commentator defined the word *Elohim*; whether they say Jacob meant a human being, an angel, or God.

Based on the similarity of Jacob's words to Levinas, I set out to learn how many of the various commentators considered the exegetic possibility that Jacob's comment was ethical in nature. My goals were to present the commentaries and the results of my analysis, and to ultimately attempt an understanding of the verse through the lenses of Levinasian philosophy.

Despite the obvious potential for affinity between *pasuk* and philosopher, Levinas himself never wrote about this story. This thesis brings them together through an Levinas-approved method: allowing layers of interpretation to lead to an ethical hermeneutic. It is my hope that a Levinasian reading of the verse will allow the descendents of Jacob to 'see God' in the descendants of Esau as well.

ESAU'S FACE AND THE FACE OF GOD

AN ANALYTIC SURVEY OF JEWISH COMMENTARY ON GENESIS 33:10 TOWARD THE ETHICAL HERMENEUTIC OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

By Randy Fleisher

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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Advisor: Dr. Eugene Borowitz

To Amy and Zoey Sky
You are my פני אור
My faces of light
Everything is enhanced
With you.

"To see a face is to witness a theophany."
-James Ponet-

"As face to a face in water, so is the heart of a person to another person."
-Proverbs 27:17-

"One who knows that there lurks in the world a prophet who can stand and face him-as Moses stood before Pharaoh or Nathan before David-
cannot become a dictator
-James Ponet-

"The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. Welcoming the face of the other is the beginning of moral consciousness and there is no moral life without utopianism.
-Emmanuel Levinas-

"When senseless hatred reigns on earth and people hide their faces from one another, then heaven is forced to hide its face. But when love comes to rule the earth and people reveal their faces to one another, then the splendor of God will be revealed."
-Martin Buber-

"For every human face is stamped with God's great name which manifests itself as divine light which surrounds your face. Surely it is difficult to sin when you see this in the face of your neighbor. For that which is formed should reflect that which formed it."
-From the teachings of Naftali Tsvi Horowitz of Ropczyce-

May God bless you and keep you
May God's face grace you with light
May God face you and grant you *shalom*
-Numbers 6:22-27: 'The Blessing of the Face'-

"Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."
-Jacob to Esau: Genesis 33:10-

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have heard often during my years at HUC about the concept of study as a form of prayer. While I have no problems with social action, deeds of kindness, camping in the woods and meditation defined as prayer; study, while often enriching and gratifying, never struck me as very prayerful. Until now. The research and writing of this thesis, living with a project for so long, soaking myself in its details; all of this has left me humbled, inspired and grateful-just how I hope to feel when I pray! And just as prayer is supposed to awaken the heart so it can be attentive to others, the completion of this thesis has left me with a desire to give *kavod* to all those people who have been part of the process.

I read Dr. Eugene Borowitz's clear and convincing book *Liberal Judaism* in preparation for my admissions interview at HUC. Spending my final year at the College with him as my thesis advisor is symbolic of the sense of wholeness I feel concerning my entire journey these last five years. I thank him first of all for believing in me and working with me to find a way to incorporate the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas into this thesis. Dr. Borowitz has been a wonderful guide; open, sharp, challenging, caring and supportive. It has truly been an honor to have worked closely with him.

Dr. Borowitz brought his four thesis students together in a wonderful first semester class in which we discussed our successes and frustrations, took turns sharing with one another an ever expanding expertise in our given topic, and graciously accepted Dr. Borowitz's insights and advice. Thanks then are also due to Lev Herrnson, Randy Sheinberg, and David Widzer, not only for their input

into my work, but for allowing me to have a glimpse into theirs. Hopefully other advisors will follow this model of making a community out of what can be a lonely endeavor.

I began studying rabbinic texts with Henry Resnick during the summer of 1998. Henry's patience, encouragement and breadth of knowledge have been instrumental in enabling me to grow tremendously in my reading and comprehension of Talmud, commentaries and *hasidut*. Throughout this year, I read these thesis texts with Henry; we studied them, debated over them, applauded and challenged them until my head swam. Always one to go above and beyond for a friend, Henry went out of his way to hunt down interesting commentaries for me. His help has been invaluable, and I think of him and thank him every time I read confidently in class, translate a Hebrew-only text that fits right into a sermon, and teach challenging adult education courses.

The source of my strength, my partner in love and in friendship is my wife Amy. She has managed these past months to be a dynamic and humane corporate executive, take wonderful care of our daughter Zoey, reach out to her friends...*and* still give me the time and space to sit in front of this computer to write. The last weeks were a big push, and as much as I have been passionate about this project, it will do my soul good to have the time back to walk, share, laugh, and enjoy life with her and Zoey. Everything is better when we are together.

My mother, Linda Randall and father, Ronald Fleisher have supported me, financially and emotionally, during this quixotic return to school. I hope they

recognize in these pages the values and commitment to the ethical life that they helped to spark in me. I always feel their unconditional love.

The congregants at Temple Beth Shalom in Hickory, North Carolina have been most indulgent in letting me test out my ideas with them, and in tolerating my thesis-obsessed visit with them last month. They have taught me so many lessons in 'practical rabbinics' and there will always be a place in my heart for all of them.

Other wonderful teachers whose influence is woven throughout these pages include, Rabbi Susan Talve, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, the unforgettable kids I worked with during my years at Camp Thunderbird and Nature's Classroom, Rabbi Michael Lerner, the guests and volunteers at the HUC Soup Kitchen, Abbie Hoffman, Dr. Carol Ochs, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Bob Dylan, Peter Himmelman, Dan Bern, Lenny Bruce, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, Rabbi Daniel Friedman, Robert Rubovits and Julie Gordon, Norman and Lois Gordon, and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

In the deepest sense, I have also been inspired and informed by 'others' everywhere, friends, family and strangers; people telling sacred stories, leading dignified lives, and adding their own healing touches of justice and compassion to our wounded but wonderful world.

Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The Hasidim teach that there is a verse in the Torah that speaks directly to each person; directly to you. Not a book, or even one story; a verse, one sentence. And I didn't even receive mine whole. I am not sure why, but when the Torah spoke to me directly, I heard only one phrase from a verse.

It was Shabbat in December 1998, and I was at B'nai Jeshurun's spirited morning service. The Torah portion was *Vayishlach*, and there was a guest speaker from Israel giving a *d'var Torah*. He was relating the Arab-Israeli conflict to the story of the biblical twins Esau and Jacob. I was reading the text silently as he taught, but when he came to what soon was to become "my phrase," I found myself whispering the words even as I heard him utter them. Jacob said to Esau, "I have seen your face, and it is like seeing the face of God." (Genesis 33:10)

I shot up straight in my seat; my heart raced. I spent the rest of the service studying the *pasuk*, staring intensely at the page like a *yeshivah bokher*. The first association I made was obvious. It was the teaching from the creation story that every person is made in the image of God. That itself is a monumental sentiment, but Jacob's comment seemed to concretize and personalize that powerful idea in such a precise and direct way. I kept repeating one name: Emmanuel Levinas.

Although my knowledge of him at the time was elementary, I had great interest in Emmanuel Levinas' ideas. Levinas is the French-Jewish philosopher who built his reputation writing about the 'face of the other.' He believed that

through full recognition of the face, we come to realize that the other person is a separate and whole entity, completely separated from our own existence. It is then, according to Levinas, that we come to understand our ethical obligations toward other people. In this way, the face of the other is where we find God, the source of the commandments. 'I have seen your face, and it is like seeing the face of God.' The connection between Levinas' theory and Jacob's words was so clear to me that I was surprised not to hear the philosopher's name from the *bimah*.

Admittedly, Levinas had been on my mind. I had been speaking to Doctor Eugene Borowitz, trying to figure out a way to write about Levinas as part of my Rabbinic thesis. HUC in New York requires that the thesis is based on a considerable amount of Hebrew text, and Levinas wrote mostly in French, a significant impediment. We had begun exploring alternative topics.

But, 'my phrase' changed all that. I started to read the classic Jewish commentators to see how they approached the verse. Each interpretation was different from the other, which was exciting; but not one of them came close to articulating my initial 'made in God's image' response to the verse. At first this was disappointing. The biggest problem seemed to be that the recipient of Jacob's words was Esau. The fact that Esau is a vilified character in Jewish tradition had occurred to me, but I naively underestimated how closely his reputation would follow him. To suggest that Esau deserved any praise at all was dubious, praising him in the name of God appeared to be unthinkable.

As I looked at more obscure interpretations, the diversity of opinion as to what Jacob actually did mean when he made his comment to Esau was striking. To be sure, as Doctor Borowitz says, when it comes to *perush*, "there is merit, in general, to finding yet another original explanation," but 'my phrase' seemed to have hit a particular nerve. The thesis began to take shape. The translation and analysis of a variety of biblical commentaries on the verse would be the 'Hebrew piece'; through that research, I would then attempt to discover if any commentaries actually existed that even hinted at a Levinas-like understanding of the phrase. A Levinasian interpretation would conclude the paper.

It happens sometimes that one follows one's intuition and is rewarded for doing so. From that morning in *shul*, I knew in my gut that connecting Levinas to the story of Jacob and Esau would bear fruit. At that time, however, I had no idea that Levinas himself wrote that the only way to uncover ethical messages of biblical texts is to first learn their context and meaning as fleshed out by the unbroken chain of commentaries. Nor did I realize how drawn into the rich, fascinating world of Torah commentary I would be, regardless of whether it ultimately led me to Levinas or not. I hadn't yet discovered that Jacob and Esau were so ingrained as symbols and archetypes that trying to understand them in a different way had powerful religious and political implications. I certainly had no way of knowing that this study would somehow encompass so many of the themes that I have grappled with in rabbinical school: Jewish attitudes towards non-Jews, the relationship between theism and humanism, compassion for one

another, universalism, and reconciling the critical, literary and theological ways of reading the Torah.

The final format of this thesis has evolved very much as I had imagined it from the beginning. The introductory first chapter provides background information on the various issues involving Jacob and Esau and the particular verse. Chapters Two, Three and Four present and explain the various interpretations, and Chapter Five looks at the commentaries and the verse from the perspective of Levinas and his philosophy.

I hope that you, the reader, are able to gain knowledge from this presentation, sense my enthusiasm for this project, and be inspired to listen for the verse that calls directly to you.

CHAPTER 1

GENESIS 33:10-THE VERSE AND IT'S PROBLEMATIC

THE VERSE IN CONTEXT

Jacob's provocative words to Esau: "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God," the words that are the topic of this thesis, come near the end of the biblical story of the twin brothers. That story begins, of course, with the unforgettable image of two children, yet to be born, struggling with one another in their mother's womb. Rebecca asked God about the tumult inside of her, and God responded cryptically: "Two nations are in your body, two tribes from your belly shall be divided; tribe shall be mightier than tribe, elder shall be servant to younger (Genesis 25:23)!"[1]

The twins were born, one red and hairy named Esau (עשו). The other, born second, but hanging on to the heel of his brother, was named Jacob (יעקב) from the Hebrew word for 'heel.' As young men, Esau is described as a skillful hunter and outdoorsman, while Jacob is said to have been 'plain,' a person who was content to stay at home. Their father, the Patriarch Isaac, "grew to love Esau, for (he brought) hunted-game for his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob (25:28)."

Once, when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, tired and hungry. When he asked Jacob for some of the stew, Jacob replied, "Sell me

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[1] All translations in this section are by Everett Fox in *the Five Books of Moses*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 115-160.

your firstborn rights here and now." Preferential social status was accorded to the firstborn son; the biblical explanation of this practice was that the firstborn was considered the exclusive possession of God.[2] In this particular situation, since Isaac had inherited God's blessing from Abraham[3], the son with the birthright would in effect become the chosen son of the chosen family. Esau stated again that he was starving: "Here, I am on my way to dying, so what good to me is a firstborn-right (25:32)?" Jacob had Esau swear over to him the right, and then fed his brother the red stew. The narrator concludes this episode by stating, "Thus did Esau despise the firstborn-right."

Esau had 'despised' and sold the birthright (though nothing in the narrative suggests that Isaac knew of this episode) and had bitterly disappointed his parents by marrying two Hittite women. Even so, the blind and elderly Isaac still called for Esau, his 'favored one,' when it came time to invoke blessings, the promise of a bright future, unto one of his sons: "Go out in the field and hunt me down some hunted-game, and make me a delicacy, such as I love; and bring it to me, and I will eat it, that I may give you my blessing before I die (27:3-4)." Rebecca, having overheard these words, told Jacob that he should present Isaac with a meal that she would prepare so that Jacob would receive his father's blessings instead of Esau.

Jacob was cautious at first saying: "Here, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man, perhaps my father will feel me-then I will be like a

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[2] Reuben Ahroni, "Why did Esau Spurn the Birthright?" *Judaism* 29 (1980): 323.
[3] "Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him." (Genesis 18:18)

trickster in his eyes, and I will bring a curse and not a blessing on myself (27:11-12)!" Rebecca took any possible curse unto herself, and then mother and son went ahead with the plan. Rebecca dressed Jacob with goatskins so that he would feel and smell like Esau, the man of the field. When Jacob went to his father with the food, Isaac asked for Jacob's identity two times, and in both instances, Jacob led his father to believe that he was Esau. The disguise convinced Isaac, and so he blessed Jacob with words he had presumably reserved for Esau:

> So may God give you from the dew of the heavens, from the fat of the earth, (along with) much grain and new-wine! May peoples serve you, may tribes bow down to you; be master to your brothers, may your brother's sons bow down to you! Those who damn you, damned! Those who bless you, blessed (27:28-29)!

Esau himself then returned from his hunting to present his meal to Isaac and receive his blessing. Esau answered his father's identity question truthfully: "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau (27:32)." Jacob trembled greatly at this discovery, but told Esau that the blessing could not be revoked; it had to remain Jacob's: "Your brother came with deceit and took away your blessing (27:35)." Esau sobbed bitter moans and cries, and re-defined Jacob's name so that it would mean 'supplanter' for his brother had finally gotten what he had been grabbing for since birth. Isaac did give another blessing to Esau, one that promised prosperity, but seemed in many ways to be the opposite of Jacob's:[4]

> Behold, from the fat of the earth must be your dwelling place, from the dew of the heavens above. You will live by your sword, you will serve your brother. But it will be that

[4] Esau is thus relegated to the 'collateral line' of biblical ancestors. Like Ishmael and Lot before him, his side of the family is cut off from the 'patriarchal' line.

> when you brandish it, you will tear the yoke from his neck (27:39-40).

Esau swore in his heart to kill Jacob once Isaac had died. Rebecca, sensing danger for Jacob, urged him to take refuge away from Canaan with her brother Laban. She convinced Isaac to let Jacob go so that he would find a wife from among Laban's daughters, instead of repeating Esau's mistake of choosing a Canaanite woman. Before he went, Isaac again blessed Jacob, this time asking God specifically to give to Jacob the blessings of Abraham, including the eventual inheritance of the land he was about to leave. In the meantime Esau, hoping to be 'the first' once again by marrying an acceptable woman before Jacob could, himself took a wife from the family (his Uncle Ishmael's daughter).

At Laban's, Jacob fell in love, was deceived in a manner reminiscent of his own trickery (Jacob's sight obscured, he was given the firstborn to marry when he wanted the younger daughter), had many children, grew very rich, and experienced the presence of God. When, after twenty years, he headed back to Canaan, the very first matter on his mind was an imminent encounter with Esau who was living in Seir, a territory he would have to pass through on his way home.

Jacob, having found out through his messengers that Esau was on his way with four hundred men to meet him, pleaded with God: "Pray save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau! For I am in fear of him, lest he come and strike me down, mothers and children alike (32:12)!" Jacob then gave instructions to his servants; they were to take the lead and when they and Esau

met, they were to call Esau 'my Lord,' refer to Jacob as Esau's servant, and offer Esau hundreds of farm animals as a gift.

Before a reunion occurred, Jacob had a meeting of a different sort. A mysterious man came while Jacob was alone and engaged him in a wrestling match, one that lasted all night. When it was over, Jacob was injured, but had done well enough that the opponent had to ask to be released. Jacob then identified the stranger as God (אלהים), and received a second name (as Esau had years before); ישראל-Israel, meaning God-fighter.

The next day, Jacob strategically positioned his various children and their mothers (apparently in order of preference-Rachel and Joseph were furthest from the scene of potential violence). Yet, now Jacob himself, not the servants, was in the lead, ready to meet his twin brother. When they were face-to-face, Jacob bowed to him seven times. Then, "Esau ran to meet him, he embraced him, flung himself upon his neck, and kissed him. And they wept (33:4)." Jacob then offered Esau all the animals that he had brought as a gift, but Esau refused, signifying that he too had become prosperous: "I have plenty, brother, let what is yours remain yours (33:9)."

It is at this point that Jacob refers to both Esau's face and the face of God in the phrase which is part of Genesis 33:10:

אל נא אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך ולקחת מנחתי מידי **כי על כן ראתי פניך כראת פני אלהים** ותרצני

(No, I pray! Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes, then take this gift from my hand. **For I have, after all, seen your face as one sees the face of God**, and you have been gracious to me.)

Esau accepted the gifts, and also encouraged Jacob to travel on with him. Jacob told his brother he would meet up with him in Seir, but he never did, making his own home in a place called Shekhem. The brothers are reported to have had one final meeting, at the burial of their father Isaac.

GRAMMATICAL ISSUES

A close reading of the *pasuk* reveals a few grammatical issues that deserve to be highlighted. The first is a matter of vocabulary. In a sentence that is not at all centered on the sacrificial system, there are a number of words and phrases that are associated with sacrificial offerings to God. Although it is not used in reference to sacrifice directly, the phrase מעצתי חן בעיניך-'If I have found favor in your eyes'-certainly is a term of deference. Moses uses it in Exodus 33:13 before asking God for further instructions. מנחה, used here to refer to Jacob's gift, is regularly defined as an (usually bloodless) offering to God. לראות פני אלהים-literally, to see the face of God, is a technical term for bringing offerings to the Temple for sacrifice to God (Exodus 23:15, Psalm 42:3, Isaiah 1:12). Because of this fact, many, but surely not all, of the commentators cited in this paper understand Jacob's comparison to be connected somehow to the sacrificial system. Finally, the root רצה used in this sentence as ותרצני, is often used biblically to denote God's acceptance of an offering, as in Leviticus 1:3, and Isaiah 56:7.

Another issue also involves the word ותרצני. Although there are interpretations of this verse that proceed as if it is in the future tense ('be

gracious to me'), the use of the consecutive *vav* (denoted by the *patach* under the *vav* and the *dagesh* in the *taf*) in the Bible generally changes a verb from the future tense to the past tense. While Hebrew verbs in the Bible are not always tightly time-bound, most translations understand it to be a verb in the past tense rendering it, 'you have been gracious to me.'

THE PROBLEMATIC

It is the task of the biblical interpreter to ensure that the words in the text are meaningful to the reader. Sometimes, the job is easy; the plain meaning of the words make complete sense with little explanation. In other instances, there is great confusion; whatever meaning may have been intended, appears to be lost. The biblical commentator must identify those areas in the Bible that appear to be problematic, and then provide a rationale that will restore unity and clarity to the passage. In addition, they must try to create an interpretation that allows the passage to be relevant for their particular era and their intended audience. Jacob's statement to Esau contains three problematic areas that have engaged the interpretive efforts of many commentators over the years; efforts which have produced a wide variety of explanations. Those three main issues are: the fact that Jacob seems to compare the face of a human being to God's face; the fact that Esau, who is vilified by Jewish tradition, is the recipient of such a comparison; and the confusion over the exact definition in this context of the word אלהים-*Elohim*.

THE 'FACE OF GOD'

The Hebrew word for face, פנים-*panim*, always appears in the plural,

probably because the face is a combination of a number of individual features.[5] The face, arguably the most identifiable part of the human body, certainly is able to express the emotions, attitudes, and sentiments of a person. The root of פנים means 'turn,' perhaps because when we really want to know about a person, we must turn towards their face. Therefore, a number of descriptive idioms in Hebrew include the word פנים. When someone is angry, their 'face has fallen,' when you 'shine your face' upon somebody, you are treating them with kindness. If a person 'falls on their face' it is a sign of homage. In Deuteronomy 28:50, God warns the Israelites about a ruthless people who will have no respect. In Hebrew, this phrase reads: a גוי (people) עז פנים (who are 'strong-faced') אשר לא ישא פנים (who will not 'lift up their faces').

If it is true that human faces can express a tremendous range of emotions, then it must be true of God, in whose image humanity was created. However, the exact description of God's face is well beyond human comprehension; the biblical writers expressed this notion in Exodus 33:20: "You are not able to see My face, for no man shall see me, and live." However, the biblical writers did describe God's 'facial expressions,' using them as powerful metaphors to explain God's presence, actions and power. The face, being a particularly receptive part of the body, often signified in the Bible attention or regard for another.[6] Therefore, 'God's face' most often implied God's presence, in all its possible manifestations.

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[5] From the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Volume II, "Face." Page 743.
[6] Maimonides, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part I, Section 37.

When the Israelites visited the sanctuary to worship God, they might not have been able to 'see God's face,' but since this was their most direct contact with the Divine, there was no question to them that God's face was present. The worshiper was said לראות פני יהוה- to appear before God's face.'[7] In this same context, the Bible uses the term לפני יהוה-'before God', but literally, to the face of God, 225 times. God's entire presence was often defined solely by face as in, "My face will go with you." Therefore, even though ישר יחזו פנימו-'The upright will see God's face' is not to be taken literally, it surely means that the righteous will bask in God's presence.

In Leviticus 20, God 'sets His face' against various offenders; this action is enough to forever cut them off from the community. God's fallen face represents extreme anger, but when God's face is lifted upon someone, that individual had been truly favored. The psalmist pleads to God: אל תסתר פניך-'Do not hide Your face (Psalm 27:9)' which would signal God's abandonment; the lack of God's presence. But when God hides his face from a person's sin, it is the ultimate expression of mercy (Psalm 51:11). God's face is also able to 'shines its light' on somebody. This shining face, as in the Priestly Blessing, represents the blessing of all God's gifts.

Exodus 33:11 states that: "God spoke to Moses face-to-face, as a man speaks to a friend." It is likely, however, that either this too is meant

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[7] The word לראות with a different set of vowels, can be read 'to see' instead of 'to be seen before.' The *Dictionary of the Bible* (1965), s.v. "Face." theorizes that the Masorites, who introduced vowels into the Bible, removed from the text the possibility that people actually saw God's face when in the sanctuary.

metaphorically (perhaps also it was a passage written by a writer with a minority viewpoint), since the central prohibition against seeing God's face is spoken after Moses himself requests such an encounter. The term 'face-to-face may have been symbolic of a singular type of 'ultimate Divine presence'; as in the description of revelation in Deuteronomy 5:4 when, "Face-to-face the ETERNAL spoke to you (all of Israel) on the mountain out of the fire." Jacob himself claimed to have had this privilege (כי ראיתי אלהים פנים אל פנים 'For I have seen God face-to-face --- Genesis 32:31.') not too long before he made the reference about God's face in comparison to Esau. But, as the material in Chapter 3 suggests, many commentators believe that Jacob was speaking about seeing an angel rather than God.

The weight of biblical evidence therefore suggests that Jacob was not speaking about God's actual face during his reunion with Esau. Yet, it is also apparent from this survey that even the mere metaphors which invoke God's face are incredibly powerful. God's face is analogous to God's very presence. The various commentators on this passage certainly must struggle to provide a credible reason that Jacob would claim that there is similar power in the face of a human being.

JACOB AND ESAU AS ARCHETYPES

Whenever Jacob spoke to Esau, Jewish interpreters of the Bible are always cognizant of the fact that Jacob was not only talking to his brother Esau, but to a figure who has become the representative of nations, as well as a nationally recognized personality type. In addition, Jacob himself is a symbol

above and beyond a character in the Torah. This is obvious from the narrative itself. The oracle to Rebecca did not say, 'Two boys are in your womb,' but rather 'two nations are in your womb.'

Initially, the nation identified with Esau was אדום-Edom, a 'nickname' hinted at when he was born all red (אדמוני), and when he begged for the 'red stuff' that Jacob had been cooking. Genesis 36 is a lengthy chapter containing Esau's genealogy: "Now these are the generations of Esau, who is Edom (Genesis 36:1)...He is Esau, the father of Edom (Genesis 36:43)." As for Jacob, his second name is ישראל-Israel (because he 'wrestled with God-אל-and men'); he is the father of the sons for whom the original twelve tribes were named. The story of the two brothers, Jacob and Esau, is also a story about two nations, Israel and Edom.

What is known from the Bible about Edom is that, in accordance with its status as the 'older brother,' it established a kingdom before there were kings in Israel (Genesis 36:31). There are conflicting reports as to how the Edomites treated the Israelites after they escaped from Egypt. Numbers 20:14-21 reports that Edom was hostile:

> From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom. 'Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us, that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors...Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through your fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory.'

> But Edom answered him, 'You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.' 'We will keep to the beaten track,' the Israelite said to them, 'and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot-it is but a small matter.' But they replied, 'you shall not pass through!' And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed. So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.

Notice that Edom is referred to as Israel's brother, and that it threatens Israel with a sword, obviously reminiscent of Isaac's blessing to Esau: 'And by the sword you shall live.' Deuteronomy 2:1-8 records the same episode with an entirely different narrative:

> Then the ETERNAL said to me: 'Now turn north. And charge the people as follows: You will be passing through the territory of your kinsmen, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. Though they will be afraid of you, be very careful not to provoke them. For I will not give you their land so much as a foot can tread on; I have given the hill country of Seir as a possession to Esau...We then moved on, away from our brothers, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir.

In this version, the kingdom of Edom is not mentioned. Instead, the text speaks about 'Seir,' the place that the Torah says that Esau settled in after parting ways with Jacob. However, this is reconciled by biblical scholars such as Diccou who theorize that at some point in the 7th century, the original Edomite kingdom spread west to Seir, which was on the southern border of the land that later became the nation of Judah.[8] As in the Numbers passage, the country is considered to be Israel's brother, and in this case Esau is named specifically as its ancestor. Most significantly, in describing what appeared to be a hostile incident in the Book of Numbers, here the Torah says that the Israelites passed

through Edomite territory in peace. Furthermore, later on in Deuteronomy (23:8), God commands the Israelite that, "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother...Children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of the Eternal in the third generation".

The books of Samuel and the Kings describe a rocky relationship between Israel (Judah and Israel combined) and Edom. In Samuel 8:13, Edom is recorded as being subjugated to Israel; thus the younger nation seemed indeed to be the 'master' over the elder ("All the Edomites became vassals of King David."), just as Isaac had predicted when he blessed the twins. Edom attempted rebellion against this relationship (I Kings 11:14), but then appeared to be Judah's helpful ally in II Kings 3:9. Finally, in II Kings 20-22, Edom established its full independence from Judah (by this time the Northern Kingdom is gone). This too seemed to give truth to Isaac's blessing, as he had told Esau, 'But when you grow restive, you shall break the yoke from his neck.' The prophet Amos was most likely talking about this specific incident when he raged:

> For three transgressions of Edom...Because he pursued his **brother** with the **sword** and repressed all pity, because his anger raged unceasing and his fury stormed unchecked...(1:11)

Most biblical scholars believe that this identification of Esau with Edom (and therefore the notion that Edom is some kind of 'brother nation' to Israel) is unlikely to have been an original element in the Jacob-Esau stories.[9] Rather, the

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[8] Bert Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 181.
[9] John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 177. There are many places in the text that point scholars to this belief. For example, Esau's home is transferred, in later chapters, from Canaan to Seir, the country of the Edomites. Also, Genesis 36 informs the reader not once, but repeatedly, that Esau is really Edom. As Sheldon Blank points out in "Studies in Post-Exilic Universalism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 11 (1936), 176.If the

connection (Esau as a symbol for the Edomite nation) is recognized as a secondary, nationalizing addition to the original cultural myth about the struggle between the shepherd and the hunter. Scholars generally believe that this 'imposition' occurred sometime during David's reign:

> For it was not until David's conquest of Edom that it becomes important to Judah and Israel, and it was not until Edom became a subject nation that its identification with Esau, traditionally subject to Jacob, became conceivable or likely. And further, the identification was unlikely before the figure of Jacob had become identical with (the nation) Israel. The identification of Jacob with Israel (the entire nation was not named Israel until David added the northern tribes to his Judean kingdom) and the inheritance of his twelve sons presuppose the existence of Israel as a political and geographic entity, just as the promise to Abraham presupposes the existence of the political boundaries of the Davidic kingdom.[10]

According to this line of thinking, the Edomites became neighbors with Judah after moving into the land known as Seir. Besides being close geographically, it is theorized that the two nations were also related in terms of their religious outlook. For all the venom later directed at Edom by the Hebrew prophets, the Edomite god, Qos is never mentioned at all (hence, he is never derogated) in the Hebrew Bible. Because of this, it is sometimes assumed that Qos did not differ very much from Israel's Yahweh, which made it difficult for the Israelites to reject him.[11] Thus, the people of Israel and the people of Edom were

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identification is as ancient and traditional as has been supposed, this would appear supererogatory." An even more critical view is that the entire story of Jacob and Esau was composed for the purposes of creating a mythology around the relationship between Israel and Edom. The overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Esau by the narrator then would reflect the general feelings of Israelites for Edomites.

[10] John R. Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4 (1977): 2.

[11] Dicou, *Brother and Antagonist*, 176. The term 'co-religionist' is actually used here to describe Israel and Edom.

already connected when the relationship became a political arrangement advantageous to Israel. (J. R. Bartlett in "The Brotherhood of Edom" points out that the root for 'brother' is the technical Akkadian term for 'treaty-partner'[12]) It was, therefore, an easy step to transform Esau, Jacob's easily outwitted hunter brother from Seir, in the national imagination as the ancestor of the Edomites.[13] The nation of Edom was from that point on known as a brother; it became synonymous with Esau, brother of Jacob, grandson of Abraham. The story of the brothers became a master story for the Israelite situation; the older, more fierce and hostile brother Esau/Edom was subdued by the younger but superior brother Jacob/Israel.

This critical perspective points to a few possible explanations for the existence of the two contradictory reports-one in Numbers and the other in Deuteronomy-of Israel's encounter with Edom after leaving Egypt. Some say that each version was written in a way that reflected two very different periods in the relationship between Israel and Edom. Both passages internalized the message that Israel and Edom are brothers connected to the patriarchs Jacob and Esau. However, what makes sense in one era is incomprehensible in another. Of course, Edom would be depicted as giving safe passage when relations between the nations were friendly; the hostile Numbers passage then

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[12] Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom," 14.

[13] Ibid, 18. By the middle of David's reign, the conquest of Edom and the Judean understanding of the Jacob-Israel traditions had produced a situation in which people could come to think of Esau as the patriarchal ancestor of Edom. And further, by making this identification, David's conquest of Edom could be viewed as the fulfillment of the oracle given to Rebecca and the transference of the firstborn's blessing from Esau to Jacob, and so enhanced the fame of the royal house."

must have been written during a period in which Edom waged war against Israel.[14]

Alternatively, it has been posited that the descriptions in Numbers and Deuteronomy could be contemporaneous, reflective of two different Israelite attitudes towards the Edomites. "Numbers reflects an attitude of political hostility towards Edom. Deuteronomy, on the other hand, suggests a more positive approach to Edom than do other contemporaries, based on the Deuteronomonistic view that other nations deserved their God-given inheritance too."[15] ("To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir as his possession, while Jacob and his children went down to Egypt."-Joshua 24:4) Those who held to this point of view knew that many Israelites disliked Edom; the Deuteronomy passage basically asks that they 'not abominate the Edomites (any more) because (after all), he is your brother.' This attitude seeks to play down the idea that Edom acted badly, and urges Israel to adopt a 'brotherly' attitude towards Edom that is more like Jacob's reunion with Esau than like the depiction of their younger years.

If there ever was a time when relations between the two nations were cordial; or if there was in fact a period in which there was an Israelite faction sympathetic to Edom and their right to independence, by the time of the Babylonian exile and its aftermath, it had apparently disappeared from the

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[14] Dicou, *Brother and Antagonist,* 170. It is also possible to apply this thinking to the story of Jacob and Esau itself; Esau is portrayed in a relatively positive light (Esau takes a wife from the family in order to please his parents; Esau reconciles with Jacob; even the fact that Chapter 36 is a long genealogy showing that kings and chiefs are descendants of Esau) when thee is an era of good relations between Israel and Edom.

[15] Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites,* 93.

common memory. The depiction of Edom went from bad to worse; its connection to Esau was regularly invoked only for the purpose of denigration. Surely, the national understanding of Esau's character was adversely affected by Edom's perceived role in the tragedy; at the same time Edom's role may have been exaggerated in light of its connection to Esau and his negative qualities as described in Genesis. Lamentations 4:21-22 insinuates that Edom did nothing while Jerusalem was invaded except celebrate; for this alone, they are to be punished:

> Rejoice and exult, Fair Edom...You shall get drunk and expose your nakedness. Your iniquity, Fair Zion, is expiated; He will exile you no longer. Your iniquity, Fair Edom, He will note; He will uncover your sins.

Jeremiah is even harsher regarding the consequences of Edom's passivity:

> Concerning Edom...I am bringing Esau's doom upon him, the time when I deal with him...But it is I who bared Esau, have exposed his place of concealment; he cannot hide. His offspring is ravaged. His kin and his neighbors-he is no more...You shall not go unpunished...For I will make you least among nations, most despised among men...And Edom shall be a cause of appallment; whoever passes by will be appalled and will hiss at all its wounds...No man shall live there, no human shall sojourn there...Hear, then, the plan which the ETERNAL has devised against Edom...(7-20)

Ezekiel expresses the opinion that the Edomites committed a further crime by moving into Judean territory after much of the Jewish citizenry was forced into exile. For this infraction, Ezekiel promises the destruction of Edom:

> The word of the Eternal came to me: O mortal, set your face against Mount Seir...say to it: I am going to deal with you, Mount Seir. I will stretch out My hand against you and

> make you an utter waste. I will turn your towns into ruins, and you shall be a desolation...Because you harbored an **ancient hatred and handed the people of Israel over to the sword** in their time of calamity...I will doom you with blood...Because you thought, 'The two nations and the two lands (Israel and Edom) shall be mine and we shall possess them[16]...As you rejoiced when the heritage of the House of Israel was laid waste, so will I treat you: the hill country of Seir and the whole of Edom, all of it, shall be laid waste.

In an apparent example of prophetic hyperbole, the prophet Obadiah devotes his entire prophecy to a viscous condemnation of Edom and Esau. In these pages, Edom has gone from a nation that was considered negligent for its passivity and lack of concern for Israel's fate to a people who actively committed crimes that were on par with Israel's fiercest and biggest enemies. Obadiah prophecies that Israel will again be dominant over Edom and his territory. (And here there are no 'Deuteronomistic voices' present advocating an 'each to their own country' position):

> Thus said my ETERNAL God concerning Edom: I will make you least among nations, you shall be most despised...I will make the wise vanish from Edom, understanding from Esau's mount...And not a man on Esau's mount shall survive the slaughter...**For the outrage to your brother Jacob**, disgrace shall engulf you...On that day when you stood aloof...When foreigners entered his gates...**You were as one of them**...How could you enter the gate of My people on its day of disaster, and lay hands on its wealth...**The House of Jacob shall be fire...and the House of Esau shall be straw.**(1-18)

It is clear from these passages that Edom and Esau are inexorably tied to one another, and that both have become despised. Because of Edom's

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[16] cf. verse 5: I have indeed spoken in My blazing wrath...against all of Edom which, with wholehearted glee and with contempt, have made My land a possession for themselves for pasture and for prey."

behavior, Esau's brotherhood with Jacob carries only negative implications. Malachi 1:2 serves to sum up this attitude in the starkest of terms: "Esau is Jacob's brother, yet I have accepted Jacob and rejected Esau...Edom shall be known as the region of wickedness, the people damned forever of the ETERNAL."

The increasing harshness with which these prophetic texts treat Edom points to the gradual transformation of one nation (Edom) into the representative of all the nations that opposed Israel; the stereotypical enemy.[17] For example, this small, remote neighbor at first seemed to play, at most, a hostile bystander role in the destruction of Jerusalem. Later texts, however, seem to associate Edom with Babylon itself as Obadiah said, "You were as one of them." Various scholars agree that there existed a 'Damn-Esau Theology,' a liturgical-like and relentless excoriation of Edom, making it a symbol for enemy nations in general.[18]

Here too, the story of Jacob and Esau was helpful in reinforcing this message because Esau himself seems to represent how the Israelites viewed other nations in general. Though Esau (the nations) was Jacob's (Israel's) brother, he turned away from God's mission, leaving God's blessing to Jacob. Thus it was necessary for him to live apart from Jacob. Esau was antagonistic towards Jacob, and forced him into exile temporarily. Esau may have been physically stronger, but Jacob, using wisdom and spirit, ultimately survived and

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[17] Dicou, *Brother and Antagonist*, 126.

[18] Ibid, 188. Cresson, Stinespring are two who posit this theory. One school of thought is that the fact that because Edom was looked at as a 'brother nation,' its hostility angered Israel more because it was supposed to act like a brother but did not.

returned to have an encounter with him in which he ended up living in the promised land.

When the Judeans returned home from exile, they found part of their former land occupied by other nations, including the Edomites.[19] The idea of the destruction and reconquest of Edom was, in the prophets, a parable for the destruction of the nations as a whole (no longer, as in the Jacob-Esau stories, is there a notion of a peaceful meeting that ends with an understanding that each brother would live in his own country), an event which would signal Israel's restoration.[20] Eventually, the descendants of those Edomites were forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmonean priest-king John Hyrcanus in the 2nd century BCE, thus ending a millenium of enmity between the two nations.[21]

However, in the minds of Jews, Edom stayed very much alive. The oracles against Edom were undiminished in their intensity long after the actual 'Kingdom of Esau' had ceased to exist, for Esau became a symbol for each new enemy. "Whenever a new oppressor arose during the course of Israel's history, its authorities at the time...have regarded the struggle between Jacob and Esau

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[19]Edomites were such a presence in southern Judah that it gradually turned into an Edomite center called Idumaea in Hellenistic times. Dicou, *Brother and Antagonist,* 175.

[20] Blank, in "Post-Exilic Universalism," posits that at first, these people from the neighboring states including Edom, were welcome in Judah. This was one manifestation of the type of universalism espoused by the prophet Isaiah. However, "In the days of rebuilding the Temple, the spirit of the times was somewhat different. The passive universalism was converted into militant universalism. Nations, it was thought, should come and serve the newly awakened Judah. Expansion was the watchword. The hope was not that Edom would have its own land with its own borders, but that Edom would again become subservient to Judah." 190.

[21] Harry Freedman, "Jacob and Esau: Their Struggle in the Second Century," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1995): 113. See also Jack Miles, "Jacob's Wrestling Match," *Bible Review* 14, no. 5 (October 1998): 23: "Esau's shrine and memorial, in a way, is the Western Wall, the last remnant of the Temple built by the most famous son of Esau, Herod the Edumean, Herod the Edomite, as a place where his brother's offspring and his own could offer sacrifice together to meet their God." (Of course, Herod received his kingship from Rome, which might have been part of the basis of the Jewish identification of Rome with Edom.)

as an allusion to their own experience."[22] In particular, Edom was used to refer to Rome and the kings of Edom were identified with Roman emperors. Hence, Edom symbolized no less than the World Empire seen by Jews to have been in opposition to God. In accordance with this shift, interpretations of Esau began to emerge which magnified his biblical failings and strategically imagined him as intrinsically evil.

Jewish interpretations generally made Jacob and Esau into opposite types; an early example is Philo who designates Esau as the 'worst part of the soul, in contrast to Jacob, who is said to represent the better part of the soul.'[23] To many, these characterizations don't exactly match the intention of the biblical narrative. In the Bible, to be sure, Jacob and Esau sometimes seem to be mirror images of one another. Esau is hairy and red ('shagginess' in many cultures indicated animal-like primitive traits and redness was associated with blood and sinister motives.[24]), a hunter and a man of the field. In contrast, Jacob is smooth, quiet and home loving. Moreover, Esau is portrayed as impulsive, quick-tempered and unable to control his appetites; he cares so little about the future that he 'despises his birthright.'[25] Jacob is a careful planner, intelligent, and one who is obviously concerned about his place in the world.

However, this stark contrast is balanced by other factors. Some question

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[22] Freedman, "Their Struggle," 113.
[23] Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Jacob," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 79, no. 2-3 (October 1988-January 1989): 119.
[24] Blank, "Post-Exilic Universalism," 330. Here Blank is referring to the work of T.H. Gaster in "Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament."
[25] Among Esau's bad choices is his attempt to make up for marrying Cannanite women. He does marry finally from the family, but his choice is Ishmael's (another disinherited firstborn) daughter, from the collateral, non-favored side of the family.

Jacob's morality (Biblical translator Robert Alter once wrote that if Esau was crass and stupid, Jacob was coldly extortionate,[26] although others excuse his behavior as normative for its time), and others applaud Esau in his decision to forgive Jacob instead of carrying out his threats of murder.[27] Rabbi Solomon Goldman wrote that the Bible does not portray Jacob and Esau as the respective exemplars of good and evil: "The narrator does not portray Jacob as an immaculate saint nor Esau as an unrepentant sinner."[28] God's choice of Jacob may not then assume that he is perfect; only that an intelligent, spiritual person, who, at times is callous and less than honest, is preferable as a founder over an emotionally open, impulsive one who cannot make discriminating choices.[29]

In order that Esau remain a potent symbol of derision for Rome, the Rabbis recast this somewhat morally ambiguous story with an unequivocal understanding of Esau as The *Rasha*-The wicked one. "A simple reading of the various *midrashic* compilations, reflecting several centuries of developing exegesis, leaves us with the clear impression that Esau was intrinsically evil,

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[26]Robert Alter, *Art of the Biblical Narrative*, 45.

[27] Frank Anthony Spina, "The 'Face of God'-Esau in Canonical Context," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning*, eds.Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon (New York: Brill, 1997), 25: "Had personal merit been a criterion for selection as bearer of the promise which, of course, it was not-Esau would have held his own vis a vis Jacob."

[28] Edmund Berg, "Justice for Esau," *Dor le Dor* 12 (1984): 231.

[29] Daniel J. Elazar, "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence of the Jewish People," *Judaism* 43, no. 3 (summer 1994): 296. Elazar calls God's choice one between Esau the 'natural man' imbued with wild freedom and therefore difficult to control except by force, and Jacob the 'federal man' whose guile can at least be chastened, tempered and restrained by the constraints of conscience and the covenant. He writes (on page 294) that in suggesting that God is choosing between "less than perfect alternatives, even in connection with those it presents unequivocally as God's special people, the Bible risks exposing the ancient Israelites and hence the Jewish people tó unjust criticism because it shows them 'warts and all.'... In previous generations as well as the present there were those Jews who either ignored these critical parts or reinterpreted them to show that the Jewish forefathers were always God-fearing models of what the Almighty expected. In this respect, the Bible is far more honest than some of its interpreters."

which helped make Jacob's triumph over him seem more just"[30]

In these traditions, Esau served as a receptacle for every trait against which the Torah counsels. Esau was an idol-worshipper from before birth; he was weary that day he sold the birthright because he had just committed theft, rape, and murder. He mocked the idea of resurrection of the dead to Jacob who was mourning their grandfather Abraham. In addition, Isaac lost his sight in an effort not to see Esau's evil deeds. In a Jewish society where literacy was prized, Jacob is said to have learned to write but Jacob did not. When Esau hugged Jacob during their reunion, he did so in order to bite him.[31] One indication that Esau's ever-worsening wickedness was widely used to embody Rome, is Josephus' translation of the Bible written for the Romans. He downplays Esau's shortcomings and the references to strife between the brothers, and seeks in his translations to arouse sympathy for Esau and to rationalize Jacob's deceits. Josephus was able to avoid offending his Roman ('Edomite') hosts and also to deny negative stereotypes of Jewish behavior by using these stories because the biblical figures had became so intertwined with the nations.[32]

With the decline of Rome as an imperial power, Esau and Edom yet survived, for they came to symbolize Christians and Christianity through many difficult years of persecution. "The rabbis comforted the population by demonstrating what they were living through was preordained in the story of the

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[30] Freedman, "Their Struggle," 108.
[31] Genesis Rabbah 63:6, 63:12, Pesikta Rabbati 12 (48a), Genesis Rabbah 65:10, Book of the Jubilees 19:14, and Genesis Rabbah and 78:9.
[32] Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait," 101-151.

aboriginal struggle between the twins. Hence all the characteristics of the occupying forces-violence, lust and idolatry-are transferred back to Edom's ancestor as a definitive proof of the corruption of his descendants."[33] In the worst of times, some Jews have probably had to reassure themselves with thoughts of Obadiah's (1:18) prediction, "There shall be no remnant to the house of Esau."

This usage of Esau as a symbol for those perceived to be Judaism's opponents persists in some Jewish circles to the modern era. '*Eissef,*' the Yiddish pronunciation of Esau, is also a word to denote something uncouth, cruel, and debasing. Rabbi Abraham Chill wrote that,

> The night battle between Jacob and Esau's angel was between two opposing views of how human beings ought to live. Jacob's view represented kindness and mercy; Esau represents self-centerdness, crudeness and destruction. It was a combat of values.[34]

The Modern Orthodox Rabbi, Ahron Soloveichik, admits that the children of Esau are no longer evil; they have, at this point, "acknowledged the principles of enlightenment and democracy..." However, he warns Jews that they must keep themselves 'theologically and spiritually' separate from non-Jews (Esau). 'Esau' is still trying, Soloveichik claims, albeit now mostly through kindness, to dissuade Jews from leading a distinctive religious life.[35]

Daniel Elazar, in his article "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence of the Jewish People" sees the updated 'spin' on the story to be an understanding of Jacob (the Jews) as the one who 'struggles with God,' and thus is concerned

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[33] Freedman, "Their Struggle," 115.
[34] Fields, Harvey, *A Torah Commentary for our Times* (New York: UAHC Press, 1990), 86.
[35] Rav Ahron Soloveichik, *The Warmth and the Light* (Jerusalem: Genesis Jerusalem Press, 1992), 73-78. In a great Modern Orthodox '*drash*,' he says that while a Jew must stay separate

with spiritual pursuits. Esau (the non-Jews) is seen as a person who struggles only with men, nature and animals, and so becomes the exemplar of a non-Jewish political leader, consumed by earthly pursuits.[36]

Another Orthodox interpretation remembers that Jacob and Esau were actually brothers, and thus applies Esau's characteristics to non-religious Jews. (Esau is not a gentile at all, but a Jew, *yisrael mumar*, who has drifted from the path.) Here, Esau is seen as having made peace with Jacob because he realized that he really didn't want the burden of being the spiritual leader (therefore he no longer wants to struggle for birthrights and blessings) of the Jewish people, after all: "He did not want to perform all the duties of a religious Jew. He did practice some of it so he could enjoy them when he felt like it...He wanted to be a hunter. He wanted to roam free making his own rules as he went." Therefore, this reading concludes, the modern day 'children of Esau' should know they can participate in religious life when they want; however, they should never be allowed to take the lead. Just as Jacob made peace with Esau but went his separate way, religious Jews somehow should show 'friendship and love toward the non-Orthodox...without fellowship."[37]

It should be noted that various Christian writers have, in turn, adopted Esau as their own, and used this story to justify gross characterizations of the

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religiously because Jacob received the name Israel, he can also integrate in secular matters since Jacob also kept his given name.

[36] Daniel Elazar, "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence," 295. In Seder Eliyyahu Zuta 19, Esau chooses as his portion 'this world,' filled with eating, drinking and business. Jacob chooses the world-to-come as his portion. When Esau saw Jacob years later with all of his possessions, he wonders in obvious jealousy and sorrow: "If the Holy One has given him so much of this world, even though it is not his portion, how much more and more will He give of the world-to-come, which is his portion!

[37] *Torah Concepts*, 41-46.

Jews. The *Interpreter's Bible* critiques both 'Old Testament' theology and the 'Jewish personality': This commentary, and others like it, focuses most of its attention on Esau's display of forgiveness and his magnanimous behavior at the brothers' encounter. To them, it was Esau (not Jacob, as Jewish writers generally view it) who had reached spiritual maturity. Here, the commentator describes, 'one of the 'rare narrative depictions of interpersonal forgiveness in the Old Testament; the reunion scene where Jacob, who some years before had swindled his brother in a major way, comes quaking in fear and to plead for forgiveness which is dramatically given':

> Esau is impetuous and outgoing, moved by the impulse of the moment; Jacob is cautious and calculating...As in the earlier chapters, Esau appears the better of the two brothers. Jacob is full of inhibitions; Esau has none, and lets himself go wherever the flood of emotions turns. The instinct uppermost in him is just the old one of kinship...He was vigorous, warmhearted, and too essentially good-natured to carry a grudge. The noblest qualities of manhood were released in Esau, and he displays a chivalrous magnanimity. One can see men like him in every generation-impulsive, friendly men who seem to like everybody, and whom it is easy for everybody to like...Consider on the other hand, Jacob.... He is distrustful of Esau because he knows he has not deserved kindness at his hands. That is always one of the possible penalties of wrongdoing. So Jacob not only tried anxiously to buy Esau's favor, but when Esau showed he had it without any price, Jacob was still incredulous; and the only thing he wanted to do was separate from Esau as soon as he plausibly could...
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> What is the explanation? Perhaps it must be found in a recognition that the Old Testament writers, along with their extraordinary spiritual insights, had also the limited estimates which belonged to their racial inheritance, their environment, and their time. On the one hand, they caught the supreme truth of the overruling grace of God. On the other hand, as they thought of Jacob, ancestor of the Israelites, as against Esau, ancestor of the Edomites, they

> never wholly escaped the impulse to take a very human pride in Jacob's superior shrewdness and skill; and they do not seem to have been troubled by the fact that, as they portray him, he was not guileless.[38]

Even more recently, on Bill Moyer's television program on Genesis, a Jewish panelist suggested that Esau was a pitiful, unenlightened figure. Stephen Mitchell responded with clear references to Jacob and Esau, proving that they still represent their respective religious stereotypes:

> No, Esau is the opposite of pitiable. And maybe Isaac was right in his preference (that Esau was his favorite-Genesis 25:28). God does, in fact, favor simple people...Esau is the one who opens his arms and his heart and embraces his brother and cries and forgives him. But Jacob is still shifty and deceitful; he doesn't really accept his brother's love. Esau is much more a representative of the values that good people respect than anyone else in this story.[39]

It is an incredible understatement to say that the figure of Esau has become, over many years, loaded with layers of (negative) meaning. Jacob and Esau are more than people, they are politically charged symbols. It is within that framework that Jewish commentators, ancient and contemporary, have attempted to understand Jacob's surprising statement to Esau in Genesis 33:10. As we have seen, it is difficult for a Jew to understand how any person could merit a comparison to God's face; a suggestion that standing before a human being is like being in God's presence. Therefore, it is virtually impossible for

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[38] *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Cokesbury Press, 1952), 728-731. See also James Kodell, "Jacob Wrestles with Esau," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 10 (1980): 67-68: "Esau has become forgiving over the years, while Jacob, although he has taken some steps in human maturity, is still smallhearted and fearful. This reading corrects the popular tradition that makes Esau the perpetual oaf, deceived by Jacob twice in the early days and now bought off by his gifts and fawning. The fact is that Esau has risen above his past trials and mistreatments to human transformation. Jacob is still on the way.

[39] Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 258-259.

many Jews to believe that such a statement could be made by the Torah about Esau, and all that he has come to represent.

THE EXACT NATURE OF THE WORD *ELOHIM*

This last 'problem' is actually used as an opportunity by some commentators; it has become a sort of loophole for them to get Jacob out of the difficulty that they perceived him to be in based on the first two problems. If the word *Elohim* is not defined as God, the other problems are certainly lessened.

The word *Elohim* is first used in the Hebrew Bible in its very first sentence ("In the beginning *Elohim* created..."). Although there it is already understood to mean the one God of Israel, most scholars believe the word originally had a slightly different connotation. Because *Elohim* is a plural word used to identify a singular entity (God), it probably originally reflected the polytheistic beliefs of the ancient Semitic world.[40] There, it may have meant 'gods' or other powerful entities. Later, "late monotheistic Israel found in *Elohim* a term that was the rudimentary form of knowledge of the one and true God, who had been given only to Israel with the name of YHVH."[41] They intensified the concept of 'gods' so that the word could be used to describe the 'highest god' or the 'only god who represents the divine in a comprehensive and absolute way. (The 'Godhead')'[42]

Some claim that Elohim came into Israelite use as a name for God during the Babylonian exile (the word is believed to have Aramaic roots) in an attempt to transform the national god, Yahweh, into a true international and supernational god. This was achieved, in part, by co-opting another people's word for power

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[40] *Dictionary of the Bible*, (1965), s.v. "God."
[41] *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), s.v. "Names of God in the OT."

and deity, and making that word another name for 'the God.' Once the word was internalized, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the only god; the One which realizes the absolute power expected of every god *(elohim)*. Yahweh is the unique and true *Elohim*.[43]

However, sometimes *Elohim* betrays its roots and appears in the Bible to describe the other gods of other people. In this form, it can be a singular noun as in Judges 16:23, "The Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their *elohim*." It can also function as a true plural as when it refers collectively to the deities of all the nations surrounding Israel, "You shall not serve...the *elohim* of the people who are around you." (Deuteronomy 13:7). Since the gods of other nations often had visible representations or images, the plural form also covers the meaning of idols, as in, "The *elohim* of other nations are idols." (Psalms 96:5).

In addition, *Elohim* is used in a handful of instances to describe human beings that are put in a position to be a 'god' over others. This can be seen in Genesis 3:5, "Then your eyes shall be open, and you shall be as *elohim*." It also appears in the Second Book of Kings 5:7, "Am I an *elohim*, to kill and to make alive...?" Even rarer are the times that *Elohim* is translated by interpreters to mean an angel or a 'lower-level' divine being. This happens when it is difficult to

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid. Interestingly, YHVH is used in Genesis as the name the representative of all humanity-Enosh-uses for God. The implication is that the name YHVH was available to all humankind from the beginning. One way to connect this contradiction is to say that only Israel was able to recognize that their God was the universal God (Moses receives the name YHVH at the burning bush), until exilic times when Israel consciously tried to once again (by incorporating foreign concepts of God like Elohim into YHVH) to publicly universalize YHVH.

fathom that the subject of a verse could really be God, as in the phrase at the center of this thesis, Genesis 33:10. Another example is in the First Book of Samuel 28:13 in which a woman said to Saul, "I saw (an) *elohim* ascending out of the earth." *Elohim* might mean God in this case, but, as in Jacob's comparison of Esau to the face of *Elohim*, the theological implications are tremendous.

Many commentators on Genesis 33:10 seize on the fact that *Elohim* is polysemeous; that it is a word that can refer to a false god, an angel, or even to a human being. However, other interpreters find it hard to ignore the fact the overwhelming fact that, "By far the most frequent occurrence of the plural form *Elohim* is with singular verbs and with singular modifiers, as a noun which refers to God, the one and only High God."[44]

NOTES ON THE COMMENTARIES

In fact, although the various interpretations on this phrase can vary wildly from one another, they divide neatly into categories when it comes to how a given commentator chooses to define *Elohim* in the context of this verse. Therefore, for organizational purposes alone, the interpretations analyzed in this thesis are divided as to this definitional choice. It should go without saying that an interpretation that defines *Elohim* as a human being may have more in common with one that says Jacob meant God than another commentary in the human being chapter.

On a few occasions, I cite non-Jewish scholars and commentators. Since the one of the primary purposes of this thesis is to analyze the Jewish

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[44] Jacob A. Loewen, "The Names of God in the Old Testament," *The Bible Translator* 35, no. 2 (April 1984): 203.

interpretations of a phrase, the non-Jewish commentary is only cited if it supports a specific Jewish commentary. In this thesis, they are not intended to stand on their own.

For each commentary, I will denote in the text the century in which the commentator worked. At the end of the thesis is a Table of Commentaries listing, in sequential order, the source text that I used for each commentary. The table will also denote whether a specific commentary is *ad loc.*, and where it can be found if it is not a commentary that follows the chapters and verses of the Bible.

CHAPTER 2

COMMENTARIES THAT DEFINE אלהים AS A TYPE OF HUMAN BEING

Jacob's treatment of his twin brother Esau before and during their reunion encounter appears at times to be truly fraternal. This behavior can be difficult to explain, considering the vilification of Esau in Jewish tradition. Many commentators reconcile the words of the biblical narrative with Esau's wicked reputation by positing that Jacob was merely acting in a respectful way in order to appease his brother. The classic volume of *midrashim*, Genesis *Rabah*, advises that, "Whoever wishes to deal with a king or a powerful authority...should study this Torah portion about the reunion of Jacob and Esau."[1] The commentator Sforno similarly applauds Jacob for humbling himself before the more powerful Esau rather than risk being destroyed by being too proud.[2] Nehama Leibowitz writes that, "Jacob's encounter with Esau becomes the archetypal pattern of Israel's Diaspora existence. The historic parallel in our chapter is obvious: Jacob the puny one confronted by the mighty Esau, and attempting to placate him."[3] Jacob acted correctly and wisely, many commentators teach, when he sent messengers of goodwill and gifts; even when he bowed to the brother who was to serve him.[4]

After all, to Jacob, Esau was a bloodthirsty hunter; a man who despised

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[1] *Genesis Rabbah* 78:6

[2] Fields, *Torah Commentary*, 82. This comment was in the context of a critique of those Jews who refused to appease the Roman authorities.

[3] Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1973), 373.

[4] However, in Genesis *Rabbah* 75:11, claims that because Jacob bowed down to Esau and called him his 'servant' or his 'lord', eight times, Edom would have eight kings before Israel had one.

his very birthright and whose own father condemned him to a life lived by the sword. Years before, Jacob had heard that Esau resolved to kill him, and now his brother was reported to be on his way with four hundred men-Jacob surely imagined that they were some sort of army. In such a situation, our sages reasoned, survival is paramount. However, many Jewish commentators draw the line at the passage in which Jacob seemingly compared seeing Esau to meeting God. To some, the idea of taking an appeasement strategy to such an extreme was unthinkable if not sacrilegious. There must, they reasoned, be another explanation.

They found it in the few sections of the Torah in which human beings are referred to as *Elohim*. As we saw in Chapter one, the word is used to describe certain individuals who are in a position in terms of other people that seems to be in an analogous, limited way to God's relationship with humanity. In Genesis 23:6, the Hittites refer to Abraham as a נשיא אלהים (translated in the JPS translation as a 'mighty prince). In Exodus 4:15, God suggests that Moses' position vis-a-vis Aaron is that of an *Elohim*. Finally, in the law codes of *Mishpatim*, *Elohim* seems to be used as a term for a human judge.[5]

With such information surely in mind, the major translation of the Bible into Aramaic, *Targum Onkelos*, goes so far as to omit the contentious use of the word

[5] Exodus 22:7-"If the thief is not caught, then the master of the house shall be brought before the Elohim." There is similar usage in Exodus 21:7. Nahum Sarna writes in his commentary on Exodus (page 120) that, "There, the accompanying verb is in the plural so that Elohim is not likely to have the literal meaning of God...the phrase 'before Elohim,' an echo of pre-Israelite legal terminology, is in the Torah divested of its original association with gods and most likely simply means 'in the sanctuary.' Probably the slave had to repeat, in the presence of witnesses or the local authorities, the formal declaration of his intention...Rabbinic tradition understood the phrase in question to mean 'in the presence of judges.'"

Elohim altogether in this *pasuk*, and substitutes the word רבריא-a master or important person. The Talmud, in Sofrim 36b, concurs, holding that Jacob's use of the word *Elohim* in this situation is *chol*-ordinary; therefore, in writing a *sefer Torah* a scribe need not write it with the *kavannah* necessary when writing a name for God.

Although this explanation might have initially satisfied the Jacob defenders, it left an important question unanswered. Those humans that are referred to as *Elohim* in the Bible include the patriarch Abraham, the lawgiver and prophet extrordinare Moses, and other individuals of (somewhat lesser) importance. Why is Esau, the older brother passed over and 'despised' by God; (Malachi 1:2), who married a Canaanite woman and became the descendent of the hated Edomites, seemingly being put into this exclusive category by Jacob, the 'chosen' brother?

ESAU HIMSELF IS NOT REALLY 'LIKE AN אלהים'

Some commentators address this problem by suggesting that Jacob's comment in Genesis 33:10 was not, in fact, a comparison of Esau himself to a human Elohim. Rather, they believe it implied only that for Jacob, the meeting with Esau was in some manner like an encounter with a *ravravia*. Sforno, as the 16th century Italian Rabbi Ovadiah ben Jacob was known, writes that Jacob meant only to compare his approach to meeting Esau with the customs relating to coming before השרים-the ministers.' Therefore, he says, Jacob brought a gift to Esau just as he would when meeting an *Elohim*. Sforno then offers a prooftext to Jacob's true motivation for following those customs: "Just offer it to

your governor-will he show you favor?" (Malachi 1:8). Sforno is suggesting that the comparison (now safely understood to not be a comparison to God) was simply a continuation of Jacob's appeasement strategy. Jacob did not truly believe that Esau was a 'minister.' Jacob simply hoped that, as in the case of a face-to-face encounter with an actual *ravravia*, a gift would ensure his survival; that Esau would 'lift his face' for him.[6]

A similar interpretation is offered by the 14th century commentator, Rabbi Bachya ben Asher:

> I believe that the correct interpretation of this verse is: Accept this gift from me in order to demonstrate your goodwill towards me, just as someone who brings a gift to his ruler feels reassured when the ruler condescends to accept his gift.

Bachya also concludes that Jacob's statement was meant only to compare the protocol of the two encounters and not to suggest that Esau himself is a ruler.

Saadia Gaon, a 10th century Egyptian philosopher, *halakhic* authority and commentator, takes the position that Jacob's words are an attempt to 'butter-up' Esau. He writes that Jacob's words meant: "פני נכבדים ולכן **רצני**" (I have seen your face as one sees the face of an honored one. **Therefore, be gracious to me.**) Saadia strategically understands the word '**ותרצני**' to be in the future tense, although most translators take it to be in the past tense (see pages 10 and 11) so that it is translated as, '**You have been gracious to**

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[6] "To 'see the face' of a king or other dignitary is to be admitted to his presence, with the implication that the reception would be favorable."-*The Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Face."

me.' As generally translated, Jacob seemed to be making a sincere summarization of his brother's surprisingly transformed behavior at the reunion. To some Jewish thinkers, Jacob was correct. He had been accepted; Esau's embrace, kisses, and tears of joy truly were examples of gracious behavior:

> "This verse can only be interpreted as an explosion in Esau of feelings of brotherhood. This simple man has honest feelings and is filled with joy and brotherly sentiment at the sight of his younger brother."... "Esau betrays his origins and shows himself as not merely a cruel hunter...he begins to feel the chords of human love."... "The embrace shows that Esau is utterly forgiving." [7]

Such sentiments, however, do not square with the prevailing image of Esau. This wild man of the field was not to be trusted. Author Frank Anthony Spina gives what he calls 'a Jewish perspective' on the reunion:

> Jacob is the sincere participant in this meeting, while Esau is the manipulative, crafty one who covers up his vengeful desires with insincere words and acts of love."[8]

That is more the way Saadia Gaon interprets the episode . To him, Jacob did not compare Esau to an *Elohim* because Esau's grace was a fait accompli. On the contrary, Jacob calls Esau an *Elohim* because he was still afraid and ready to try anything to appease him; he believed that Esau's acceptance was far from assured. Saadia hears the phrase this way: "You are like an honored

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[7] Ziv Adar, *The Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1990), 116...Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch quoted in Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 375...Rabbi Burt Visotsky quoted in Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 282.

[8] Spina, "The 'Face of God,'" 15. Others simply say that Esau is simply raw emotion personified. He swings from uncontrollable anger to uncontrollable love. Spina notes that the biblical language shows Esau to be impulsive and plodding whether he is selling the birthright ("He ate, drank, got up, and left."-Gen.25:34) or reconciling with his brother("Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on his neck, and kissed him."-Gen. 33:4).

person...NOW will you be gracious to me? Sadia renders Jacob's words, that Esau is 'like an *Elohim*' as disingenuous praise.

Rabbi Jacob Tzvi Mecklenberg, writing in the 19th century, doesn't believe that the word *Elohim* was directed to Esau at all:

> This is to say, you showed me goodwill and desire and love as if קבלת פני (meeting or literally, 'receiving the face') of an important and great one. The sense of the verse is that seeing your face merited importance; that you (Esau) considered me (Jacob) as one of the אנשי מעלה ('men of heights'); that it was fitting for such a great honor as this to move about by coming to greet me with such a large number of people in order that I appeared as such in the eyes of everybody. And you received me with such great love; so measure for measure, I also feel obligated to show everybody that you are very important in my eyes, so I want to make a sign of remembrance of this covenant of love by your accepting this small gift...פני אלהים was translated in the *Targum* as רברבי-א- a master...and if you explain the term על כן in this sentence to mean 'because' as did many commentators instead of 'so' as it really means here and in many other places, then 'seeing the face of *Elohim*' is connected to 'seeing your face' and this turns the phrase unto Esau. The cantillation mark is a רביע, and this is a cut-off mark.

Rabbi Mecklenberg states that most people understand the *pasuk* this way: על כן ראיתי פניך כראת פני אלהים ('Because I have seen your face as on sees the face of *Elohim*.'). He, however, reads it differently: על כן ראיתי פניך. כראת פני אלהים ('So, I have seen your face. It is as if you (Esau) were seeing the face of an *Elohim*.) Jacob sees Esau looking right at him and humbly observes that it appears that Esau is ready to meet an *Elohim*-an important master.

Although Mecklenberg works very hard to refute any possibility that Esau is connected to the concept of *Elohim*, this interpretation actually treats Esau quite well. Jacob admits that Esau's reception of him showed not only respect, but also love. Furthermore, Jacob's gift is not described (as it is elsewhere) as a bribe offered to spare his life or as a reward for Esau's change of heart. To Rabbi Mecklenberg it is actually a sign of their new ברית והאהבה-covenant of brotherly love. While this interpretation eliminates any possibility that Jacob's statement may connect Esau to *Elohim*, it certainly signals a recognition that Esau's brotherhood can sometimes transcend his reputation as the evil sworn enemy of Jacob and Israel.

ESAU IS INDEED SOMEHOW 'LIKE AN אלהים'

Some interpretations claim that Jacob truly meant that Esau was comparable to a human Elohim. Most of the previous commentators take the position that the phrases כראת פני אלהים and ראתי פניך are idioms for: 'I have **met** you' and ' as one **meets** a human *Elohim*. Therefore, they claim, Jacob was comparing the circumstances of the two types of meetings. The following commentators, however, take the words more literally: '**Seeing your face'** (or, at least, seeing you) and 'is like **seeing the face of** (or seeing) an *Elohim*. There job is to then explain how such a direct comparison could have been made.

Or HaChayim, an 18th century Moroccan Jew whose commentary combines Talmudic and Kabalistic thought, believes that Jacob was being neither

tactical nor sarcastic; his use of the word *Elohim* to describe his brother was sincere :

> The nature of this gift is not in order that you should demonstrate brotherliness but rather you should accept what is befitting when one visits high-ranking individuals. One does not appear before such individuals empty-handed. Therefore, Jacob said, you can only demonstrate your goodwill towards me by keeping the gift; should you fail to do so you would shame me.

Or HaChayim's translation of an *Elohim* as a 'high-ranking individual' allows Jacob to apply the word to Esau without resorting to making a positive moral judgement about his brother the 'rude *chasseur*.'[9] After all, God had said that an entire nation would come from Esau[10], and while Isaac did give the more important blessing of ancestral promise to Jacob, Esau received his own blessing from his father that included prosperity. (Genesis 27:39)[11] Esau's entourage of four hundred and his response to Jacob's gifts ("I have plenty, my brother, keep what you have for yourself."-Genesis 33:8-9) point to the fact that this blessing of material wealth had indeed borne fruit. These facts alone make him like an '*Elohim*,' Or HaChayim implies, and Jacob's statement simply reflected that reality-*Elohim* was a proper title for a man of Esau's apparent stature.[12]

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[9]Spina, "The Face of God" quoting Warmones, "Jacob Ravit la Benediction de Esau", 6. The reference here is to the 'inarticulate appetite' of Esau when he trades the birthright to Jacob and stuffs himself while the narrative voice seems to speak in Esau's voice–, "he ate, drank, got up, and left." (Genesis 25:34) We are reminded that the Yiddish term 'Eissef,' from Esau denotes something uncouth, cruel, debasing and of bad taste. (Berg in "Justice For Esau," 229.)

[10] While biblical scholars basically agree that characterizing Esau as the progenitor of the Edomite nation is a secondary gloss made for 'historical-propaganda' purposes, Spina in "The 'Face of God" accepts the story on its own literal terms. Therefore, instead of understanding Esau's blessing as an explanation of the fate of Edom, it instead underscores Esau's positive future and his own prosperity." Page 20.

[11] "Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and the dew of heaven from above."

[12] The commentator Ralbag, in a brief comment, seems to agree with this reading-"The face of a great minister."

The commentator Keli Yakar, who wrote his Torah commentary in the 16th century, does dare to add a moral dimension. He argues that comparing Esau to an Elohim was Jacob's way of admitting that he had wrongly harmed his brother in the theft of the blessing. To Jacob, Esau is like an *Elohim* over him, a master until he sets things right:

> "I request that you accept my gift, because I admit that the blessings aren't mine because you are the master of your brother and all masters and princes are called Elohim. Just as, about Moses it was said, 'See, I have put you as Elohim over Pharaoh.'(Exodus 4:15) Therefore, I compare seeing your face with seeing the face of Elohim. And therefore, take my blessing that I have brought to you- and it isn't the gift I am speaking about. Rather, it is the blessing that my father blessed me with; take it please, for it is yours. It is being brought to you because my father, when he blessed me, thought it was you. And if you say, 'it isn't MY blessing-if it was, then why don't I have all these possessions (the ones Jacob offers to him-why aren't they Esau's in the first place)?' About this I say, it is because of God's grace that this was given to me. It is the same grace involved in giving to the poor. It is certainly not because of the obligation of blessing."

It is quite a shift in perspective to envision Esau as Jacob's master. The prophecy that "the older would serve the younger" (Genesis 25:33) was announced by God before the twins were even born. All indications were that Jacob was to be lord over his brother. Yet, this interpretation of Jacob's use of *Elohim* suggests that, in the case of their father's blessing, Esau was the brother with the moral high ground. Implicit in this reading of the story is the notion that when Jacob referred to Esau as "my lord" and when Jacob bowed seven times to

the ground as he approached his twin, literalness, not merely appeasement, was on his mind.[13]

There are, in fact, two different ways that Biblical commentators generally view Jacob's early years. Jacob becomes one of the 'patriarchs.' He is, "the child of promise who bears Israel's glorious future."[14] and "the one who shall carry on the Abrahamic line that will serve God's purposes in the development of a societal model for the world."[15] Therefore, many Jews feel that they must interpret Jacob's every action (even those which seem open to criticism) to have been motivated by righteousness.[16] To them, Jacob wasn't deceitful or manipulative when he won Esau's birthright and then his blessing. Jacob instead is said to have displayed intelligence and great forethought in fulfilling the terms, as foretold to his mother by God, of his own future.

Others, however, believe that it is wrong to excuse what they see as mistakes that Jacob made in his youth. They admit that the early episodes of his life (the birthright, the blessing) as a bit unsavory (although to most of them this

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[13] Adar in *The Book of Genesis*, strenuously disagrees. To him, this behavior is strategic and not at all apologetic: "He will use stratagem here too (in his meeting with Esau, like in getting the birthright), and whereas formerly it was to take from Esau...now it is to benefit Esau. But now, as then, the ultimate objective is self-interest. He really has no love for Esau, and his giving is calculated, as was his taking. Page 115.

[14] Spina, "The Face of God," 9.

[15] Elazar, "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence," 295.

[16] Jacob is described in various *midrashim* as being righteous and attracted to the house of study. Therefore, his questionable acts are miscast. For example, in *Pesikta Rabbati 12 (48a)*, shows how Jacob actually didn't take advantage of a hungry Esau. Jacob was cooking lentils in mourning for his grandfather Abraham who had died in reaction to some shocking crimes Esau had committed. After mocking the family religion, Esau flippantly offers to trade birthright for lentils, in order to prove how little he cared. And in *Midrash Tanhuma 66a*, Jacob, of course, doesn't lie about his identity and say "I am Esau, your first born son." According to the *midrash* he actually answers with complete honesty when the blind Isaac asks who he is. "I," he answers truthfully as the punctuation is altered by the interpretation. "Esau is your first-born son." According to many of the *midrashim*, Isaac knew all along that he was giving the blessing to Jacob (see Rashi on the blessing episode).

side of Jacob was slight in comparison with the loutishness of Esau). If Jacob really did know he was the chosen one all along and would eventually receive God's blessing, it is doubtful he would have been struggling so hard to have been born first! Jacob grabbed at every opportunity to gain the advantage. Besides, the fact that everything ended as God wanted it to does not justify misbehavior. Jacob's early days are filled with episodes of selfishness, but later, he seems to change.

This point of view makes the claim that Jacob's genius is his capacity for moral growth; Jacob's biblical encounters with God highlight his tendency to wrestle with his own lesser inclinations and then climb to a higher rung on life's ladder. This group often points to the fact that, in the text, Jacob's name was changed from יעקב (According to Everett Fox: 'Heel-Holder,' then according to Esau in Genesis 27:66, the 'supplanter-trickester') to ישראל (the one who struggles with God) precisely in order to highlight this trajectory. "It was only after his purification and refinement in the crucible of sorrow that his character was approved by God, and his name was changed to Israel."[17]

As part of this journey towards patriarchy, Keli Yakar apparently believes that it was necessary for Jacob to apologize to Esau. In this interpretation, Jacob's words to Esau were an admission of guilt ('you are like a master over me); words that led to an act of *teshuvah*. For, the very next thing Jacob does after comparing Esau to an *Elohim* according to this commentary is to return their

[17]Berg, "Justice for Esau," 231.

father's blessing to Esau.[18] With this act, Jacob presumably undoes Esau's temporary *Elohim* status, and at little cost, for Jacob's emerging personal connection to God makes Isaac's blessing is superfluous. Jacob fixed the "crooked machinations whereby Jacob gained ascendancy over Esau;"[19] without altering God's plan-he had finally gained in a legitimate fashion what he had earlier stolen.

Although Keli Yakar's interpretation serves above all to praise Jacob's character growth, he points to the seeing of Esau's face with its implied apology as a major factor in Jacob's moral reversal (and therefore Israel's future). This fact gives far too much credit to Esau for some. The Kabalistic commentary, *Sefer Shaaray HaLeshem,* for instance, explains this verse during a comparison of divine names. YHVH, it says, is a name that only refers to the One without limits, who has always been present, who is beyond time and who constitutes all. In contrast, Elohim can be used to describe the false gods of other nations. In addition:

> There are also wicked **people** that make themselves into gods (אלהות) such as Pharaoh, Hiram, and Nebuchadnezar...But it is obvious that none of them would take for themselves the crown on high of the name YHVH, God forbid...The name Elohim has the ability and the power and the ruling to be general or specific, and therefore the word Elohim is an inclusive name...So therefore, it is written that, "You shall attach yourself to **YHVH.** He is your God." And likewise we say about YHVH that it is the only divine name which is not given to any being in creation except to Him alone, God. And to Him

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[18] In this verse only (33:11), the word used for 'gift' in Hebrew appears as ברכתי, literally, 'my blessing.' Jacob's talk of gifts throughout this narrative are referred to in Hebrew with the more normative words to describe gifts and presents. Because of this choice of words, some commentators believe that here Jacob is offering to return Isaac's blessing.

[19] Spina, "The Face of God," 17.

> does Israel cleave and He is our God. And the rest of the names, they can go other ways; they can be used for other purposes; they divide into paths and byways that can be known.

The logic of this commentary is interesting. Although there are no actual examples in the Hebrew Bible in which evil people are called *Elohim,* (besides here, according to the *Sefer),* it is true that the word is used to describe false gods. It follows then that *Elohim* could be used to describe those evil individuals who want to be as powerful like they perceive their gods to be. Just as Moses can be called *Elohim* when he acted as the representative of the true God of the universe, Esau is like an *Elohim* because he represents the false gods. This, claims the *Sefer,* is the type of human *Elohim* that Jacob used in reference to Esau-as powerful in wicked ways that the other human *Elohims* are powerful in righteous ways.

A very different interpretation, by Rabbi Norman Cohen, a contemporary proffessor of Midrash, is that the human *Elohim* that Jacob referred to in Genesis 33:10 is none other than Esau himself. As in, 'I have seen your face just like when I saw you and called you *Elohim.* Rabbi Cohen considers the possibility that Jacob's mysterious wrestling opponent the night before the reunion with his brother was actually Esau, camouflaged by the dark of night. Cohen imagines that Esau had, "forded the Jabbok during the night, taking advantage of his brother's vulnerability in order to revenge the theft of his blessing."[20] Cohen is not alone in positing such a *midrash.* Bible scholar Jack Miles wrote:

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[20] Norman Cohen, *Self, Struggle and Change* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1995) 114.

> "The context (of the scene at Jabbok) easily permits us to identify Jacob's attacker as Esau. This is why the stranger was loath to speak his name out loud—he had been wrestled to a draw by the twin he had thought he could best easily."[21]

Cohen claims that, as grueling and antagonistic as going through this wrestling match with Esau was, it made Jacob a better person.[22] Therefore, when it was all over, he named the man who was still a stranger to him in such a way that would refer to the divine transformation that had occurred: "I have seen an *Elohim* face-to-face," he said. (Genesis 32:31)

The next day, Jacob's new found strength of character was tested, and he passed. There was no violence. In fact, he and Esau reconciled in an intimate manner that suggested they had not been apart very long: "It was...the feeling of closeness, of bonding they had experienced (wrestling the night before) that allowed Jacob and Esau to come together now in an affectionate embrace."[23] Suddenly, Jacob realized that the mystery man from the night before was the same person he was currently facing. He then tells Esau by code, referring to Esau as *Elohim* as he did the night before, that he knew that it was Esau who had attacked him: "Seeing your face is like seeing you last night when, as a

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[21] Jack Miles, "Jacob's Wrestling Match," *Bible Review* 14, no. 5 (1998): 22. Steven Molen, "The Identity of Jacob's Opponent: Wrestling with Ambiguity," *Shofar* 11, no. 2 (1993):21, notes that Esau's syntax ("Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!"-Gen.25:30) matches that of the mysterious opponent ("Let me go, for the day is breaking."-Gen.32:27).

[22] Ironically, Jacob was wounded on the way to becoming a 'better person.' Some commentators note that Jacob's wound made him less arrogant and therefore more sympathetic to Esau

[23] Cohen, *Self, Struggle and Change*, 118. Most Jewish commentaries that go so far as to give some credit to Esau for his embrace of Jacob certainly don't go as far as Cohen and imply that there is affection between them. However, this idea is not completely contemporary. Ha Amek Davar, an 18th century commentary sounds the same theme: "BOTH wept, implying that Jacob's love too was aroused towards Esau. And so it is in all ages. Whenever the seed of Esau is prompted by sincere motives to acknowledge Esau, for he is our brother. As a parallel, we may cite the true friendship that existed between Rabbi Judah Hanasi and the Roman emporer Antoninus, and there are many others.

result of your role in my spiritual and physical renewal, I called you an *Elohim*. As Cohen writes, "The struggle with our siblings...is also the struggle with our higher selves (thus we can call them *Elohim)*, that impulse in us which makes us transcend our human natures."[24]

Despite the 'transcendent' tone of the last interpretation, these commentators have all taken the 'heavenly' element from the word *Elohim*. No doubt that diluting the phrase in this way was the main objective. However, as grounded in the biblical text is the notion that *Elohim* can be used as a term for a person, it is not the first definition that comes to the mind of most people, including Bible scholars. So it should not be surprising that the commentators in this first category do not have the last word on creating an explanation for Jacob's statement. The interpretations that follow believe that Jacob, for some reason, had 'other realms' in mind when he made his fascinating remark to Esau.

[24] Ibid., 119.

CHAPTER 3

COMMENTARIES THAT DEFINE אלהים AS A DIVINE BEING OTHER THAN GOD

Whether the name *Elohim* is being used to indicate God or a specific person, the realm of *Elohim* is always the world of being and power superior to ordinary humans. The divine beings aside from God that occasionally appear in the Hebrew Bible certainly can be classified as part of such a world. Therefore, *Elohim* is a valid word choice for an array of entities, from the lesser gods of other nations, to false gods (who nevertheless are imbued with the power that is given to them by their adherents) to the angels who work with God in the heavenly court.

There are many commentators on Genesis 33:10 who are apparently both incredulous at the notion that Jacob would literally invoke the name and face of God in connection to his encounter with Esau, and skeptical that defining *Elohim* as a human being is an acceptable alternative. Thus, understanding the word *Elohim* in Jacob's statement to mean 'a divine being other than God' is obviously an effective evasive technique. The word also retains its celestial connotations without the difficult association with God's face; there are no prohibitions against seeing an angel. Furthermore, because the exact nature of the various divine beings is often not fleshed out in the Bible, this job is left to the exegetic imagination, opening up an array of possibilities for the commentators. Both those who were loath to interpret Jacob's statement in any way as words of praise and those who were daring enough to hear in Jacob's words an intention

to relay a positive message about Esau found in the *Elohim* of Jacob's words a divine being that suited their purpose.

Again, for this grouping of commentaries, an early biblical translation helps to succinctly frame this way of understanding the meaning of the word *Elohim* in Genesis 33:10. The editors of *Targum* 'pseudo-Jonathan' (believed to have been edited in the 7th century CE[1]) obviously believed that by *Elohim*, Jacob meant a divine being other than God; he rendered the word *Elohim* as מלאכא, the Aramaic word for an angel. Just like *Onkelos* on the same phrase, this *Targum* uses word choice to alter the meaning of a problematic verse, demonstrating the highly interpretive nature of translation. In Jonathan's *Targum*, the phrase now reads, '...I have seen your face as one sees the face of an **angel**...'

The *Targum* as interpretation clears up one problem: In using the word *Elohim*, it says, Jacob was referring not to God (and not to a nobleman either, for that matter) but to a 'lower level' spiritual entity. However, translations are limited when it comes to deepening our understanding of the meaning and motivation behind Jacob's intriguing statement. It is up to the commentators to fill in those blanks, each with their unique understanding; imaginative, yet grounded in the text.

ESAU'S GUARDIAN ANGEL

A *midrash* in Genesis Rabbah, a classic collection that was redacted in the 5th century[2], agrees that Jacob compared Esau's face with the face of an

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[1] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 4:842—Called 'pseudo' because this translation is believed to have been misattributed to Jonathan.
[2] *EJ*. Volume 7:400.

angel. The *midrash*, however, takes a further step and actually identifies the angel in question: "It was Esau's שר" (his guardian angel or divine minister), it claims. In this reading of the text, Jacob is comparing Esau's face to the face of the angel who represents Esau. Jacob, of course, must somehow know Esau's angel in order to make this comparison. Genesis *Rabah* itself provides the necessary information with a separate *midrash* dealing with Jacob's wrestling match at Jabbok.

It opens with the following question: "In what form did the angel who wrestled with Jacob appear to him?" (It is necessary to keep in mind that in the *Torah* story, Jacob said about that incident; "I have seen *Elohim* face to face." Genesis 32:31) Rabbi Hama ben Hanina said, 'It was Esau's guardian angel (that he saw face-to-face).'" At this point, the *pasuk* which is the subject of this paper is offered as evidence: "As it says (in 33:10), 'For I have seen your face as one sees the face of *Elohim*.' Your face,' concludes the *midrash*, 'resembles that of your guardian angel." The two *midrashim* 'complete' the biblical story: Jacob wrestled 'face-to-face' with *Elohim*. (An angel, as interpreted by the *midrash)* The next day, upon meeting 'face-to-face' with Esau, he remarks that Esau looks much like that same *Elohim* (...'seeing your face is like seeing the face of *Elohim*, the angel from last night's strange encounter'). This recognition thus leads the *midrash* to deduce that, if Esau looked so much like the divine being from the night before, Jacob's wrestling opponent must have been none other than Esau's divine representative. Jacob's seemingly provocative words are thus neutralized and understood as a simple observation.

The idea that the *Elohim* here is not only an angel, but specifically Esau's guardian angel, is based on the idea that Esau is the logical candidate for the 'man' part of this being who is supposedly a combination of human and the divine. The man most likely to struggle with Jacob is certainly Esau—after all, they even wrestled in the womb! As he walked closer to Canaan, Jacob appeared preoccupied with Esau and frightened by the thought of their imminent encounter. Abrabanel even suggests that the wrestling match was a dream that came to Jacob precisely as a result of his anxiety over Esau.[4] (What worse nightmare could Jacob have than of an Esau turned demonically strong?) Or, as biblical critics would have it, the wrestling narrative was actually composed to reflect the enduring rivalry between the nations that each twin represented. It seemed that this opponent was both an angel and Esau-thus, many concluded, it must have been an entity who reflects Esau but in divine form.[5]

The remarkable use of the Hebrew word for face-פנים (פני in the construct state)-used both regularly and idiomatically throughout these passages gives credence to the *midrashic* notion that Jacob was able to connect Esau with his divine minister. In Genesis 32:21, Jacob's upcoming encounter with his brother was at the forefront of his thoughts:

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[4] Joseph Ozarowski, *Common Ground* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), 49.

[5] Some *targums* actually change the word *Elohim* to angel in the wrestling passages, as they did for 33:10. Some even identify it as Esau's guardian angel during the translation of the wrestling narrative. The *targum* that opened the chapter, *Targum* Jonathan, changes the wording from *Elohim* to *malachah*, but identifies the angelic wrestling foe as the angel Michael.

Of course, there is another agenda to the *midrash* identifying *Elohim* with a 'divine representative' of Esau. The Rabbis were playing with the use in the Bible of *Elohim* as 'other gods.' The Rabbis used Esau as the personification of Rome. Therefore, this character of 'Esau's angel' also represented the gods of Rome (and later, Christianity), who are bested by Jacob, the follower of the Supreme God.

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אכפרה פניו במנחה ההלכת לפני אחרי-כן

אראה פניו אולי ישא פני.

A standard translation of the passage is: "I will appease him with the present that will go before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me." When the face metaphors are translated literally, the repetition is striking: "I will wipe the anger from his FACE with a gift that goes before my FACE; afterward, when I see his FACE, perhaps he will lift up my FACE."

Later that night, after wrestling with the stranger, Jacob exclaimed that,

ראתי אלהים פנים אל-פנים

("I have seen *Elohim* FACE to FACE.") He even gave the place a new name:

פני אל ("The FACE of *Elohim*.")

Finally, there is the phrase in Genesis 33:10:

ראתי פניך כראת פני אלהים

("I have seen your FACE as one sees the FACE of *Elohim*...")[6]

The Torah's repetitious use of 'face' is behind Genesis Rabbah's claim that Jacob compared Esau to the angel based on a physical resemblance between the two. It is apparent from the first passage that Jacob was particularly anxious about seeing Esau face-to-face. He even sent messengers with gifts that were to go in front of Jacob's face in an effort to avoid such an encounter.

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[6] There are biblical critics (Rand, Kodell) who point to the wrestling and reunion passages as 'J' narratives. The references to the 'face of Elohim' both at Jabbok and at the reunion, however, are 'Elohist' insetions. The wrestling narrative is believed to be a very ancient myth which is placed by 'J' into the context of the Jacob narrative in order to underscore the dangerous nature of Jacob's encounter with Esau.

Then, all of the sudden he claimed to wrestle with a being he calls *Elohim*. In the actual meeting with Esau, Jacob then related the face of his anxiety to the face of the stranger with whom he wrestled. Esau is finally in front of him, and his visage is that of the opponent. His face looked like the face of *Elohim*.

The 16th century *Safed* preacher, Rabbi Moshe ben Chayim Alshech also understands resemblance as the key to Jacob's comparison of Esau and his guardian angel. Alshech writes that the most striking feature Esau and his guardian angel have in common is a 'face of anger.' Upon seeing Esau's angry face, Jacob makes his statement of comparison.

Rashi, as the commentator Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki is known, wrote an 11th century Bible commentary that is traditionally studied by Jews as soon as they begin learning *Torah*. He also identifies *Elohim* in the *pasuk* as Esau's guardian angel. However, he believes that Jacob compared meeting the angel to seeing Esau based not on physical resemblance but because the two behaved similarly. In Rashi's interpretation Jacob meant to say:

> 'Accept my present because it is fitting and proper for you to accept it, for I have seen your face which is as dear to me as the sight of the angel-for I have seen your guardian angel-and because you have agreed to pardon my offence.' Why, however, did he mention to him that he had seen the angel? In order that Esau would be afraid of him saying, 'He has seen angels and has nevertheless escaped safely! Now, certainly I will be unable to overcome him.'

According to Rashi, Esau's face is similar to the face of Esau's angel because they both pardoned Jacob's offence. The offence in question, of course, was Jacob's usurpation of their father's blessing. The guardian angel agreed to forgive Jacob as a consequence of losing the wrestling match

(according to Rashi's comment on Genesis 33:28).[7] The next morning, Esau himself follows suit, at least in part due to Jacob's verbal intimidation.

The Torah commentary written by the 14th century *halakhic* authority Jacob ben Asher (the Baal Ha-Turim) also writes that Jacob brings up the angel to frighten and intimidate Esau, and reveals further that this message to Esau was transmitted through code. כראת פני אלהים, says the Baal Ha-Turim, using *gematria*, means 'your minister,' which was a hint to Esau that Jacob had seen his guardian angel and had overcome him."[8]

In Rashi's interpretation, both Esau and the angel surrendered to, and forgave Jacob. The angel, whose mission was to protect the wicked Esau, was defeated, and that is why he reminds Jacob of Esau. Although Jacob does admit he acted badly in stealing the blessing (Rashi is reproached by the commentator Ramban for even suggesting that Jacob needed forgiveness from Esau-after all, Jacob is Israel...What do the Jews have to apologize to its enemies for?[9]), his comparison of Esau's face to *Elohim* is no compliment to Esau; it only serves to highlight Jacob's own victory.

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[7] "It shall no longer be said that the blessings came to you through supplanting and subtlety but through noble conduct and in an open manner."

[8] כרות פני אלהים corresponds to 853 using gematria, and שר שלך equals 850. In the introduction to his Torah commentary, the Baal Ha-Turim explains his system of gematria, in which there are a number of ways to 'make a match' when the numbers are close, but the numerical value of the two phrases aren't exactly equal. One of those methods is if the total number of words in one of the phrases makes the two equal in number value. 'Like seeing the face of *Elohim*,' has three Hebrew words, bringing 850 up to 853, thus the two phrases match.

[9] Ramban-"It would not be good if he (Jacob) was mentioning sin." Much of Jewish tradition sees Jacob's 'theft' of the blessing to be well-crafted and intelligent, and at the very least, irrelevant since Jacob had already been chosen by God (therefore the means justify the ends). There are those, however, who follow Rashi's lead and suggest that Jacob's admission that his initial blessing was received by deception is part of his moral growth and point out that his 'real' blessing is the one he receives legitimately from God, not the one he stole from Esau.

Keli Yakar, in this opinion, agrees that the comment says more about Jacob than it does about Esau. He admits that it may seem at first glance that Jacob is comparing seeing Esau's face to seeing the face of God. However, the interpretation goes on to explain that Jacob simply was making an observation about his emotional state: "...in his heart was this intention-'I was frightened on the night I saw the face of *Elohim*, your guardian angel, likewise I am frightened (now) upon seeing your face.'" It is interesting to note that Rashi claims that Jacob's comparison statement is meant to frighten Esau, while Keli Yakar believes that the same words actually describe Jacob's own fear.

Alshech also has a '*davar acher*' (another explanation for the verse). In it, he claims that Jacob's comparison was meant to articulate how the results of the wrestling episode were so similar to his meeting with Esau. He discusses the fact that when Esau's guardian angel first appeared, it, "had certainly not begun on a friendly note, but (the whole matter) had concluded in a friendly manner." A frightening sneak attack resulted in a blessing and a fresh identity (Jacob went from being the 'supplanting one' to the spiritual struggler). Similarly, כראת פני אלהים, the much anticipated and feared reunion with Esau ended quite well for Jacob. He would be able to live in Canaan and carry out the promise of Abraham free of threats from his now appeased brother. Therefore, seeing Esau's face is-כראת פני אלהים-the same as seeing Esau's angel in that after both encounters everything worked out for Jacob after initially seeming so grim. Jacob's reunion with Esau was for himself a true divine experience-like that of seeing an angel.

Tzadok Ha-Kohen, a 19th century Hasidic Rabbi[10], explains the *pasuk* altogether differently:

על מלאכו של עשו אמר חד כתלמיד חכם נדמה לו וחד אמר כעכו"ם נידמה לו ושניהם אמת, שהיתה בו תערובת טוב ורע גם תלמיד הכם וגם עכו"ם וכך גם היו עשו ומה שאמר לו יעקב כראות פני אלהים: על המסתכל בקשת אמרו שעיניו כהותו המסתכל בפני אדם רשע עיניו כהות ושניהם היו בעשו

Concerning Esau's guardian angel, one says he appeared to Jacob as a *talmid hakham*, and one says that he appeared to Jacob as an idol-worshipper. Both are telling the truth. There was in him a combination of good and evil, a *talmid hakham* and an idol worshipper. Thus, this was also true of Esau. So, when Jacob said to him, 'I have seen your face as one sees the face of Elohim...' About staring at a rainbow, it is said that his eyes will go dim, and about staring into the face of an evil person, it is said that his eyes will go dim—and they were both in Esau.

This is the only interpretation of those that understand *Elohim* as Esau's divine representative that refers to Jacob's statement as having anything positive to say about Esau. In most of these commentaries, the angel is portrayed as simply Esau's undesirable qualities embodied in a divine being. The fact that Esau has a guardian angel at all represents the fact that although Esau is human and will one day die, there is a part of him that is immortal; that immortal part will embody the opponents of Jacob (Israel) for all time. In this way, the comparison to divinity need not mean that Esau's negative character is transformed or that Jacob's feelings of enmity toward Esau have changed. Tzadok Ha-Kohen, however,admits that comparing somebody to an angel (even one who is associated with Esau), just might say that there is something 'angelic'

[10] Tzadok Ha-Kohen received *halachic* ordination by Lithuanian Rabbis, and only later became a *Hasid*.(*EJ* 16:915)

about that person.[11]

In this interpretation, Jacob's encounter with Esau allows him to realize that his brother is more than a one-dimensional figure precisely because he recognized that Esau's face was like face of the guardian angel. The hypothesis here is that goodness is more easily transparent in Esau's angel than in Esau himself. Jacob had detected righteousness in the angel with whom he had spent a night in combat and conversation, so much so that he asked it to bless him. When he later saw Esau, Jacob noticed the resemblance to the divine being and he could not ignore his brother's connection to the angel. This enabled him to see not only the idol-worshipper in Esau[12], but also a brother who understood that forgiveness and brotherliness were *mitzvot*. Ha-Kohen claims that because Esau's 'divine' side (symbolized by a rainbow, like the angel, a sign of God's presence) was revealed to Jacob through his encounter with Esau's angel (along with the already-established *rasha* side), Jacob remarked,

"כראת פני אלהים"

However, certainly not every commentary accepts the notion that angels must have a positive side. There is a story in the *Zohar* (the 13th century classic of Jewish mysticism) about Rabbi Eleazar who happens upon Rabbi Jose, Rabbi

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[11] Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait," 126-127. Among the volumes of interpretation that denigrate Esau, there is some Rabbinic material that gives him grudging praise. Genesis Rabah (76:2) has Jacob fearful that Esau is more righteous because he kept two commandments that Jacob did not: living in Israel and attending to his parents. Because he married again after parental objection to the first marriage, Simeon Ben Gamliel declared, "...I did not do a hundredth part of the service that Esau did for his father."

[12] See Rashi on Genesis 25:22; the twins in utero-Esau pleads to be born when his mother passes the pagan temple, while Jacob pleas for an early delivery when passing the house of study.

Judah and Rabbi Hiya as the three men were riding together. Said Rabbi Eleazar; "Truly I behold the face of the *Shekhinah*! For to see the righteous and saintly of one's generation is to see the very face of the *Shekhinah*." This teaches that the realm one belongs to is reflected in one's face: "...friends of the Divine Presence are regarded as Her face."

The discussion then turns to Jacob's night of wrestling, and the opponent is identified as the wicked accuser of the heavenly court, *Samael*, who also (according to the *Zohar*) served as Esau's guardian angel. Thus, the divine being that best exemplifies evil in Rabbinic tradition is connected to the Rabbis' classic example of a truly wicked human being. This fact was exposed on the day of Jacob's reunion with Esau. The *Zohar's* version of Jacob's statement is: 'I have seen your face as one sees the face of *Elohim* (you look like the wicked *Samael*).'[8] (This, the *Zohar* reveals, is a foreshadowing of what will happen when the long night of Israel's exile-wrestling with *Samael*- is over and the dawn's light will expose the pagans-recognition that *Samael* is connected to Esau- and they shall disappear.) The reason, the *Zohar* claims as it comes back around to its opening story, that Jacob was able to recognize *Samael* in the face of Esau is that '...the realm (and in this case, it is an evil realm) to which a person belongs is revealed in his face.'

OTHER GODS AND IDOLS

The exegetic conclusion of the Zohar not only attempts to neutralize Jacob's exclamation to Esau; it serves to buttress Esau's negative image. The same format, transforming 33:10 into harsh words of condemnation, is also used

in the next two commentaries. They both go a step further than the *Zohar* in that while they still interpret *Elohim* to mean 'spiritual entities,' they mean entities that have no place in the heavens. They read *Elohim* in 33:10 using its true plural form (as opposed to its use as a 'plural of intensity,' describing the only God-the God of Israel-who represents all divinity in a comprehensive way), so that it meant, 'gods.' Or, from the point of view of the Bible: 'other' gods, the false-at least, lesser gods that people worship.

Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, a 14th century commentator, begins his interpretation by relaying a talmudic-era argument.[13] Rabbi Pedot asserts that it is not permissible to flatter the wicked even if one fears for his life. Rabbi Yohanan counters that such a thing is indeed allowed, citing Genesis 33:10 as a proof-text. (Rabbi Yohanan's view is in turn cited by many commentators of this passage who claim that Jacob is in fact using *Elohim* to mean God-but he is doing so only as part of a life-saving appeasement strategy of flattering Esau.) Bahya himself then reconciles the positions of the ancient debate by saying that Jacob's words are permissible because his statement allowed for more than one interpretation. In other words, explains Bahya, Jacob's words were capable of carrying a favorable impression **or** an unfavorable one. A negative meaning can be attributed to Jacob using the word Elohim in describing Esau's face. Bahya continues:

התכון יעקב באמרו אלהים לע"ז, ויש ראי של בזיון

[13] The argument is similar to the one that is actually in Sotah 41b, but has some major differences including the names of the Rabbis and the nature of their disagreement. I was unable to find any Talmud text, which echoed Bahya's description.

Jacob's intention in using the word '*Elohim*' was to mean a false god. A term of degradation.

ועשו הוא שהיטעה את עצמו בחשבו
שיעקב מתכון ללשון של כבוד

And Esau mistakenly thought to himself that Jacob intended to use language of honor.

According to Bahya, "If the wicked person to whom Jacob's words were addressed chose to interpret them as flattering him, then this is Esau's problem, not Jacob's. Jacob really said to Esau, 'I like seeing your face as much as I like seeing your idol-gods.' By this he meant, 'Just as I hate your gods, so I hate you.'" Bahya concludes that both Rabbis are correct: flattery of the wicked is in general not allowed (per R. Pedot). However, it is permissible if it occurs because someone is fearful (per R. Yohanan), and only then the wording of the 'flattery' must be enough of a double-entendre that the intention of the speaker is clear to him and to God. Jacob's utterance in 33:10 apparently passes Bahya's test.

The interpretation of *Sefer Hasidim*, a major 12th century work on ethics, is similar. It also understands Jacob to be comparing the meeting with Esau to looking at an idol. However, both activities, looking at an idol and looking into the face of an evil person, are forbidden. But, because of the principle of פקוח נפש (saving a life), it is permissible in this instance. (As long as one doesn't 'enjoy' the gaze) Therefore it was permissible for Jacob to look Esau in the face, and to claim that doing so was comparable to gazing at an idol, both generally forbidden activities, because he was doing so in order to save his own life.

AN UNIDENTIFIED ANGEL

The final cluster of commentaries in this chapter understands that the comparison to the face of *Elohim* refers to an angel; though not one specified as Esau's guardian angel. To Ibn Ezra, a 12th century Spanish commentator, the angel who wrestled with Jacob was not a divine representative of his greatest foe. Rather, it was an angel sent by God in order to bolster Jacob's confidence.[14] Says Ibn Ezra, "He came to Jacob to strengthen his heart so that he wouldn't fear his brother. Because, since an angel wasn't able to overcome him, how much less could a human being." And in fact, after the wrestling, Jacob is no longer fearfully at the back of his entourage. He has boldly taken the lead. Jacob then mentions the angel in 33:10 to remind himself, while facing Esau, of his great victory against the angel.

Radak, another 12th century commentator, also believes that the phrase is not a true comparison, but part of a strategy. However, for Radak, Jacob's mention of the angel is not aimed inward; it was rather a 'name-drop' meant for his brother's ears. Radak understands the verse this way: "'I have seen your face straight in the eyes like the angel which I have seen.' He remembered seeing the face of an angel in order that Esau would be too afraid to harm him."[15]

Radak's commentary continues by offering an answer to an intriguing question about the reunion episode as he interpreted it: Why should Esau believe (and be so intimidated by) Jacob's claim that he had overcome an angel? After

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[14] For example, *Targum* Jonathan adds that the wrestling opponent is the archangel Michael.

all, Jacob had lied before, directly in front of him, as when he told their father, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

כי יודע היה עשו כי יעקב היה צדיק ותמים
כמו שהיה 'יושב אהלים' מנעוריו והאמין בו שהמלאך נראה לו
Because Esau knew that Jacob was a righteous and pure individual-for he was a 'tent-dweller' (Genesis 25:27) from his earliest days. So, Esau (naturally) believed him (when he said) that an angel had appeared to him

It is, of course, also a wonderful example of how biblical interpreters read the text liberally in order to build up Jacob's youthful character. He is deemed to be 'righteous' based on the fairly innocuous term, 'tent-dweller.' At the same time, Radak concludes his commentary by ensuring that no one should understand that the fact that he is being associated with angels means that Esau's status has been elevated in any way: "As to the comparison of seeing the face of a human being to seeing the face of an angel-this is an exaggeration."

Rabbi Jacob Culi a 17th century Sephardic commentator, also believes that Jacob's line is an exaggeration. He writes that Jacob wanted Esau to accept his present:

> "In order that you accept me and reconcile with me in terms of the sin which I committed against you; the one which I've dwelled on so much. It isn't proper that my efforts would be in vain; that you wouldn't want to receive the gift."
> From here we learn that if one meets a person in the middle of the night, or an evil person in the middle of the road, it is good to mention -בפניו-to him (but literally, 'in his face') someone important. This is the reason that Jacob mentions the angel-בפני-to (but literally and more to the point, 'in the face of') Esau."

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[15] The commentator Ralbag also comments that *Elohim*-an unidentified angel- is spoken to instill fear in Esau: "The face of an angel of God, to inform him that he was a prophet; in order that Esau would be too afraid to harm him.

Culi's interpretation is reminiscent of Rashi's. Both believe that receiving forgiveness from Esau for stealing his blessing is an important step in Jacob becoming Israel (Culi uses stronger language than Rashi on this point-he comments that Jacob had 'committed a sin,' one that he had 'dwelled on so much'). Furthermore, both commentators understand the comparison to *Elohim* as being instrumental to securing that forgiveness. Rashi wrote that Jacob mentions *Elohim*, the guardian angel of Esau whom he bested, in order to intimidate Esau, while Rabbi Culi claims that *Elohim* stands for any angel-'someone important'-who might help Jacob survive his encounter with Esau. Culi also seems to believe that merely 'mentioning' the angel to Esau is not enough. He playfully uses the language to suggest that Jacob was especially wise to mention that the angel was actually 'in Esau's face,' thereby explaining Jacob's strange method of comparing Esau's face with the face of divinity.

The *Sefer Be'er Mayim Hayim*, the Torah commentary written by the 18th century Hasidic leader, Rabbi Tier from Tsurnovitza, changes the focus somewhat:

כלומר לפי שחביב וחשוב עלי ראיית פניך כראיית פני המלאך ועל כן הבאתי המנחה הזו שהבאה לשאילת שלום בלבד

That is to say that meeting you-seeing your face-is as dear and important to me as seeing the face of the angel, and therefore I have brought you this gift which is a gift of greeting alone.

Rabbi Tier borrows the phrase, 'seeing your face is as dear and important to me as seeing the face of the angel' directly from Rashi. Therefore, he obviously agrees with the master commentator that the import of both meetings (Jabbok

and the reunion), and the reason for mentioning the angel at all, was to secure forgiveness for Jacob.

But Rabbi Tier wants to clear up an additional problem. The additional 'present' which Jacob offers to Esau just after he refers to their encounter as somehow 'divine,' is referred to by the *Torah* as ברכתי-literally, a blessing. Some biblical commentators use such word choice to claim that Jacob returned Isaac's blessing to Esau on the day of their reunion. Rabbi Tier rejects this interpretation, stating that the word is used in this context as a synonym for gift. Esau deserves a gift of *shalom*, but not his father's blessing.[16]

Two commentaries from the modern era round out this chapter. Both, while careful not to define *Elohim* as God, are more inclined to be daring in considering some of the radical implications of Jacob's statement. In addition, neither of these interpretations constricts themselves by connecting the divine being Jacob compared to Esau to Jacob's divine wrestling opponent. Therefore, there need not be any adversarial undertones to Jacob's sense that 'meeting Esau was like meeting *Elohim*.'

The 19th century German rabbinical authority, David Tzvi Hoffman re-phrases Jacob's statement in this fashion: "Since you have received me with love

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[16] Those commentators who claim that Jacob wrestled with an angel generally seem to agree that the episode means that Jacob now has won his father's blessing in a legitimate fashion. (No trickery; and this time Jacob reveals his identity when asked). This argument is made even stronger when the angel is specifically Esau's divine representative-Jacob beats Esau at his own (physical) game and earns the blessing that he asked for outright this time. Those who say that Jacob actually wrestled with God generally understand that God's blessing is the 'official' blessing; the other he receives prematurely, through invalid and deceptive means. Now armed with the 'spiritual blessing' of God, he returns the 'material blessing' of Isaac to Esau, its rightful owner.

and kindness as would a divine being, please do not reject my gift just as a divine being would not reject a gift of a person." Hoffman believes that Jacob made his comparison because, much to his surprise, Esau behaved just as Jacob imagined a divine being might in the same situation. Jacob had every reason to believe that Esau would be vengeful and dangerous; Esau had threatened his life (Genesis 27:41), and even with all of Jacob's overtures, the reports were that Esau was coming with '400 men.' (Genesis 32:7)

However, Genesis 33:4 reports that, in contrast to Esau's worst imaginings, "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Ziv Adar enthuses about the incident sounding more like one of the Christian fathers who attempted to lionize the maligned Esau than a Jewish Bible scholar:

> The story of Esau embracing Jacob is one of the great triumphs of imagination, a passage of unusually heightened pathos, humanity and religious dignity. Esau has an explosion of emotional feelings of brotherhood, and is overcome with love at the sight of Jacob.[17]

Hoffman seems to be making a straight comparison: In this situation, Esau displayed some of the qualities of an angel. If this is true, Esau is in good company. The other Biblical figure whose qualities are compared to those of an angel is King David:

כמלאך האלהים כן אדני המלך לשמע טוב הרע (Like an angel of the

[17] Adar, *The Book of Genesis*, 116. The second century Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, who had suffered greatly at the hands of the Romans, remarked nevertheless that as a rule it is known that Esau hated Jacob but that on this occasion his true love for his brother was stirred. (Sifre Numbers 69). But Rabbi Yannai (Genesis Rabah 78:9) avers that Esau intended not to kiss Jacob, but to bite him.

Eternal, so is my lord the King to discern good and bad.-II Samuel 14:17).

Nahum Sarna, a contemporary Bible scholar, agrees with Hoffman that Esau's reconciliatory behavior merited what they call the (admittedly surprising and unorthodox) praise of Genesis 33:10. Sarna also rewrites the passage interpretively: "I have been admitted to your august presence; you have been graciously indulgent of me; my encounter with you is like that with a divine being." Sarna does mention the Elohim of the wrestling match: He says, "This last would be an artfully astute reference to Genesis 32:31." However, the reference does not seem to suggest that Jacob's divine foe is the divine being of Jacob's comparison. Rather, with his last comment Sarna is remarking on the irony running through these passages: Jacob is clenched in a violent wrestling hold by an allegedly divine being. Later, Esau, the mortal prophesied to live by violence, clenches Jacob in a loving embrace. The angel wounds Jacob, but Esau reconciles with him and is thus rightfully compared to a true divine being; an *Elohim*.

Although *Targum* Jonathan substituted the very specific word מלאכא for the multisemous word *Elohim* that must have shocked many readers, it certainly did not end the conversation on the meaning of Jacob's statement to his brother Esau. As we have seen, that מלאכא has been interpreted alternately as Esau's guardian angel, Satan (Samael), a 'lesser' god or a stone idol, an angel sent by God for Jacob's personal benefit, and a gracious divine being. Jacob is said to have made the comparison of meeting Esau to the angel for a wide variety of reasons. Most commentators re-write the comparison to be a statement which is

utterly innocuous, some find in it further evidence that Esau is a רשע, while a few view it as genuine words of praise stemming from a warm reconciliation between brothers.

According to the *Targum* 'pseudo-Jonathan,' Genesis 33:10 reads, "I have seen your face as one sees the face of an angel." Biblical commentators continue to characterize that 'angel' in a multitude of ways; each direction leads to a renewed context for the *pasuk*-Jacob's tone of voice, motivation, and attitude toward Esau all shift depending on the interpretation. The possibilities for the next group of commentators, however, are even greater, perhaps infinite and boundless like their subject. For they, despite the risks of creating interpretations deemed sacrilegious, define *Elohim* in 33:10 the way it appears most frequently in the Bible-as God, the one and only high God. So, they must explain why Jacob the patriarch tells Esau, the prototype of the hostile non-Jew: "I have seen your face as one sees the face of God."

CHAPTER 4

COMMENTARIES THAT DEFINE אלהים AS GOD

In his commentary on the Torah, Samuel David Luzzatto, a 19th century Orthodox rabbi, nicely summed up how the commentaries described in the first two chapters of this thesis define the use of *Elohim* in Genesis 33:10: "According to the *Targum of Onkelos*, *Elohim* means master. According to the *Targum of Yonaton ben Uziel* and the commentary of Rashi, *Elohim* means angel." Luzzatto's next comment, however, is less satisfactory: "And everyone," he writes, "admits that this does not refer to *ha-shem baruch hu*."

This second statement in no way reflects the variety of interpretations that exist on the verse. In fact, a large number of commentators do believe that Jacob was referring to God in his statement to Esau. To them, there is scant textual evidence that the word *Elohim* should be redefined in this *pasuk* to mean anything else. They are obviously no less cognizant than the others of the fact that Esau has come to represent 'the nations' at their worst, and that Jacob is the progenitor of the beloved twelve tribes of Israel. These commentators, however, prefer to recognize and struggle with the presence of God in Jacob's words, and create a scenario in which it makes sense for them and for their time.

JACOB'S STATEMENT IS DISINGENUOUS OR DEROGATORY

Read on one level, Jacob's comparison of Esau's face to the face of *Elohim* is the centerpiece of a wonderful story about reconciliation. Jacob and Esau, who only knew one another as opponents, suddenly end the struggle that had begun in their mother's womb. However, for countless Jewish students of

the Hebrew Bible, such a reading is impossible to accept because they believe that Jacob and Esau never stopped being antagonists. They know that true reconciliation could never have taken place, for to them, the spiritual descendants of Jacob and those of Esau are opponents to this day. The story itself ends with the brothers each going their separate way, a paradigm that some Jews still apply to their way of life vis-à-vis non-Jews. They do believe that Jacob invoked God's name in relation to Esau, but their interpretation is that the invocation was simply another tactic in an eternal battle.

A *midrash* in Genesis Rabbah offers a parable to help explain this problematic verse:

> Jacob mentioned God's name to Esau in order to intimidate him, to frighten him. This conduct of Jacob is similar to that of the man who invited his neighbor to dine with him, and, perceiving that he desired to murder him, observed, "This dish tastes like that which I ate in the royal palace." "The king is then acquainted with him," the other exclaimed, and he was filled with fear and did not kill him. Similarly, when Jacob said to Esau, 'For I have seen your face, as one sees the face of God,' Esau exclaimed, "Seeing that the Holy One, blessed be He has promoted him to such honor, I can no more prevail against him."

This is similar to the commentaries in which Jacob mentioned that he had met an 'angel' in order to frighten Esau. Here the *midrash* takes intimidation through 'name-dropping' to its highest level; it claims that Jacob refers to his relationship with God in order to save his own life.

The rabbis who take part in the debate in theTalmud, Sotah 41b, all agree that Jacob's words are disingenuous. Their discussion is about the exact type of insincere motive that was behind Jacob's words. Rabbi Simeon ben Pazzi

disputed the opinion that a person should never flatter the wicked of the world. Rabbi Simeon deemed such flattery permissible based on the fact that Jacob flattered Esau when he compared seeing Esau as 'one sees the face of God.' Rabbi Levi, however, then stated that the prooftext was misused. In his opinion, Jacob's words were meant to intimidate Esau (here the Talmud uses the 'king parable' that was recorded in Genesis Rabbah), not to flatter him.

The idea that people might interpret Jacob's words as flattery seems to dismay the next two commentators and inspire them to be creative in their refutation.[1] Rabbi Isaac Elijah Landau, a 19th century commentator asks:

היתכן? היאך זה יעקב מחניף לעשו בדברים עד כדי כך?
אלא לכך התכוון יעקב: "ראיתי פניך כראות פני אלהים"
רוצה אני לראות את פניך כשם שאלהים רוצה לראות את פניך
Is it possible? How could Jacob flatter Esau to such a degree? Rather, this was the intention of Jacob: "I have seen your face like seeing the face of God." I want to see your face in the same way that God wants to see your face.

According to this interpretation, Jacob told Esau that he saw him and consequently judged him harshly the same way that God will ultimately judge him. As in: 'I see your face-כראות פני אלהים- like God's (face) sees it: as one marked for judgement.' In an interesting twist on this idea, Rabbi Jonathan Eyebeshutz, an 18th century Kabalist, actually believes that Esau's wickedness merited him to be one of the agents of God's harsh justice:

> The truth is that God has a 'good' face, as it is written in Numbers 6:6:
> "יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויחנך"
> "May YHVH lift up His face to you and be kind to you."

[1] In contrast, some modern commentators have no problem identifying Jacob's comments as flattery. See W. Gunther Plaut's comment on the *pasuk* in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: UAHC, 1981). On page 219, he says simply of the comparison: "Extreme flattery."

> And there are faces that express anger, as it is written in many places in Leviticus 20:
> "ואני אתן את פני באיש ההוא"
> "And I will set My face against that man."
> The face of YHVH is the face of mercy; it is good, but the face of Elohim is the quality of justice; it is (reserved) for bad, it cuts off, it makes revenge. And justice is meted through wicked individuals-they are the ethical sword and staff of God. Through their hands, God makes justice. And this is why Jacob says to Esau the wicked one, 'seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.' God forbid is he flattering him by a wonderful description such as this. Rather, the truth is, he said this because the evil one is (serves as) the face of God; the angry face of God.

Like the Kabalistic *Sefer Shaaray Haleshem*, Eyebeshutz creates a distinction between two names for God. When God needs to make justice, the 'face' used is *Elohim's*. Most provocatively, Eyebeshutz states that God's harsh judgements are 'meted out' through the actions of wicked individuals. Thus does this interpretation attempts to both clarify Genesis 33:10 ('I have seen your face as the wicked face of God's judgement.'), and put forward a theological position that claims that the evil in the world is actually one of God's justice-making tools.

These interpretations portray Esau as one who is so connected to the concept of God's harsh judgement that he is both one of the agents through whom it is executed and an eventual recipient. These portrayals obviously fit nicely with the Esau who is known as the founder of the nation that was said to have assisted in the destruction of Jerusalem and whose own destruction would signal Israel's redemption.

There is a story about this same Rabbi Eyebeshutz in a collection called *Mivkhar Amarim* that epitomizes how Jacob's statement can be re-understood to be casting Esau in the most negative light possible:

> Rabbi Jonathan Eyebeshutz was visited by a censor who was a Jewish apostate and was appointed by the government to check Jewish books to see if there were any hints of an insult in them about their religion. In the midst of the conversation, this apostate censor felt that Rabbi Jonathan was directing his eyes at the ground and was unable to look at his face. "Why sir, are you unable to look at my face--asked the apostate--did not Jacob in his words with Esau his brother look at his face, and did he not furthermore say to him, 'For I have seen your face?'"
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> "Finish sir," answered Rabbi Jonathan softly, "to the end of the citation, how does Jacob finish? 'It is like seeing the face of Elohim.' Is it possible that Jacob is comparing the honor of Esau to the honor of God, is this possible??? No, we say rather from this--this is what Jacob said to Esau...'For I have seen your face and it is like seeing the face of Elohim.'(that is to say) Just as it is impossible for a person to see the face of God as was said, 'That none can see my face and live.' (Exodus 33:20) Thus--comparison of comparisons--it is impossible for a Jew to see your face, the face of evil incarnate. Thus Chazal said, (Megillah 28a) 'It is forbidden for a person to look at the image of an evil person.'"

In this story, the apostate, who is trying to use his knowledge of the Torah to force Rabbi Eyebeshutz into making eye contact with him (even as he censors the Rabbi's holy books), is given a lesson in *midrash*. According to Eyebeshutz, Jacob told Esau, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God because looking at both of your faces is forbidden." As a similar commentary taught: "One (face) is forbidden because of its great holiness, and the other (face) is forbidden because it represents infinitely great impurity and evil."[2]

Of course, it is possible that in all of these interpretations, Esau believes that his brother is actually praising him with the name of God. (As in Bachya ben Asher's comment on page) The commentators suggest that Jacob is slyly able

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[2] From *Yismah Moshe* 'ad loc.' to *Vayishlach*, p.לט

to get away with both appeasing and insulting Esau at the same time. These commentaries seem to pick up on the side of Jacob that has been called 'clever' and 'ambitious' by his loyalists, and 'crafty or shrewd' by the skeptics. On the one hand, Jacob's calculating nature has become part of an unattractive non-Jewish stereotype of Jews (although they are only prominent, not typical of the *Avot*; the characters of Abraham and Isaac are quite different[3]). On the other hand, perhaps the condemnation of such behavior is the imposition of one era's sense of ethics upon another: "The audience for whom this story was intended...would have applauded Jacob's cleverness and duplicity and laughed when the trickster was able to demonstrate Esau's inferiority.[4] In ancient tales the hero is often cunning and deceitful (e.g. Odysseus); he is a survivor, a winner, and stories of his victories were heard with admiration and with delight in his success."[5]

This is the same Jacob who waited for just the right moment to trade food for a birthright;[6] who covered himself in goat skin to fool his father (Genesis 27:15-16); who demands that God give him the best deal possible in return for his loyalty (Genesis 28:20-22). It is surely not inconceivable that he could have made a seemingly sincere comment to his brother that was in truth a tricky

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[3] Elazar, "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence," 296.
[4] Victor Mattews, "Jacob the Trickster," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12 (1985): 195. He goes on to say that: "Today's readers are more prone to feel moral repugnance at Jacob's trickery, and more sympathy for Esau in his role as underdog. Literary examination...can perhaps remove some of our modern preconceptions regarding the text and alloew it to speak for itself."
[5] From a letter to *The Bible Review* (August 1998, 11.) in response to an article by Elie Weisel that decries the overly negative reputation of Esau.
[6] Spina, "The Face of God," 7: "Demanding the transfer of a birthright is not exactly a natural response to a brother's request for food."

double-entendre. Displaying great cleverness themselves, these commentators have been able to transform through interpretation a statement pregnant with the possibility of reconciliation and mutual recognition into the rhetoric of persuasion. They see the phrase in Genesis 33:10 as yet another example of the skill and knowledge of human nature with which Jacob is able to tame his brother's ferocity.

JACOB'S COMPARISON REFERS TO SACRIFICES TO GOD

One of the three explanations of this verse found in the Genesis Rabah collection of *midrashim* established a completely different explanation that is found in many interpretations that followed it.[7] In these commentaries, Jacob's extravagant gifts that he gives to Esau are the primary reason for comparing the 'face of Esau' to the 'face of God.' The *midrash* claims that Jacob's words referred to the three harvest festivals in which offerings were to be made to God:

> And even with respect to the face of God it is written, "ולא יראו פני ריקם" ("And none shall appear before My face empty-handed"-Exodus 23:15). So are you (Esau); none may appear before your face empty-handed.

As was discussed in Chapter One, 'appearing before God's face' is a metaphor for entering the Temple and bringing sacrifices and offerings before God's presence. Therefore, the *midrash* uses the same logic to understand Jacob to be saying something like: "I must come before you (ראיתי פניך) with a gift in the same manner (כראת) as one must come before God

[7] By far, the two most repeated interpretations out of the many sources that I researched were that 33:10 was either about Esau's guardian angel, or about sacrificial offerings.

(פני אלהים) with an offering." Jacob is therefore not referring to God in this statement, but to the act of sacrificing offerings to God; Jacob's encounter with Esau is likened to the moment of ritual sacrifice.

Genesis Rabah ends its comment without an explanation as to why it was wrong for Jacob to come 'empty-handed' to his meeting with Esau, but the famous 12th century Spanish commentator Ramban offered the following comment:

> Jacob said to him, 'Take my gift since I have seen your face and it is to me like the face of God. And favor me (ותרצני)[8] by accepting the gift just like God favors those who fear Him by accepting their offerings and sacrifices. As in, "He shall bring it (a burnt offering) to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for acceptance on his behalf (לרצנו)"(Leviticus 1:3)..."Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome (לרצון) on my altar."(Isaiah 56:7)..."May he be the favorite (רצוי) of his brothers." (Deuteronomy 33:24) In all of these examples, ר-צ-ה means acceptance and favor. Rashi wrote that here the word means pardon, as in forgive me my transgression-mollify me. As I have already said, it is not good if Jacob were mentioning sin.

Ramban provides one reason that the *midrash* equated the sacrificial encounter with Jacob's meeting with Esau: Just as people brought offerings in order to be accepted by God, Jacob brought a gift hoping that Esau would hold him in good favor and not act upon his threats. Critiquing Rashi's comment on the same *pasuk*, Ramban also uses textual evidence in an effort to prove that

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[8] Here, Ramban creates a second sentence beginning with the word (ותרצני) that actually ends 33:10 sentence in the Torah text. In doing so, he like Sadia Gaon, understands the verb to be in the future tense, suggesting that Jacob is seeking acceptence instead of reporting that he has already found it.

תרצני was in fact Jacob's appeal to Esau for acceptance, not an apology for the blessing incident.

Abravanel, a 15th century commentator who was part of the expulsion from Spain, comes to the same conclusion as Ramban. Jacob's meeting with Esau was similar to making an offering to God because in order to be accepted in both situations it was necessary to bring gifts. However, Abaravanel also wanted to make sure that Esau, who by 'despising his birthright' was understood to despise Judaism itself, is not portrayed as the 'victor' of this encounter. He points out that when a person sacrificed an offering to God, it was only for the benefit of the person; "God certainly doesn't need it," as Abarvanel puts it. Similarly, Jacob's gift to Esau was intended for his own benefit (basically, to save his own life), and not for Esau's.

Abravanel's remark that the motivation behind Jacob's gift was certainly not to increase Esau's wealth, is reminiscent of Esau's own words in Genesis 33:9. When Esau observed everything that Jacob planned to give to him he said:

"ויאמר עשו יש לי רב אחי יהי לך אשר לך"

"I have enough, my brother, let that which you brought be yours." Rabbi Baruch Epstein, a 20th century Russian scholar, refers to this incident explicitly, and in doing so, interprets the intent behind Jacob's gifts differently than Abravanel:

> What is the comparison of the seeing of the face of Esau like seeing the face of God? It is merely a parallel. Esau says, 'I have enough.' (33:9), and about this Jacob answers (*'midrashically*), 'It is not the intention of this gift to make up for any lacking. Rather, it is because this is the way of honor and elevation.' As is the case of 'seeing the face of God' as it is written, 'Three times a year, appear to the face of God...and do not see him empty-handed.' (Deuteronomy

> 16:16) Obviously, God doesn't need the offerings of us humans because, 'To God, all the earth and all that fills it!' And as it is written, 'Does God delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices?' (I Samuel 15:22) Rather, this is the way of honor and largesse. This also applies here- (In the case of Jacob and Esau)-this is the comparison to seeing the face of God.

Rabbi Epstein, like the others, views Jacob's comparison as having to do with sacrifice. However, he chooses to highlight a different purpose for sacrificial offerings; that of honoring God rather than appeasing Him. If the comparison is to make sense, Jacob's gifts must also have been motivated by a sense of honor toward Esau. Knowing the context and the individuals involved, it is possible that Rabbi Epstein meant only that Jacob was attempting to flatter Esau. However, the many commentaries that boil Jacob's words down to flattery are quite obvious about saying so. Here, on the other hand, there is no glaring indication that Epstein understood Jacob to have been insincere.

Moreover, there are other interpretations that take a similar approach. Malbim, a 19th century commentator, also interprets the reunion as being driven by a sense of honor:

> כבר סלחת את עוני והשוב לאהוב אותי, אני מבקש ולקחת מנחתי מידי, לא מיד שליח, 'כי על כן ראתי פניך כראת פני אלהים' 'ולא יראו פני ריקם' ותרצני, להראות אות הכבוד שאתה מכבד אותי לקחת מנחה מידי
>
> You have already forgiven my sin and returned to loving me. Now, I request that you take this gift from my hands—not from some messenger—because, 'I have seen your face as one sees the face of God' and one does 'not appear before Him empty handed.' Accept me, show me a sign that you honor me-take this gift.

Malbim begins by explaining that, in return for Esau's unexpected welcome, Jacob honored Esau (as one should honor God), not only with lavish

gifts, but also by presenting the gifts in person. Earlier, driven by fear, Jacob had decided to let his servants act as messengers and go ahead of him to deliver the gifts of appeasement. (Genesis 32:17-22) Malbim suggests that Esau's gracious behavior disarmed and emboldened Jacob so that he could 'face up' to Esau himself.[9] God's honor is not, however, the only reason for making sacrifice. Malbim repeats the belief that offerings are given with the hope of finding acceptance. But, Malbim's commentary has a different tone than those of Ramban's and Abravanel's. Here, Jacob does not make this 'offering' of gifts lightly, merely to get Esau off his back. In fact, the gifts are to be received by Esau in the same serious spirit as with the *kavod (*heaviness/honor) with which they were given.

The aspect of the sacrificial system that the 15th century Spanish commentator, Isaac ben Moses Aramah's *Sefer Akedat Yitzchak* focuses on is divine service. It is true that sacrifices were offered for the reasons listed previously-to appease and honor God-but most of all, they were physical manifestations of the fact that all humans were servants to an all-just and compassionate Master. Thus for Aramah, Jacob's comparison teaches that he saw Esau as his master, at least for the duration of their reunion:

> "Jacob announced that he did not think that the gift actually belonged to him. He had already agreed to serve Esau in meeting him. This is also the tradition when coming before God in the offering of sacrifices. As it is written in the Talmud (Hagigah 2a), "In the meeting, I give two shekels." This interpretation now basically has Jacob

[9] Others suggest that Jacob's newly found courage came more from his wrestling match with the mysterious stranger. There, he was given a new name, Israel (God wrestler), which meant that he had finally transcended the fraternal struggle that was bound up in his old name, Jacob ('The Supplanter).

> saying: 'Now that I have seen your face, I am obligated to serve you with these gifts, in the same manner that I must serve God when I am before Him.'

This controversial contention that Jacob suddenly became the servant of Esau can be gleaned from the Torah text itself:

> Jacob has striven to be first and to be the master over his brother and has indeed acquired his brother's blessing, which included the promise of superiority: 'Be lord over your brother, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.' (Genesis 27:29) But this is reversed in chapter 33. It is Jacob who bows down to Esau (seven times in 33:3). Jacob presents himself as 'your servant' (33:5, 14; 32:5, 19, 21) and calls Esau 'my lord (33:8, 13, 14, 15; 32: 6, 19).[10]

In the commentaries of Baruch Epstein, Malbim, and Aramah, Jacob compares seeing Esau's face to the honoring and serving of God that occurs in sacrificial service. Something that Esau did during their reunion (because Esau initially turns down the gift-Epstein; because Esau was loving and forgiving-Malbim; simply because Esau met with him face-to-face-Aramah), enabled Jacob to stop fearing Esau and begin respecting him. In sacrificial terms, these interpretations mean that Jacob's gifts went from being a peace offering ("I will appease him with the present that will go before me."-Genesis 32:21) to a thanksgiving offering ("Take my present because I have seen your face as one sees the face of God[11], and **you have been gracious to me**."-Genesis 33:10).

There are those commentators, however, who agree that by 'seeing God's Face' Jacob meant coming before God to make an offering, but cannot accept

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[10] Dicou, *Brother and Antagonist*, 123.

[11] Or, as these commentaries understand the line, 'as one makes offerings in order to honor and serve God.'

that Jacob's words reflected any positive feeling toward Esau.

Rabbi Moshe Yehiel Ha-Levi Epstein, a 20th century Israeli descendant of *Hasidic tzadik* Aryeh Leib, understood that interpreting Esau's gift to be a parallel to a sacrifice to God, was quite problematic. His commentary is an attempt to justify the fact that an offering to the 'Holy One of Blessing' is mentioned in these interpretations in the same breath as an offering to the brother they portray as intrinsically evil, the symbol of every nation that opposes Israel:

> Our Rabbis said that Jacob meant to compare bringing a gift to win Esau's acceptance with the injunction against coming before God with empty hands. But even with this explanation, this is troublesome. Because, with this understanding, a gift given to an evil person is equivalent to a sacrifice. However, there is a hint as to how this could be so in the Talmud. In Baba Batra 9a it says that during the time that the Temple was standing, a person would weigh out an offering and it atoned for him. Now that the Temple is not standing, if one gives *tzedakah*, it will atone for you. If you do not, an idol-worshipper will come and take money from you. Nevertheless, this is considered *tzedakah*, as it is said: 'ושמתי נגשיך צדקה'
> 'Your oppressors will be for righteousness.' (Isaiah 60:17)...And, about *tzedakah* itself the Rabbis say in the Talmud (Sukkah 49B) that it is greater than sacrifices. Therefore, because even *tzedakkah* taken by an evil person results in righteousness, it is certainly the thought in the case of sacrificial offerings (given to an evil person). And all of this was active in Jacob's words when he talked about acceptance—this gift was like a sacrificial offering so that Jacob would be accepted by God.... Also, about *tzedakah* it is said (Baba Batra 10A):
> 'זוכה ומקבל פני שכינה'
> 'it merits receiving the (face of the) divine presence.' And the nations taking from us (taxes), this too is considered like tzedakah, so therefore we too merit seeing the face of the Shekhinah.

Rabbi Epstien uses inter-textual parallelism to great effect. The Isaiah passage (although it was talking about an occurrence in the messianic future)

enables him to prove that justice can be carried out through an evil person. (As in the case of money set aside for *tzedakah*-but never given-being stolen by a robber). Then, through a Talmudic dictum, he establishes that this principle obviously must also apply to the Temple system. He is then set up for his conclusions: Jacob owes an offering to God for His acceptance (*tirtzeni* in this explanation is directed at God, not Esau) and in that case, even a gift given to a *rasha* such as Esau qualifies. Esau's face can therefore, without hesitation, be compared to 'seeing the face of God'—offering sacrifices. Or, to switch back to the *tzedakah* model, the comparison is now Esau's face to 'seeing the face of the *Shekhinah*'—Jacob received the divine presence because of the *tzedakah* gifts he gave to God through Esau.

Reb Nahman of Bratslav, the well-known 18th century great-grandson of the founder of *Hasidism,* also interprets the verse by applying this same principle (Under certain conditions, even when you give to idol-worshippers, it is *tzedakah)* to sacrificial offerings. He links the two systems through a quote from the prophet Malachai (3:3): 'Take my gift (מִנְחָה-*minhah*/sacrificial offerings) in righteousness (צְדָקָה-*tzedakah*).' He, like Epstein, understands that Genesis 33:10 should be read as: 'Accept my present, for giving it even to you, my evil brother (seeing your face), is a valid form of coming before God with offerings.' Reb Nahman, however, goes on to explain how it is that a truly evil person can be a vehicle for righteousness. In typical *hasidic* fashion, it is because the divine is everywhere, even on the 'lowest rungs' of humanity :

> Even given to oppressors, it is *tzedakah*. Through *tzedakkah*, God's highest will is revealed. And from there,

> the divine will works its way down to the lowest levels, and this is how it is active in Esau.

The next two commentaries justify the comparison by connecting Esau to elements of sacrifice already considered evil. Tzvi Elimelech, in his 19th century Torah commentary *Igra DeKalah*, understands the 'כ' in כראת to mean 'at the same time.' Therefore, Jacob's statement was not a comparison at all. Instead he said, "I have seen your face and **simultaneously** I saw the face of God:

> There is a hint here about these difficult things Jacob our father said from his mouth to Esau the evil one. It seems that Esau was important in his eyes; that 'seeing his face was like seeing the face of God! And he also requested that Esau accept him and take the present. But, it was actually Jacob's intention that his gift of animals to Esau was really given as part of the sacrificial commandments during *Yom Kippur* of the scapegoat. Esau is the scapegoat (in the sense that any sin a person would put on a scapegoat, Esau has committed). The verse says: Due to this gift (the *Yom Kippur* offering), I merit seeing your face (Esau the scapegoat's face) **at the same time** as I see the face of God. That is to say, at one of the seasons in which we meet God, on *Yom Kippur* when we go to the Holy of Holies, I also see the scapegoat.

Here, we are to understand that Jacob's 'gifts' to Esau are actually Yom Kippur sacrifices. Esau received his share, of course, because he represents the scapegoat, the beast who carries the sins of all the people. 'Scapegoat,' Jacob may have said, 'I see your face now as I make my offering in God's presence on this *Yom Kippur*.' (Interestingly, the place that Jacob goes directly after the reunion is called *Sukkot*, the name for the holiday which, of course, falls directly after *Yom Kippur*.)

The interpretation of Moses Teitelbaum, a 19th century *Hasid*, ties Esau once again to false gods while still defining *Elohim* as the one God:

> Jacob speaks the truth in what he tells Esau: 'I have seen your face as one sees the face of God.' That is to say, meeting you and bringing you this gift, I am performing the *mitzvah* of sacrifice, which is why it is LIKE seeing the face of God. And, all these gifts that Jacob gave to Esau, they will be returned to Israel when King Messiah comes. This is what Elijah says about the animal sacrifices made by the prophets of Baal.

Jacob knew that he was giving a gift to Esau, a *rasha*. He nevertheless compared it to an offering to God since he knew that the gifts, like all the offerings made to false gods, would eventually serve God's purpose.

All of the interpretations in this section believe that Jacob's comparison has something to do with ritual sacrifice, the moment when the worshipper is said to be in the presence of God. However, they do not view Jacob as saying that Esau is connected to God's presence, only that there is something about meeting Esau in common with the sacrificial system.

JACOB IS COMPARING ESAU TO AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

This last group of commentators cut to the heart of the matter. Although they give different explanations, all of them believe that when Jacob said כראת פני אלהים, he wasn't referring to the act of offering sacrifices; he wasn't being slyly disingenuous; he wasn't talking about an angel or a prince. They each believe that for some reason, Jacob brought God into the conversation. To them, Jacob believed that seeing Esau's face was in some way similar to being in the actual presence of God.

A *midrash* found in Genesis Rabbah explains that Jacob indeed experienced God upon seeing Esau because Esau displayed one of God's

qualities: "Even as the face of God denotes judgement," Jacob said to Esau, "so does your face denote judgement (upon me)."

It is a remarkable contrast to the interpretation of Rabbi Yitzhak Eliezar (see page 74) who wrote that Jacob looked at Esau 'through God's face' (and saw a man who deserved harsh judgement). This *midrash* claims that Esau looked at Jacob 'through God's face' (and saw a man who had been deceitful, but who now deserved **merciful** judgement). David Lieberman, commenting on this explanation, says that Esau's gracious benevolence in forgiving Jacob was, "...like the face of God; like the way that God administers justice."[12]

Biblical scholar Leslie Brisman[13] writes about this idea as it is expressed in Genesis Rabbah, and does so in a beautifully poetic fashion. He also believes that Jacob's comment was an observation of Esau's godlike display of compassion and graciousness during their reunion. Brisman recalls the second line in the biblical prayer that James Ponet calls 'The Blessing of the Face,' but is more commonly referred to as the 'Priestly Blessing' (Numbers 6:25): 'May God's face grace you with light.'[14] Brisman observes that Jacob was graced by this light in different forms throughout his lifetime. After he miraculously survived the nocturnal wrestling match, the 'sun rose upon him' (Genesis 32:32); to Brisman, this was a 'physical representation of the metaphysical component (God's face shining upon him).' Later, after Esau greets Jacob as if he didn't even remember

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[12] David Lieberman, *Eternal Torah: A New Commentary Utilizing Ancient and Modern Sources in a Grammatical, Historical and Traditional Explanation of the Text* (River Vale, NJ: Twin Pine Press, 1979), 92.
[13] Leslie Brisman, *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 91.
[14] The novel name for the blessing and the translation are from: James Ponet, "Faces: A Meditation," *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 1 (1985): 62

the incident that had Jacob so worried; ('Forgiveness, not the sword had become Esau's preferred instrument in dealing with his brother'[15]), "the sweet savor comes this time rather from the sunshine of human joy." This time it was through Esau's face, because of the graciousness it represented, that Jacob again received the blessing of being bathed in God's light.

Another contemporary biblicist, Robert Alter, compares Jacob's exclamation after he wrestled all night with God: "I have seen God face-to-face and come out alive!"(Genesis 32:31), with his sentiment at the reunion with Esau when he mentions God's face once again. That second time, however, he finished his statement with 'And you received me with kindness,' instead of, 'And I came out alive.' The experiences were remarkably similar: both times Jacob thought that he might die, and both times he was instead rewarded. Together, these two encounters were utterly transformational, a re-writing of Jacob's spiritual portfolio.[16] The wrestling turned his fears into self-assurance. The new name, Israel that he had received meant that he could overcome major obstacles;[17] then his reunion with Esau proved it; he no longer needed to be

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[15] Spina, 'The Face of God," 17.

[16] Kodell, "Jacob Wrestles With Esau," 67: The claim is made here that Jacob's transformation had begun earlier, with Laban: "Here we find a man who is just as clever and grasping as Jacob...No one before Laban has been able to get the best of Jacob because he has always been careful to keep his guard up. But with Rachel this changes. She stirs a new feeling in him...Suddenly like many others before and after him, Jacob is touched by love and for the first time becomes a vulnerable human being...He does not immediately change his wily ways...But the combination of Laban's shrewdness and Rachel's love gives Jacob a new awareness of human existence and a new openness for human transformation."

[17] Elazar, "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence. Here, this wrestling episode is paradigmatic of the Jewish people and their relationship to God. "Israel's future is not one of blind obedience to God's will but one of difficult covenant partnership, of wrestling with their own inclinations and doubts in the face of the mystery which will not fully reveal itself," 300. On a more cynical note, Elazar wonders if Jacob is really different after the wrestling for in some ways his treatment of the

Jacob, constantly struggling to supplant his brother. Esau's gracious display was comparable to the divine grace that Jacob had experienced after wrestling with God; because of his actions Esau enabled Jacob to 'see God's face' for the second time in a day.

For many, these observations are far too friendly to Esau. Rabbi Jonathan Eyebeshutz, with yet another take on this *pasuk*, writes that Jacob could have meant that Esau's face was like experiencing God without singing Esau's praises:

> Whenever a *tzadik* is in the presence of the *Shekhinah*, he is able to draw to himself holiness from it. Sometimes a *tzadik* sees in an evil person that there are holy sparks and they want to exit and they aren't able to move from their place, and the *tzadik* pulls from him the holy sparks and leaves the evil person dead. As it is said, "He gives his eyes and makes a heap of bones, as a magnet drags an iron to it." Or, he can draw the holiness of the sparks to himself. This is why Moses stared at the face of Pharaoh--to collect his holy sparks. And what about the saying that it is forbidden to look at an evil person? This is a *tzadik* who is not complete. As it says in Berachot 7, "A *tzadik* can be swallowed; a completed *tzadik* cannot be swallowed." Once the holy sparks have been collected, the *tzadik* should no longer stare into the face of the evil person. So, in Esau, there were holy sparks, and from this (aspect of Esau) came Shamaiah and Avtalion and Rabbi Meir. And therefore, Esau was buried in the cave of Machpelah. Therefore, (as the text says) "he (Jacob) was distressed." (Genesis 32:8) (A *midrash* says[18]) ...distressed so that he (Jacob) would not kill an other (אחר ים)--this ('other' that Jacob did not want to kill) is (not Esau exactly, but) really Rabbi Meir--who is called 'אחר ים' (in the Mishnah) And therefore, Jacob intentionally wanted to look at the face of Esau in order to gather the holy sparks to take from him 'holy life' and bend him under his will--and this is the truth.

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opponent mirrored the birthright scene—he doesn't let the stranger go until he can extract something of worth from him.

[18] Genesis Rabbah 76:2

Eyebeshutz is very clear: Jacob told Esau that seeing his face was 'like seeing God' because of the holy sparks inside of his brother; a vestige of the fact that Esau too was created in God's holy image. He is equally clear that the existence of those sparks had no positive effect on Jacob's 'evil' twin brother. The only good that came out of the holiness inside Esau was Rabbi Meir, apparently a descendant. This was the reason that Jacob was worried about the possibility that there would be violence at the reunion resulting in Esau's death. Interestingly, the way that Jacob is supposed to 'control' Esau's holy sparks (and presumably get him to be appeased) is to stare at him, which is the very thing Jacob told Esau he could not do in the story on page told in the name of this same Rabbi Eyebeshutz.

To Tzvi Elimelech, with another opinion about this verse collected in *Igra DeKalah*, Jacob did sense God's presence when he met Esau. But that holiness, while in the vicinity, was certainly not in his brother's face.

> It is a difficult thing to say about Jacob, our father that such a thing came out of his mouth. And if it was due to fear, also it is even more difficult to compare the face of an evil person to the face of... (the commentator cannot bear to complete this sentence) And also, our Rabbis in various *midrashim* have explained this. And me, small as I am, I also would like to explain his intention. The phrase really means, 'You see that I am looking at your face, although it is forbidden to look in the face of a person, but at the same time I am seeing the face of God. This is because the *Shekhinah* did pass before Jacob, just as they have explained how God passed before them (Exodus 33:18-23). Therefore, what appeared to Jacob's eyes when he looked in Esau's face was nothing but seeing God walk before him! And the meaning of the 'כ' in 'כ-ראת' is that of time (meaning simultaneously-this is the same explanation in Elimelech's other interpretation on the verse on page)-that is to say, 'I am looking at the Divine

> Presence, then I am permitted to look into your face because I'm not (really) looking at you, only at the Divine Presence.'

Elimelech is intrigued by the notion that the 'afterward' of God, the divine presence called *Shekhinah*, is around us even when we don't take notice. Here, Jacob, like Moses, actually is aware enough to sense this presence when it passes during his reunion with Esau. The interpretation thus negates the possibility that Jacob was (ראיתי פניך) staring at Esau the *rasha* because he was in actuality (כראת פני אלהים) looking at the *Shekhinah*.

Rabbi Tzvi Kalischer, who wrote his Torah commentary in the 19th century, agrees that Jacob's words refer to the fact that God is in the immediate vicinity of the brothers' encounter. However, he explains that God's presence helps bring the brothers together, not to keep them from looking at one another:

> The commentators are amazed at how Jacob said this to an evil person, things that appear to be flattery, God forbid! To me it appears that when Jacob saw Esau's face, he recognized immediately that God was shining his face upon him. And God drew Esau's heart to love at the same time there would have been hate. As it is written, 'I have seen your face.' And there wasn't in his face anger and wrath at me as was normal. 'Like seeing the face of *Elohim*.' This was to me a clear sign that God was shining his face to me for the good of both of us removing the hate from his heart. And you have been gracious and you have mollified me, and now–behold "**how good and how pleasant for brothers to sit together.**" And if it so happens that Esau understands Jacob's words as flattery (that he is comparing his face to that of *Elohim*, behold that Jacob's intentions had nothing to do with words of flattery. We have also found in the Bible–that when a person speaks to a person, his heart is turned toward God.[19]

[19] See the appendix for a related text.

Here, the notion is repeated that while Esau may perceive Jacob's statement to be an extraordinarily flattering comparison to God, but Jacob's intention is clearly otherwise. However, while in Bahya's interpretation (pages 63-64) Jacob's true intention was rather to insult Esau, in the understanding of Tzvi Kalischer, Jacob's words were meant to describe the experience of God turning Esau's heart toward goodness. 'I have seen your face,' this commentary would posit, 'and I see God too, because His work is evident in your sudden graciousness toward me.' Jacob does see God's face in Esau's-not the face man is not allowed to ever see, but God's metaphoric face, the divine presence that inspires even the most unlikely of people to do acts of love and kindness.

Rabbi Norman Cohen posits that Jacob made his statement because he had learned that it is mainly through our relationships with other people that we come to know God. Jacob may have meant: 'Seeing your face is like seeing God, because in fact, seeing the face of a human being is one of the few ways any of us can actually begin to experience God.' Cohen continues:

> A mature Jacob finally understood that we come to a relationship with God through our relationships with other human beings, especially those closest to us. He also understood that an act against our brother or sister, against any other human being, is a sin against the Divine. By fearing Esau, Jacob's guilty conscience imbued his brother with divine power. Esau was perhaps a stand-in for God.

After all, we are the one part of creation described as being created in God's own image; we are therefore the only image of an imageless God. When we look at a person, presumably, is as close as we can get to experiencing God. Jacob discovered this was true about his brother Esau, as modern Torah

commentator Avivah Zornberg wrote, "It was a moment of true encounter; Jacob greeted the godliness in Esau's face."[20]

A major Protestant Bible scholar, Walter Brueggeman nicely sums up this point of view:

> 'For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God- since you have treated me with such favor.' Of course, our life of faith is like that. Biblical faith offers no God who is not embedded in the fabric of human transactions. Thus estranged brotherliness leads to estrangement form God. Reconciled brotherliness, moreover, leads to reconciliation with God.

Rabbi Mordechai Gafni, part of the spiritual renewal movement in Israel, bases his interpretation on this same sense that Jacob had been estranged from God, and was seeking reconciliation. Gafni 'hears music' in the text; an interplay between the word אחר (*achar)* which represents "God being behind a person; the place of exile", and the word פני (*penay)* "which represents 'facing God'; the place of redemption." Ironically, Jacob, the son who has been blessed with the right to the Promised Land, has long been in exile while Esau was free to live in Canaan. A number of times in the story, Jacob referred to his servants going לפני, toward the place of face and redemption, while he remains אחרנו; behind them, still in exile.

As Jacob begins to move forward, the *achar* words cease, and the words with *penay* increase, as was discussed on page 56. He gets very close at פני אל, the location of the wrestling episode. But, as Brueggeman wrote, one

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[20] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 236. See also the appendix for a related text.

could not reconcile with God so long as he is estranged from his brother. As soon as Jacob saw and received his embrace, he knew that he had returned from his exile, and that he was again 'facing' God. Jacob articulated the connection between seeing Esau's face and his re-union with God with the words, 'seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.'

The *Hasidic* theological paradigm, "All is God," *'Alles is Gott'* in Yiddish, denies that God is merely approached through other people; it teaches that God is other people, and other people are God; there is actually no distinction between people and God. God is the ocean, and everything in creation is a wave, a manifestation of the ocean. Author Elie Wiesel explains Jacob's comparison using such a world-view:

> Jacob has just understood a fundamental truth: God is in man, even in suffering, even in misfortune, even in evil. God is everywhere. In every being. God does not wait for man at the end of the road, the termination of exile; He accompanies him there. More than that: He is the road, He is the exile. God holds both ends of the rope. He is present at every extremity, He is every limit. He is as part of Jacob as He is part of Esau.

Seeing Esau's face was not only 'like' God's face, but some believe that it and everything else **is** God's face. If everyone is God, such a notion would have serious implications in terms of how we should decide to treat one another. Someone once asked Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch, "How can I love wicked people?" The Rabbi's answer was also his explanation for why Jacob compared Esau to God:

> You have to love the soul within them, because it is a part of God from Above. Have compassion for God, for the holy spark that is trapped within the Shells (kabalistic expression for the evil forces that surround the soul, separating it from God). Rabbi Noson Tzvi taught that we must treat everyone with the utmost love and respect because the wicked person never loses his divine image. When Jacob met his wicked brother Esau, he said to him, "I have seen your face as if seeing the face of God." Rabbi Tzvi compared a sinful or wicked person to a sleeping king and said that even when asleep a king's honor is precious, because he is still the king and all must treat him as such.

If the idea that everything was God was taken seriously, we would each have a responsibility for every aspect of creation, even those that are undesirable. Rabbi Noson Tzvi had internalized all of the most negative characterizations of Esau, yet he still understands that Esau should be "treated with the utmost love and respect."

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was certainly no Hasid, but he is identified with the idea of 'radical responsibility of the other,' the idea that I am responsible for you, even if you don't feel the same at all towards me. The realization of this responsibility, according to Levinas, comes in the same way that Jacob finally encounters Esau—face-to-face.

CHAPTER 5

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

BACKGROUND

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1906, and immigrated to France in 1923. He studied philosophy in Strasbourg where he was influenced greatly by Heidegger and Hussel. He spent much of World War II in a hard labor camp; a Jew, he was spared a harsher fate because, as an uniformed French soldier, he was protected by the Geneva Convention. His wife and daughter were hidden during the war in a convent in the south of France. The arrangements were made by a few close friends; no doubt the experience influenced his thinking on what was to become his great theme: our responsibility for the human other.

Levinas published his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, in 1961. In that book, he articulated a highly original philosophy of ethics which opposed the ethically neutral tradition of ontology. He was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1973. Also in the 70's, he wrote a second magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being*, in which he expanded and elaborated upon his theories.

Levinas also wrote extensively on Jewish topics, and conducted numerous lectures on the Talmud, which featured an integration of his religious and philosophical thinking. In addition, Levinas directed the Alliance Israelite Orientale, an organization devoted to training teachers in Jewish subjects.

Emmanuel Levinas died on December 25, 1995. His work is not extremely well known in the American Jewish community primarily because he

didn't speak English. However, his ideas have tremendous implications for Jewish life and for philosophical discourse, and his achievements were great. As Colin Davis wrote in his Levinas primer: "Emmanuel Levinas has established an immense, unmatched reputation as the person who almost single-handedly restored philosophical respectability to ethics in post-war French thought."[1]

ETHICS AND 'THE FACE'

Levinas begins with the assumption that human beings spend much of their time preoccupied with their own thoughts and problems. We are free to construct our own universe, representing all that is within it any way we choose. We make use of all the objects we can that are in our vicinity for our own use and enjoyment. To use Levinasian terminology, anything that is not part of me is 'other', but 'I' tend to reduce the 'other' to 'same' (myself), by attempting to possess and assimilate into my world everything that I encounter. Levinas writes that, "The object is accounted for as though it were constituted by a thought...the same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same which determines the other."[2]

Into this interior world, this 'totality', will inevitably enter another person, the 'human other'. I notice this other best when I face his face; the face being composed of the most receptive organs in the body, it is through my face that I make sense of the world. The human other has a face, as I do, but hers is distinct, unique to her; she is definitely not me. To be sure, I can think of that

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[1] Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame University Press, 1996), 47.
[2] Tamra Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy* (London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 4.

other individual as an extension of myself or of I have the power, I can manipulate him and use him for my own purposes.[3] However, these actions ignore what the face clearly proves: there are fundamental differences between the other and myself. His face gives him a distinct presence. As much as I ever may be able to find out about the other, he can always surpass my idea of him. The face of the other is all of the features that can be perceived, but it signifies much more-the full meaning of the person herself.[4] As Levinas put it, "The best way of encountering the other is not to even notice the color of his eyes! For what is specifically the face cannot be reduced to that."[5]

Therefore, when we meet people this way, as they truly are-radically different from ourselves-we are truly challenged. I realize that the world is not my unique possession, and so I am not as free as I had assumed. Levinas describes this challenge by referencing, as he often does, a concept from the Hebrew Bible. The first 'revelation' from the other, he says, is the famous biblical commandment; 'You shall not commit murder.' The person orders me to do him no harm, commands me not to 'assassinate' him under the rubric of my needs.[6]

Seen from one perspective, I should kill, ignore, or try to control this other who has invaded my territory. (In fact, the other is the only being I really 'need' to

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[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1961), 14.
[4] In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 1, Section 37, Maimonides includes 'the presence and existence of a person' as one of the biblical significations of the word 'face.'
[5] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillip Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1982), 85.
[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 110: "Thou shalt not kill not only forbids the violence of murder; it also concerns all the slow and invisible killings committed in our desires and vices, in all the innocent cruelties of natural life, in our indifference to what is far and near, even in the haughty obstinacy of our objectifying and our thematizing...The entire Torah, in its minute descriptions, is concentrated on the 'thou shalt not kill' that the face of the other signifies." Significantly, TheTalmud notes that to 'whiten the face of a friend (sham him) is to murder him.

kill because of the fact that he is the one who exceeds my powers in that I am unable to consume him[7]) But, as in the overwhelming majority of person-to-person interactions, I do not. War stories tell us that it is difficult to kill someone who looks straight at you; jurors will only look at the defendants whose lives they have spared. The face stares back at us with an ethical resistance that we generally succumb to.

Levinas explains this phenomenon by describing the other as destitute, utterly needy. No matter who that other is, because I have realized that she stands apart from me and from my enjoyment or consumption of the world, I see her as disenfranchised and defenseless. She has broken through my sense of insular totality, the feeling that the world belongs to me. We have only exchanged glances; I have no idea who she is. Hence, I assume that she has needs and that I must have something that she needs. In fact, Levinas refers to all of the others that face me (regardless of their actual status) as the stranger, the poor, the widow and the orphan, using the biblical shorthand for the most vulnerable people in any society.

Ironically, then, this lowly status that I bestow upon the other is what allows him to look at me from a 'dimension of height', or 'superiority', as if a master spoke to me.[8] For, in the same way that biblical society was to welcome and take care of the neediest individuals in their midst, am I to respond to the face of the other. The other's face does not only command me not to kill him, but

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[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 216.
[8] Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 23. "The other is superior to me, not necessarily, of

also to love him, to treat him with kindness. I am of course, free to ignore these commands, but that fact leaves me no less commanded. "Levinas does not claim that murder is impossible, but that it is ethically impossible. The face is not a force, it is an authority and authority is often without force."[9]

Recognizing the force of the face leads to a major shift in our orientation. Levinas writes:

> This human inversion of the in-itself and for-itself (every man for himself) into an ethical self, into a priority of for-the-other...This radical turnabout takes place in what I call an encounter with the face of the other.[10]

This change of focus translates into an extreme responsibility for the other:

> The tie to the other is knotted only as responsibility...whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or unknowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the other. To say *hineini* (Levinas uses this biblical response-Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses at the burning bush all used it to let God know that they stood ready to do what was asked of them) to describe our only response once we have recognized the other). To do something for the other. To give...His face is what orders me to serve him. I employ this extreme formulation. The face orders and ordains me.[11]

Surely, this suggests why it is difficult to bump into another person without saying, 'After you, sir!' This responsibility is what drives me to share the things I had once thought were mine alone. "I cease to regard things simply in terms of

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course, in the sense of superior intelligence, skills, talents, virtues or holiness, but as a human existence that, in its poverty and needs, surprises and inevitably obligates me."

[9] Wright, *Twilight*, 26.

[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 202.

[11] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 97

the use I can make of them and begin, instead to view them as offerable to the other."[12]

But the responsibility of which Levinas speaks is even more radical than that. Recall that Levinas called the ethical obligation (for-the other) a 'priority.' It is not a question of everybody treating each other equally well because we are all the same. Rather, it is because the other is decidedly not me, because we are unequal that the other comes to me from a 'dimension of height.' In any interaction, I am the servant of the other and he is the one who makes demands on me. Levinas uses terms such as 'under accusation', 'persecuted', 'obsessed', 'guilty' and 'hostage' for the relation of the 'I' to the other. [13]

> I know that I am obligated with regard to the other, and consequently I demand infinitely more from myself than from the others...However hard I try, I can never adequately fulfill my responsibility towards the others. 'The more I am just, the more severely I will be judged' says a Talmudic text.[14]

Moreover, unlike Buber's I-Thou, Levinas' ethics require no reciprocity. "That the other might be responsible in my regard is his affair alone...Reciprocity is his affair...I am unequal in the face of the other, and I am also responsible for the other's lack of responsibility...But only for me! My close relations and my people are already the others and, for them, I demand justice and equality."[15]

Yet, Levinas claims that this sense of ethical urgency is not a burden.

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[12] Wright, *Twilight*, 11.
[13] Ibid., 90. Levinas does talk about concern for the self, but in a characteristic way: "Concern for myself can itself be understood as part of my concern for the others. If I do not stop serving the others in order to eat and sleep, and otherwise attest to my own needs, I will not be able to continue serving them. My lot is important. But it is still out of my responsibility that my salvation has meaning."
[14] Ibid., 76.
[15] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98-99.

"It is, rather, inspiration, and it is inspiration that makes human life meaningful."[16] Being one 'for-the-other' is nothing less than transcendent, an approximation of experiencing God. "The dimension of the divine opens forth with the human face...The other is not the incarnation of God, but his face...is the manifestation of height in which God is revealed."[17] In fact, in his writings, Levinas often spells the word 'other' with an upper case 'O' (as in 'Other') to signify how related he or she is to God.

The face of the other can be said to resemble the traditional notion of God in many respects. God can be said to be the ultimate Other. Like God, the face is a source of ethical commandments. (Actually, to Levinas the revealed law was secondary; encoding morality became necessary because even though the face calls on us to behave ethically, we don't always respond). We see the other, and we are no longer anonymous; we are reminded of our sacred ethical responsibilities. As if we are under watch, it is the closest we will get to being under the 'divine eye.' The act of turning to the other, with all of its attendant responsibilities, allows us to break out of the limitations and solitude of 'being' and experience the more holy realm associated with God, the 'beyond being'. We are thus able to move from our world of 'totality' into 'infinity.' "For Levinas, this is choseness-I am elected, called out of my narcissistic self enclosure not by the traditional God of theology but by the revelation of the face of the other."[18]

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[16] Wright, *Twilight*, 51.
[17] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78-79.
[18] Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 268.

Therefore, the human desire for transcendence is the reason that we continue to turn towards the faces (recall that the Hebrew root for the word 'face' means 'turn' and that one of the biblical uses of 'face' that Maimonides discusses is 'attention or regard for other people.'[19]) of other people, even when we understand the implications of such a move. In the introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, John Wild of Yale University said:

> Responding to the other does not fulfil a need. I can satisfy my own needs more adequately by keeping to myself and the members of the in-group with which I am identified. And yet it is the expression of a desire, as Levinas calls it, for that which transcends me and my self-directed categories that despite my nature, I turn toward the face of the other.[20]

Levinas often quotes Rabbi Israel Salanter who said, "The material needs of my neighbor are spiritual needs for me."[21] We desire a connection to God, and though this desire can never be fully satisfied, that energy is diverted to the only being who approximates Him, the human other.[22] When I truly recognize the other, I am let into the idea of infinity. The bond between myself and the other when it goes beyond totality is therefore, spirituality and religion, and this is why entering into such a bond remains attractive given its harsh obligations.[23]

To be clear, Levinas, then, is not saying that in order to enter into a relationship with God, we must first establish ethical social relations with other

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[19] *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 1, Section 37.
[20] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 16.
[21] Handelman, *Fragments*, 263.
[22] Ibid., 301: "Authentic spirituality has nothing to do with the supernatural or even with concern for one's own salvation which is but another form of self-love. Spirituality, instead, is determined by the ethical relation to the other, a relation of the most concrete kind."
[23] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

people. Rather, he believes that those human relations themselves are the only way to claim a relationship with God. Anything else is impossible since God is invisible and beyond being and therefore cannot properly be said to exist. God's existence as such is not necessary, says Levinas, quoting the prophets, "To judge the case of the poor and the miserable, is that not to know me?" (Jeremiah 22:16) The other is not God, but treating her with goodness is the only way for me to turn towards the holiness that God represents:

> The idea of the metaphysical ethical relation is the dawn of a humanity without myths...to hear the divine word (the ethical commandments) does not amount to knowing an object; it is to be in relationship with a substance (God) overflowing its own idea in me...Everything that cannot be reduced to an inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion...A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation...The comprehension of God taken as participation in his sacred life, an allegedly direct comprehension (of God) is impossible, because participation (in the Divine) is a denial of the Divine, and because nothing is more direct than the face-to-face which is straightforwardness itself...There can be no knowledge of God separated from the relationship with men.[24]

It is ironic that, although many Jewish thinkers would consider this line of thinking to be far too exclusionary of other possible ways a person may experience God, part of the motivation for Levinas to develop this philosophy was his desire to introduce God into mainstream philosophy. Levinas believed that Western thought, typified by ontology and Cartesian philosophy erred in reducing all otherness to sameness, valuing the good over the true. With their focus on the individual, his essence and thoughts, they ignore the Levinasian reality that

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[24] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77-79.

one could transcend such interiority by reaching out to the other, and in doing so, approach God.

While Levinas does not deny that ontology's emphasis on the ability of humans to form concepts is important, he posits that it should not be a 'first philosophy' because it doesn't capture the true sense of human existence which is for-the-other above for-the-self.[25] My true essence begins to take shape when an other who faces me interrupts my private thoughts. Not only because this act helps me to go beyond myself, become concerned with the suffering of others, and put their needs before mine, but also because ethics ('good beyond being'), not 'being', are the ground of knowledge. Thought and discourse have no meaning by themselves, in isolation. (As in Descartes, "I think, therefore I am.") "Utterances do not simply float in midair but are attested to or vouched for by other people."[26] All the questions that I ask myself pale in comparison to the discovery of my responsibility to others. For Levinas, ethics is the search for knowledge removed from its natural tendency to egotism. He says that, "the question *par excellance* of philosophy should not be 'why being rather than nothing, but how does being justify itself."[27] To truly know about existence, we must recognize the face of the other.

For Levinas, this debate had a practical influence on the type of society human beings should establish. Society, of course, cannot be based on ethics alone. Levinas understood that the participants in his ideal face-to-face

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[25] Levinas often said the 'philosophy should be more about the wisdom of love than the love of wisdom.'
[26] Edith Wyschogrod, "Who is Emmanuel Levinas?" *Sh'ma* 22 (March 6, 1992): 66
[27] Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), 86.

encounter know that there is always a 'third' to contend with, a face that is currently out of the picture. Once a person recognizes the responsibility inherent in the face, they become concerned about all the other 'faces' that they cannot help; this, to Levinas was the origin of the quest for justice. A system of justice, however, cannot mirror the ethical model. In essence, 'equality under the law' was born out of the inequality I feel when face-to-face with another person:

> When thinking in terms of justice, I am permitted to think of myself in the same category as other individuals, and to consider not only my obligations towards them, but also their obligations towards me. Justice is something that can be taught and preached, whereas I am not permitted to expect others to behave ethically.[28]

However, when 'Greek thought' (A major Levinasian theme is that Greek is the language of western philosophy, while Hebrew is the language of ethics), which Levinas believes is quite effective at the conceptual reasoning necessary in setting up institutions of justice, is unchecked by ethics (which, as we have seen, was the original foundation for those institutions), state sanctioned violence can ensue. In other words, Levinas demands a place for charity and mercy after justice.

> Justice remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those close by and those far off, but where there also remains the impossibility of ignoring those that are closest. After all, it was because of those that are closest that the system exists at all.[29]

To Levinas, the freedom and universality of western philosophy must be

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[28] Wright, *Twilight*, 125.

[29] Handelman, *Fragments*, 415. Levinas notes that, although flawed, the liberal state is superior in that it holds justice to the standard of human rights.

judged by an ethical standard. James Ponet writes that, "One who knows that there lurks in the world a prophet who can stand and face him-as Moses stood before Pharaoh or Nathan before David-cannot become a dictator."[30] Without ethics as 'first philosophy' Levinas argues, there was no system of thought to help ordinary Germans resist the atrocities of the Nazis, who eroded the concept of 'human' (since to them, the 'other' was part of the 'same') so that it no longer included Jews, Gypsies, etc. Levinas scholar Tamara Wright summarized Levinas' position by saying, "Western philosophy has failed humanity by...providing the individual with alibis for following his natural inclination towards self-preservation, rather than responding to the call of the other."[31] "Morality, wrote Levinas, "Begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent."[32]

The antidote is to re-discover Levinas' ethical urgency and goodness that already echoes within state institutions. Jacob Meskin writes that from Levinas' perspective, "Societies may be evil and may need radical, even revolutionary changes, but there is no utopic, immediate, new society to create out of hitherto unimagined and unimaginably spontaneous social forms. Social forms per se already recognize the ethical. We must highlight this fact because systems of pure cognition will never lead to peace"[33]

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[30] James Ponet, "Faces: A Meditation," *Onm: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 1 (1985): 58.
[31] Wright, *Twilight*, 26. Levinas makes the point that, because our rationalist modern world (in full stride in Germany) has lost the faith of theodicy, ethics, as the only approach to God, is the only way to continue sacred history and oppose violent history.
[32] Ibid., 84.
[33] Jacob Meskin, "The Other in Levinas and Derrida: Society, Philosophy, Judaism," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 417.

It was this sense of mission that may have fueled Levinas to fine-tune his ethical philosophy in *Otherwise than Being*. There, he adds God's actual presence back to the equation. Levinas explains how this is possible using the narratives surrounding the Israelite experience at Sinai. In Exodus 20:15, the people are described as 'seeing the thundering.' Rashi explains that these thunderings are actually God's voice. Deuteronomy 5:4 on the same event claims that the people saw God "face-to-face." From these passages, Levinas concludes that seeing God's face means hearing God's voice, and His 'voice' in this situation is nothing but the commandments. (Ethical commandments--Levinas believes, as we will discuss at length in the next section, that all the commandments can be interpreted as having ethical significance)[34]

One of Levinas' most often repeated biblical passages is from Exodus 33, in which God tells Moses that he cannot see His face. God does, however, agree to pass His Presence by Moses. From here, Levinas talks about God's presence as a 'trace'; that which passes by before we are aware of it.[35] Now Levinas connects this trace (which was a substitute for God's face from which was heard the word of God) to God's commandments. Therefore, the fact that we are made 'in the image of God' does not mean that we bear God's actual face. Rather, it means that we each carry the 'trace' of God, which manifests itself as the ethical commandments internalized (which we do not consciously

[34] As in the last chapters, God's face always is representative of something else, like God's presence. Here, the face represents the God's commandments. The last biblical use of the word face that Maimonides mentions in *The Guide For the Perplexed*, Part 1, Section 37 is, 'the hearing of a voice without seeing any similitude, the inability to comprehend God's existence as such.

[35] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1981), 150.

know is part of us since the trace is that which has always passed before we know about it).

Levinas has thus created another locus for ethical responsibility. Besides the face of the other, the commandments are also part of my very identity, carried in the trace of God from an immemorial past. (However, as before, the trace does not lead to God; we only come close to God through the other-to follow the trace of another is to find him) God, or 'the Good' as Levinas sometimes refers to God, is from before being. Thus, although on a conscious level, ontology is correct that self precedes the other, Levinas now asserts that, unconsciously, ethical responsibility has always been a part of us. We have an inherent orientation towards the ethical: "Responsibility for my neighbor dates from before my (ontological) freedom in an unrepresentable past that was never present."[36]

It is still through the face alone that we can become aware of our ethical responsibilities. But now that the obligations are also defined as a part of myself, they have a stronger foundation; they are more difficult to evade.[37] The other faces us, and in doing so she approximates God. At the same time, God and the commandments are always present in the encounter, in the form of the trace. Levinas explains this by again recalling Sinai, and the Israelite response to revelation, "All that the ETERNAL has spoken, we will do and hear." (Exodus 24:7) They acted before they understood just as I act on behalf of the other when I recognize his face; however, it is not because I heard the command

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[36] Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 84.
[37] Wright, *Twilight*, 84.

represented by the trace of God within. God does command me to assume responsibility for the other, but this commandment is not the cause of my response; I am only aware of it after the fact, if at all.[38]

> Ethics is meaningful because I experience myself as responsible for the others. If I recognize that this responsibility is commanded by God and not just by the face, this recognition adds an extra dimension to my understanding and experience of the ethical.[39]

The face of the other is now also imbued with the power to remind me of God's eternal presence: "The other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me...and in doing so it recalls my (ancient) responsibility."[40]

ETHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Levinas has described his philosophical role as ensuring that ethics have a primary place in philosophy. He attempted to translate the 'Hebrew' ethos of ethics into the 'Greek' of philosophy by illustrating his theories with examples from Jewish texts. If Levinas had a definition of 'the mission of Israel,' it was for the Jews to share their unique ethical teachings with the world.

At the same time, he was an interpreter of the Hebrew texts themselves. In this guise, Levinas constantly sought to interpret their every message as ethical teachings. He wrote, "Ethics provides the model worthy of transcendence and it is as an ethical kerygma that the Bible is revelation...Every text is asked to

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[38] Ibid., 91.
[39] Ibid., 92.
[40] Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*. 178 and 83.

produce prescriptive lessons."[41] He applied this ethical hermeneutic to many texts, especially the Talmud and the Bible; sometimes applying an ethical reading to passages that seemed purely theological. "In a wide variety of settings and contexts, Levinas elicits the themes of the extreme responsibility from Jewish texts."[42]

As we saw repeatedly in the previous section, Levinas often took biblical examples to be literary illustrations of the phenomena of face-to-face relations that he discussed in his philosophy. Sometimes, as in the case of concern for the 'stranger, widow and orphan' formula, there is a fairly obvious connection. However, Levinas also invoked the story of Jonah to teach that, although one may forget his infinite responsibilities towards the other, it is ultimately impossible to escape from the Good (represented in the story by God). Psalm 119:19 says, "I am a stranger on the Earth, do not hide Your commandments from me." Levinas understands the message of the passage to be that the space between the self and her world is lessened by obligations towards others. ('Commandments' above are understood by Levinas to be ethical commandments only). In Levinas' exegetic imagination, God Himself had to shut the door of the ark because Noah would never have closed it on a humanity in peril.[43]

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[41] Ibid., 207, 193.
[42] Robert Gibbs, "The Philosophy of Extreme Responsibility," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* 22 (March 6, 1992): 72.

[43] Wright, *Twilight*, 54, 61, 62

In another Levinas 'staple', he illustrates his contention that the move toward recognizing infinity can be a forward one by comparing Ulysses and Abraham. In the Odyssey, Ulysses started out in Ithaca and ended in Ithaca; he represents the ontological view that we always return to self. However, Abraham left his native land and traveled to a land unknown, not to return; he thereby exemplifies the great task of becoming a permanent self-for-the-other, doing work of goodness without expectation of reciprocity.[44] In all of these readings, Levinas demonstrates his belief that, "the writing is less important than the lessons it contains, and its inspiration is measured in terms of what it has inspired."[45]

Levinas did not take the work of hermeneutics lightly. Although he saw an ambiguity in the Bible which rendered it uniquely open to a multitude of interpretations, he wrote that it must be approached via the tradition of the Rabbinic commentaries in order to guard the text from purely subjective readings.[46] One lesson that Levinas learned from the Rabbis about biblical commentary was that it is important to pay careful attention to the details of the passage and to the context from which it was taken.

In addition, Levinas believed that the ongoing tradition of interpretation allows the text to stay alive in relation to issues contemporaneous to the given commentator, and be an eternal source of universal teachings. He saw himself as part of a chain of commentators, shedding light on and demythologizing the

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[44] Handelman, *Fragments*, 203.
[45] Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 198.
[46] Wright, *Twilight*, 156.

Bible, working to uncover its ethical meanings.[47] Because of this tradition of interpretation, the Bible, ancient as it may be, belongs to the modern study of Judaism.

The tradition of commentary itself can be seen to have an ethical component. Not surprisingly, given his involvement with 'post-modernists,' he resonates with the way biblical commentators are involved in the construction and reconstruction of meaning in the text, and they are involved in dialogue with one another. A page in the *Mikraot Gedolot* (The Hebrew Bible printed with a number of different commentaries on the same page) is not a solitary exercise of 'being', but a literary 'face-to-face' encounter. He said, "The multiplicity of persons (involved in text interpretation)...as if each person, by virtue of his own uniqueness, were able to guarantee the revelation of one aspect of the truth, so that some of its facets would never have been revealed if certain people had been absent from mankind."[48]

Characteristically, Levinas placed a sense of urgency upon this type of hermeneutics. He saw it as a parallel process to making a better society. Levinas wrote often about the 'saying' and the 'said.' The 'saying' is meaning and intention, while the 'said' is how that meaning is ultimately articulated. In ethical hermeneutics, the commentator is always searching for a *chiddush*-a new understanding in a biblical, prophetic, or philosophical text-that will help bring the 'saying' (the underlying ethical message) into the 'said' (the written commentary which tries to identify that message). The 'said' often falls short of fully

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[47] Ibid., 163.
[48] Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 195.

describing the power of the 'saying', but hopefully it moves in a positive direction.[49]

This effort can perhaps provide a roadmap for society, which, according to Levinas, should also periodically make sure it is attempting to bring the 'saying' (love and responsibility for every individual) into the 'said' (societal institutions, the 'texts of reality'). The ethical renewal of our sacred text may thus lead to the sacred renewal of our world.

LEVINAS: 'FACE-TO-FACE' WITH THE COMMENTATORS

The story of the reunion between Jacob and Esau seems to have many elements in place to be identified as a prototypical Levinasian narrative. Two 'others' meet face-to-face. Although they are twin brothers, they are as different from one another as day and night. There has been enmity between them; each has reason to fear that the other may want to do him harm. Yet, instead there are hugs, tears: reconciliation. Jacob bows to his brother, calls him "my lord" and, amazingly, refers to Esau's face with a reference to God. Gifts are offered and peace rules the day. It would seem to be an easy step to cast the story completely as an inspiring model of the ethical implications of encounter.

None of that, however, takes into account Esau's negative behavior in the narrative itself, let alone his reputation that arose out of his identification with the enemies of Israel. It ignores the theological discomfort with the notion of God's face and dismisses the linguistic possibility that Jacob didn't mention God at all.

As we have seen, a great many commentators, reading the same text that

[49] Meskin, "The Other in Levinas," 418.

I used to for the above synopsis, do not interpret Jacob's statement to Esau, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of *Elohim*," as an ethical overture from brother to brother. It would never occur to them to view the story as I have just stated it. Others, however, seem to suggest that the passage does have an ethical orientation. Therefore, before the verse can be read through the lens of Levinasian thought, it is necessary to go back the commentaries, this time armed with a working knowledge of Levinasian ethics. As Levinas himself said, "There is a necessity to refer to the continuity of readings through history, the tradition of commentaries which no excuse of direct inspiration allows one to ignore. No 'renewal' worthy of the name can dispense with these references."[50]

The goal is to bring some of the commentaries into an 'encounter' with Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, to explore the places where they agree and where they depart in terms of an understanding of this particular *pasuk*. Although Levinas maintains that, "ethics incontestably dominates the whole book,"[51] he knew that he had to contend with interpretations with which he did not agree. If we, "stretch the text across all the amplifications brought by tradition just as the strings of a violin are stretched across its wood,"[52] will there be a logical place for Levinasian thought to enter and leave its imprint on this passage? Can a face-to-face ethical paradigm be at least one credible way to read Jacob's comment?

Obviously, the major reason that Jacob's statement and Levinas' ethical

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[50] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 196.
[51] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 115.
[52] Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 197.

writings may appear, at least on the surface, to be related, is that they both somehow connect the 'face of the other' with God. However, a consistent Levinasian philosophy would not automatically be at odds with an interpretation of Jacob's comment that defines *Elohim* in 33:10 as a human being. Levinas did propose that God, through the trace, is a constant presence with us as the source of our ethical obligations. However, he was insistent that people come to understand these obligations primarily through recognition of the other's face. The trace, even if we become aware of it, merely adds 'an extra dimension' to our understanding. In fact, Levinas, who often said that atheism was, "more true" than a belief in miracles, divine intervention, or a "God who blessed the law and order of a bourgeois culture with its armies and capitals,"[53] claimed that, "although the other resembles God, the relation to the other would survive the death of God."[54]

Levinas claimed that the human other (through his face) approximates God in that the other has the ability to compel us to behave ethically. In this way, it is very similar to the biblical use of *Elohim* to denote a human being who was able to act as a 'god.' Therefore, as long as the interpreter proposes that Jacob meant that Esau was like a human *Elohim* in an ethical sense, there could still be a point of connection with Levinas.

However, this representation was not usually the case. The commentators most often posit that Jacob made his comparison for a variety of reasons that

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[53] Peperzak, *Beyond*, 31.
[54] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 123. Levinas wrote an article titled "To Love the Torah More than God," which is reprinted in the collection *Difficult Freedom* in which he put forward the notion

have nothing to do with a realization of ethical responsibilities. Sforno, for example, believes that Jacob made his statement as part of a strategy to appease Esau. Esau is not compared to an *Elohim* in that he had any positive impact upon Jacob. Levinas might have concluded that Jacob, though he faced Esau, had yet to break free of interiority:

> True encounter is not some disembodied acknowledgement of the other, mediated by concepts, or strategies, or deliberations. True encounter reveals, rather that I am directly affected by the other, affected in the very body that I find myself to have turned toward him, in the very flesh which I approach him.[55]

Kli Yakar wrote that Jacob saw Esau's face and called him his **'master.'** This corresponds to the Levinasian realization that recognition of the face amounts to an understanding that the face issues a commandment. As Levinas said, "There is a commandment of the face, as if a **master** spoke to me."[56] The next step of recognition, according to Levinas, is a positive response to the commandment. Kli Yakar suggests that Jacob took this step, commenting that Jacob's identification of Esau as his master led Jacob to return the blessing that he had wrested from their father.

To Levinas, human encounter itself was so godly that *Elohim* could be defined as a human being and still produce a compatible interpretation. However, the thought of identifying Esau (or any other) with angels and other gods would have been a hard sell to the French-Jewish philosopher. To Levinas,

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that those Jews who, after the Holocaust, cannot believe in God, should nevertheless follow the ethical precepts of 'God's Torah.'

[55] Meskin, "The Other in Levinas," 406.

[56] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89.

monotheism was not a victory of one God over all others; it was a rejection of any notion of God except One who is utterly transcendent and almost entirely unknowable. "It (monotheism) neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and numinous gods; instead it denies them."[57]

Take, for example, the *midrash* in *Genesis Rabbah* which says that Jacob meant his comment as a descriptive remark concerning how much Esau resembled the angel who had wrestled with Jacob. This line of thinking is totally inconsistent with Levinas' religious and philosophical thought. It would dismiss the angel as an imaginary being which Jacob invented in order to avoid true encounter with Esau.

Tzadok Ha-Kohen, who also presents the problematic angel, does, however, suggest that seeing Esau brought Jacob somewhat more toward Levinasian exteriority. Jacob seems, in this interpretation, to recognize Esau as a more complex individual than the one he had imagined. Esau is now real to Jacob, a well rounded 'other' as opposed to the figure concocted by Jacob before the reunion who embodied all of Jacob's most frightening and anxious moments. However, there is no indication here that this recognition led to any ethical behavior on Jacob's part or to a permanent awakening of his moral consciousness.

The commentary offered by Rabbi Jacob Culi is also notable for its few connections to a Levinas orientation. Culi imagines that Jacob said to Esau, "Accept my gifts and reconcile with me in terms of the sin which I committed

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[57] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 14.

against you; the one which I've dwelled on so much." Correspondingly, Levinas also believed that the appearance of the other before you often resulted in goodness in the forms of admission and apology.

> The self's preoccupation with the other leads it to discover itself as guilty before the other. Levinas insists that the essence of conversation is apology. To be in conversation with the other is simultaneously to recognize the other's right over the egoism, and to assert oneself.[58]

Rabbi Culi also inadvertently provides a great Levinasian slogan in his interpretation. The reason that Jacob brought up an angel to Esau was that, "it is good to mention somebody important *bifeni*-'in his face'." To Levinas, it is surely true that somebody or something important is happening 'in a person's face.'

The most modern of the interpretations presented in Chapter Three, those of David Tzvi Hoffman and Nahum Sarna, define *Elohim* as a generic divine being other than God. Both view Jacob's comment as implying a more generous recognition of Esau and containing a positive ethical orientation. Because there is no specific deity named in these commentaries, these readings may not be as offensive from a Levinasian perspective. Jacob may well have said that there was a 'divinity' in Esau that evoked a change in his viewpoint, a position that would be much more palatable to Levinas than an anthropomorphic angel.

Many of the interpretations that allow for the fact that Jacob was referring to God in relationship to Esau's face suggest that Jacob meant his statement disingenuously. I would argue that these interpretations, while in opposition to the spirit of Levinas' ethics, are still helpful in that they open the very possibility

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[58] Wright, *Twilight*, 7

that *Elohim* need not be translated as an angel or a human being. These commentators see Jacob as attempting to appease, insult, flatter or intimidate Esau.

In Levinasian thought, the other's (Esau's) very presence calls my (Jacob's) freedom and control into question so to fill me with a sudden sense of responsibility for the other. The very transcendence of this occurrence establishes God's presence. This view is certainly not represented in those commentaries that excuse Jacob's use of God language. However, it can only be realistically applied to this verse now if a critical mass of commentators have affirmed through the centuries that Jacob had, at least, meant God when he said *Elohim*, even if many of them believed he had done so for reasons that Levinas would not affirm.

The story about Rabbi Eyebeshutz and the censor raises an interesting Levinas issue. The rabbi did not make eye contact with the censor because he said that the law forbids a Jew to look into the face of an evil person. Meaning not at all to downplay how horrific the pursuers of Jews can be, I do believe that Levinas (who lived through the Holocaust) would think quite negatively of a law of this sort. If face-to-face encounters truly make recognition, understanding and transformation at least possible, than prohibiting the turning of one toward the other (especially in an interaction such as the one portrayed in the story that seemed not to include an immediate danger), seems to negate the one element of potential humanity in an inhumane situation.

Many of the interpretations that understand the passage as Jacob comparing the protocol involved in meeting Esau with the offering of sacrifices to God, refer to Exodus 23:15, "And none shall appear before My face empty-handed." A person would never be in God's presence without bearing gifts. Levinas used this same image to describe our own obligation to others. "To welcome the other is to be ready to offer my possessions to him; no face can be approached with empty hands."[59] Levinas explained that our responsibilities are actually infinite, but this overwhelming thought should not prevent us from doing for the other whatever we can for the other.

In contrast, while the commentators surely believed that human beings could not do enough to fulfil their obligations when it comes to God, most thought that Jacob, who was offering gifts to Esau only to ensure his own safety, needed to give him the bare minimum necessary to accomplish that goal. One exception is the commentary of Rabbi Baruch Epstein. According to Epstein, when Esau claimed that he did not need Jacob's gift since he "had enough," Jacob responded that it did not matter, he wanted to give him the gifts anyway, in order to honor him. This is reminiscent of the way that Levinas associated the other with the orphan, the widow and the poor. It should not matter to me if the one who faces me is factually poor; "Insofar as I am I, I stand in position of responsibility for the other, whose very otherness Levinas associates with the general context of disenfranchisement from society, influence, and power."[60]

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[59] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172.
[60] Handelman, *Fragments*, 411.

Jacob felt the need to bestow gifts upon Esau to "honor him" for the generous way that he received him. The gifts, meant originally as a bribe to a hostile Esau from a threatened Jacob, become offerings of thanksgiving; Esau is transformed into an honored person before whom a gracious Jacob should not stand "empty-handed." This is a remarkable parallel to Levinas' belief that there can be a transference from a person who is hurt by the other into one who is "for the other"...from the outrage inflicted by the other to the expiation for his fault by me.[61]

The commentaries in the last section all suggest that Jacob's reference to Esau's face and God meant that God's presence was, in fact, in the vicinity of the reunion between Jacob and Esau. These explanations, though they are a diverse group, come the closest of all the interpretations to illustrating Levinas' theory that God and a transcendent quality are active in every face-to-face encounter.

Rabbi Eyebeshutz clearly has no desire to cease the vilification of Esau. In his interpretation, Jacob's motivation for looking into the face of Esau is anything but ethical; it is to "bend him under his will." However, Jacob notices Levinasian transcendence about Esau's face; it contains "holy sparks" and that transcendence is the reason stated for the fact that Jacob did not kill Esau. And murder, according to this commentary is what the tradition says that this what a *tzadik* is supposed to do when confronted with an evil person who has holy sparks. That Jacob did not follow this tradition is no small ethical matter. Recall

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[61] Wright, *Twilight*, 55.

that the first message from the face of the other is 'Thou shalt not kill.' Eyebeshutz quotes the *midrash* in which Jacob is frightened that he may kill Esau. And Levinas states, "To exist for the other, to be called into question by the other is to fear murder more than death."[62]

Tzvi Elimelech interpretation is that the divine presence passed before Jacob in the midst of his reunion with Esau prompting his statement. Furthermore, his prooftext is Exodus 33, the same passage that Levinas uses to depict the way in which God is present in a face-to-face encounter. However, for Elimelech, God's presence prevented Jacob from seeing Esau's face and recognizing him as an other. Rabbi Tzvi Kalischer, on the other hand, does not bring the classic prooftext, but he believes that God's presence was manifest and was the catalyst for the ethical direction that the encounter took. The "face of God" in Jacob's words, then, carries their Levinasian connotation of God's voice uttering the ethical commands. 'When I see your face Esau, I hear God charging me with a moral responsibility for you.'

The contemporary commentaries described in this section have the most in common with a Levinasian approach. This, of course, may be due to the influence Levinas has had on all of them. Robert Alter believes that Jacob was referring to his back-to-back, face-to-face encounters; his wrestling match and the reunion with Esau. Both, Alter wrote, were transformational. Levinas suggested the reason why: "the face-to-face brings the 'judgement of God,' a

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[62] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 246.

new orientation of inner life, called to infinite responsibilities and to goodness."[63] Together, Alter and Levinas create *midrash:* On his journey home, Jacob had lagged behind, afraid to face his brother. After a transcendent encounter with the unknown other at Jabbok, Jacob recognized his ethical obligations. Later, he puts himself in front of his entourage, finally ready to meet Esau as an other, a decision that bears the fruit of reconciliation.

Rabbis Norman Cohen and Mordechai Gafni's contention that Jacob's comment indicated that the idea of God is best accessed through other human beings, is also Levinas' mantra: "It is our relationships with men that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of."[64] The Hasidic interpretation of Rabbi Noson Tzvi, that even wicked people are part of God and therefore deserve our love and respect, would seem to be equally resonant with Levinas' philosophy.

However, Levinas had little patience for Hasidic theology. In his writings on Judaism, he dismisses the Hasidim for how they perceive their relationship to God... "they address, praise, and reprove God as if He had human attributes and failings" as infantile.[65] Yet, many of the hasidic commentaries as presented in this thesis have at least a higher ethical component than do those in the rabbinic or medieval periods. Still others contain thinking that would not be out of place in Levinas' prized Lithuanian genre, the ethical *musar* literature.

Perhaps the reason for this dissonance is that the Hasidic theology out of

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[63]Wright, *Twilight*, 75.
[64] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79.
[65] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*.

which Noson Tzvi and Ellie Weisel's interpretations arise, see God in everything, including human relations. Levinas, on the hand, views ethics as the only area where we can be certain that God is present. Therefore, while Hasidic interpretations of the encounter between Jacob and Esau will often connect with Levinasian ethics, Levinas' philosophy has no room for the Hasidic viewpoint on anything but the divine role in guiding us to turn toward others.

Although Levinas bemoaned the fact that, "the most modern Jews know about Judaism is Hasidic tales,"[66] there can be few other parables as fitting to Levinas' notion of radical responsibility than Rabbi Tzvi's explanation as to why we must 'face' (with all Levinasian implications) wicked people. Like the king who is asleep but whose honor is still precious, the goodness of some have faded, but their divine spark which makes them an "other to whom I am obliged," remains.

A LEVINASIAN INTERPRETATION OF JACOB'S COMMENT TO ESAU

There are certainly many commentaries on this *pasuk* that contradict Levinas' belief that all of the Torah's narratives have an ethical message. Jacob's comparison statement has been understood by many interpreters to be directed at Esau in a variety of ethically neutral and negative ways. However, there are surely enough interpretations that connect in some way with Levinasian philosophy (especially beginning in the 19th century) that it would not be "the play of the phantasms of amateurs (or even charlatans)"[67] to attempt to understand Genesis 33:10 completely through the lens of Levinasian ethical philosophy. As

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 195.

Levinas scholar Tamra Wright wrote, "It is only when we are already in a position to execute a Levinasian reading... that the text can illuminate Levinas' philosophical work."[68] There does seem to be room for ethical hermeneutics, especially at this point in time, for in general, the interpretations that leaned Levinas' way have been written in the past three hundred years.

Despite the existence of many of so many Levinasian terms, concepts and scenarios in this biblical passage, Levinas never applied his ethical hermeneutics to this verse. However, James Ponet, the founder of *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale*, wrote an article called "Faces: A Meditation," in which he brings up the story of Jacob in the context of explaining Levinas. Ponet writes that most people fear facing others for exactly the reason Levinas enthuses over it: once "caught", we know we will have to respond to the other. This fear is ascribed to, "the young Jacob (who) neither revealed face (in standing before Isaac and claiming to be Esau) nor truly recognized faces (when he failed to notice that his partner on his wedding night was Leah)."[69] He was afraid to move to exteriority, to "beyond his own being."

Like others, Ponet points to the struggle at the Jabbok as the transformative event in Jacob's life. There, he meets somebody face-to-face for the first time, and appropriately calls this opponent God, for God is always the Levinasian third party behind such encounters. Then, as Israel, one who faces God and men, he is face-to-face again, this time with his brother Esau. Again, the face of the other inspires him to invoke God's name, thus recognizing God's

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[68] Wright, *Twilight*, 160.
[69] Ponet, *Faces*, 60.

presence. Jacob had overcome his fear of facing others; even though this meant staring at and sometimes dealing with "its (the face's) poverty and its meaning." After this encounter, "Jacob's life afforded him one more major facial theophany,"[70] when he recognized his son Joseph despite the royal appearance that had fooled his other children. "Now I can die," exclaimed Jacob, "having seen your face!"

Ponet concludes that the reason Jacob, "a stealthy conniver, an uninspiring survivor, a man of little faith," merits fathering the twelve tribes is that he, "learned how and why to face a face."[71] This is the goal of a religious life; to go from idolatry ('masking' your face; not seeing the other as 'other') to revelation (Truly facing the other, ready to hear the divine, ethical command that results).

Perhaps it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I believe that a year after immersing myself in everything Jacob, Esau and Levinas, I would interpret Genesis 33:10 exactly as I did on the day that the idea for this thesis was born. Jacob was sure he knew Esau; if you can know anyone 'telepathically' it is your twin. He 'knew' that Esau was still intent on carrying out his death threat against him. Jacob prepared to travel home as if getting ready for a war. The preparations, however, weren't necessary. Esau greeted Jacob with a bear hug.

It was at this point that Jacob 'saw' Esau's face for the first time. Before that moment, when Jacob looked at Esau, he could only think about his twin from his own perspective. To Jacob, Esau wasn't an other at all; in their interactions, he was really a being created in Jacob's imagination. Esau's behavior at their

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[70] Ibid., 61.
[71] Ibid., 60.

reunion was so radically different than the way 'his' Esau was supposed to act, that all of Jacob's expectations disappeared and he was forced to see Esau without any of his old filters. The images we build in our minds are comforting to us because we carry then around for so long, they seem like reality. But they are not. To Jacob, seeing Esau as he really was, with depth, virtues, faults, vulnerabilities, beauty, ugliness and strengths all his own, was awesome. Esau, completely separated from Jacob's consciousness, was stunning in his aliveness. He was, like all people are when we force ourselves to see them as wholly other, free from being jailed by our interiority and all of its bias and baggage. He was someone to get to know, be kind to, and care for. He was holy. Like seeing the face of God.

CONCLUSIONS

Some stereotypes are enduring. To this day, the biblical figure Esau is identified with non-Jews, and the negative characteristics ascribed to Esau (characteristics which in part exist because of this identification) are still part of, in some Jewish imaginations, the stereotypical non-Jew. This is nothing new. When Esau went from being the symbolic Roman, and became the representative of Christianity, he was still thought of as an idol-worshipper even though Christians accepted the one God of Israel. In fact, Esau himself is never depicted in the Bible as an idol-worshipper. While non-Jews in the United States mostly moved from prejudice to tolerance, and finally, I would argue, to acceptance in terms of their relationship with Jews, Esau is still labeled as vicious and reactionary in many Jewish places of study and worship. Those adjectives are at least questionable as a description of the biblical Esau when one examines the text itself.

Most of the surviving stereotypes of Esau and Jacob seem to come from the beginning of the story of the twins. This is the part of the story when both brothers make their major mistakes and display their most negative qualities. These mistakes and negative qualities have been exaggerated over the years, and now become part and parcel of the way we think about the twins. We internalize these characterizations and repeat them, usually without any malicious intent. For example, Rabbi Burt Visotsky, appearing on the Bill Moyers 'Genesis' television program, tried to make the noble point that the characters of Jacob and Esau have both been altered for didactic purposes:

> The rabbis very naturally-and the Christian fathers too-make oppositions. Jacob's over here, and Esau's over there. To them, they really are opposite types. And yet, in some way, the Bible doesn't do that. T..e Bible reminds us that they are twins...God isn't just the God of Jacob. God is also the God of Esau. God doesn't just prefer genius; **God also prefers the brute**. God is the God of imperfection as well.[1]

In the course of arguing against the perpetuation of stereotyping, Visotsky has repeated one of the generalizations about Esau. "Esau was a brute," and by extension (Visotsky himself admits that he is not talking merely about biblical characters, but about 'types'), brutality is a non-Jewish characteristic. Esau greedily gobbled stew and threatened Jacob during a time of high emotion. And Esau loved to hunt. (As Elie Wiesel wrote, "So what? Hunting isn't forbidden in the Bible![2]) But is Esau a 'brute' throughout the entire story?

A different way that these stereotypes are perpetuated is the desire on the part of some to switch personas; to be the stereotyped version of the 'other.' There have long been non-Jews who idealize Jews as the ultimate urbanites; people who love New York City because "if you live there, you're an automatic Jew-by-choice." They attempt to imitate what they see as the Jewish personality: 'worldly', 'clever', 'skeptical' and 'ambitious.' All of these traits have been used in characterizations, positive and negative, of Jacob.

Esau is, as we know, also Edom, but there is another sense of that word besides it being the land of the Edomites. Edom sounds like *adamah*, the ground. Esau has come to embody the land, physical labor, and simplicity.

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[1] Moyers, *Genesis*, 282.

[2] Elie Wiesel, "Esau," *Bible Review* 14, no. 2 (1998): 26

Many of the early Zionists wanted to create the 'new Jew' who, instead of being internationalist, intellectual and complicated, would become...Esau. More recently, novelist Phillip Roth described the same type of longing using the voice of a young Jewish man who was visiting a mining town with his Communist mentor. He is introduced to a local kid:

> Compared with Brownie, I felt like a kid with the most abundant and frenzied existence...compared with Brownie, that's what I was...But if something about my complexity mocked him, something about his simplicity mocked me. I turned everything into an adventure, looking always to be altered, while Brownie lived with a sense of nothing but hard necessity had been so shaped and tamed by constraint as to be able to play only the role of himself. He was without any craving that wasn't brewed in Zinc Town...He wanted life to repeat and repeat itself, and I wanted to break out. I felt like a freak wanting to be other than Brownie...**What must it be like to be Brownie? Wasn't that what the fascination with 'the people'** (Communists use the term "the people," while Jews say "the nations.") **was really all about?"**[3]

There are still others who see the twins as being two parts in search of each other; in order to become whole, each needs the qualities of the other; a symbiotic yearning. The belief is that a healthy person would possess the best of Jacob and the best of Esau. Torah teacher Avivah Zornberg says she is a person, "who is both, Jacob and Esau."[4]

Rabbi Norman Cohen wrote that this type of integration was desired by Jacob himself, that it was the true benefit of going hunting for his father:

> At the moment he put on Esau's clothes and the animal skins that his mother provided for him, he was not merely dressing up as his brother. He was demonstrating that he really possessed the qualities that were so evident in

[3] Phillip Roth, *I Married A Communist* (New York: Hougjton Mifflin Company, 1998), 207
[4] Moyers, *Genesis*, 284.

> Esau...Jacob was not only an introspective, quiet tent dweller. He was also virile, strong and cunning. He was a man of the field. It was the combination of these characteristics, the very totality of his being, that justified him receiving his father's blessing.[5]

Perhaps, some say, that the reunion scene was really about re-union; the qualities of the two brothers merging to form a more complete persona:

> The twins are at last disarmed and open, and each has in some measure integrated into himself something of the other. Esau is mild, impeccable; Jacob has a wildness in him now, he is, after all, a wrestler.[6]

All of these are ways to deal with the Jacob and Esau archetypes that we have inherited: accepting and internalizing the stereotypes about the other, wishing to become the other, and wanting to absorb the other into the self. They also all fall under the Levinasian category of interiority. They have to do with wanting to somehow own or subsume the other, to strip the other of her right to emerge on her own terms. By contrast, Levinas wrote about recognizing the other.

We live in a new age of interfaith and intercultural understanding. We want to be tolerant, and engaged in mutuality; the process of getting along with and taking care of each other without losing our own identities. For our part, the traditional interpretation of the biblical twins, with its stereotyping of Esau as the Jewish model of the "other," inhibits the advancement of such a cause. However, there is a part of the story that can be shaped into a master story for this new age. In it, Jacob does recognize and welcome Esau as "other," with

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[5] Cohen, *Voices*, 112-113.
[6] Peter Pitzele, *Our Father's Wells: A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 194.

being and dignity all his own. Jacob looks at the face of Esau with whom he has shared tears and an embrace; he sees him without pre-conceived notions. The transcendence of the moment was captured when Jacob told Esau that seeing his face reminded him of God, the One who commands just and compassionate treatment of the other.

I am not suggesting that we can turn back to the naked biblical text in order to find and then use this new paradigm. It was, however, the interpretive tradition that created the stereotypes we are currently saddled with. Scholar Daniel Elazaer wrote that, "the Bible is far more honest than some of its interpreters."[7]

However, Levinas believed that without the interpretive tradition, linking the biblical text to a present understanding, the Bible would belong to the past, useful only to historians.[8] Moreover, I would never suggest that the plain meaning of the reunion, as presented in Genesis, is that which I have proposed both here and in the last chapter. As we have seen throughout this paper, many commentators draw diverse and different conclusions.

However, as we have seen, there is a movement in the interpretations towards the kind of understanding of the biblical episode that I have put forward, one that draws from the ethical ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, just as Levinas himself had hoped for. As the modern era drew closer, as entire societies became more ethical and human rights focused in orientation (at least in principle), the interpretations of this episode began to entertain the notion that

[7] Elazar, "Jacob and Esau and the Emergence," 294.
[8] Wright, *Twilight*, 109.

recognition, reconciliation, and ethics might have played a role in the brothers' encounter.

Just as Jacob and Esau's mutual recognition put an end to their hostilities (as just such an ethical understanding would have it), those interpretations that have created a more ethical story out of the reunion narrative have indeed changed some Jewish minds about Esau. Elie Wiesel asks that we give him the benefit of the doubt. Edmund Berg asks for 'justice for Esau, and refers his readers to Deuteronomy 23:8 ("You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother") saying, "My hope is that we have plenty of strong-minded amongst us who will be able to change their opinions about Esau, our brother."[9]

The founder of modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch was one of those who was able, through an ethical understanding of the reunion story, to 'change his opinion' about Esau:

> Esau betrays his origins and shows himself as not merely a cruel hunter. Otherwise he could never have reached such a leading position (speaking of Christianity) in the development of mankind. The sword alone, brute force, cannot accomplish this. Even Esau gradually relinquishes his sword and begins to feel the chords of human love...When the strong-Esau-falls on the neck of the weak-Jacob-and casts his sword away, than we know that humanity and justice have prevailed.[10]

Of course, it is possible to claim that the fact that Jacob and Esau acted like mature adults at their reunion has no message for us today. Some biblical

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[9] Wiesel, "Esau," 27, and Edmund Berg, "Justice for Esau," *Dor le Dor* 12 (1984): 236.

[10] Leibowitz, *New Studies*, 375. See also Rabbi Burt Visotsky in Moyers, *Genesis*, 282: You know, I think we always give Esau short shrift...At the beginning of the story, Esau is so concerned about his stomach that he's willing to sell his birthright for a bowl of lentils...And yet, twenty years later, when Jacob returns, Esau has grown tremendously. He's got lots of wealth. And he's utterly forgiving.

critics write the whole episode off as a polemic written in order to explain a period of peace and friendship between Israel and Edom (Just as somebody may someday dismiss the ethical interpretations of the brothers' reunion because it was written at a time of peace and friendship between Jews and non-Jews). However, Levinas has said:

> The modern historical criticism has shown that the Bible had multiple authors spread over very different periods, contrary to what was believed several centuries ago, changes none of this conviction, to the contrary. For I have always thought that the great miracle of the Bible lies not at all in the common literary origin, but, inversely, in the confluence of different literatures toward the same essential content. The miracle of the confluence is greater than the miracle of the unique author. Now the pole of this confluence is the ethical, which incontestably dominates the whole book.[11]

In other words, regardless of the origin, lessons of religious significance that can be legitimately extracted from the text can continue to be quite powerful. We can stay with the teachings of Jacob and Esau's early years, with their attached legacy of negative interpretations. Or we can begin to refer to the reunion encounter, with its ongoing history of progressively more ethical understandings, as our main model for teaching the essence of meaningful relationships with the other.

If we believe, for example, that by facing Esau, Jacob became a more compassionate and understanding person, we can make sure that our Sunday school space, as well as our prayer space, allows for face-to-face interaction. If facing the other enables us to fill in the gaps that exist between human beings, let us facilitate such encounters.

I have learned a lot about the hesitance of people to face others from my one-year old daughter Zoey. Zoey is fascinated by new people, and she is also an attention-seeker. On the subway, in elevators, or at the airport, Zoey will find a person and stare at their face. Normally, they are looking any way they can to avoid eye contact with an 'other.' But Zoey doesn't give up. She waves, smiles, and makes her 'fish face.' The person will eventually look up and look Zoey in the face. Inevitably, their demeanor changes. They smile; they want to talk, share and play. They would help us if we asked for it. Not everybody is as cute as a one-year-old baby is. It isn't easy to look up at faces, especially those we don't know. It reminds us that others do exist, others for whom we are responsible. But I believe that something inside of us changes for the better if and when we face the other. As Levinas said, "The face-to-face relation is an account of the possibility for a human being to break with the natural inclination of living beings and place the needs of others above his own."[12]

Moreover, we know that Jacob and Esau were more than two individuals. They represented nations. While, in another context, this fact was a source of pain and prejudice, transferred to this new paradigm, it can be used to promote peace. The time is right; with relations with the 'children of Esau' in good shape, to allow the reunion to become our chief political image of Jacob and Esau, so that we may have a new model to follow if the situation deteriorates. Mutual recognition and understanding versus labeling and fear, respect and tolerance as opposed to distrust, are the messages this story can carry to nations and

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[11] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 115
[12] Wright, *Twilight*, 26

peoples. If a nation lives in interiority, it means that it believes everything in creation exists for its own benefit, and is ripe for the taking. On the other hand, a nation that recognizes other entities as distinct and worthwhile for its own sake, views itself as being responsible for helping to relieve suffering in the world, and sees the godliness in the ways of people different than themselves has gone 'beyond being.' His is, said Levinas, "a philosophy of peace rather than war."[13]

I was teaching about Levinas at a synagogue, and the Rabbi raised a challenging question. "Don't you think that if the Zionists in 1948 had used this philosophy, there would be no State of Israel?" I answered that there were in fact voices in the early days, such as Martin Buber, which were calling for just such an ethical approach. But, I conceded, Levinas' philosophy was an ideal that sometimes was too unrealistic to actually be put fully into practice. However, serves to remind us how we should respond to one another; we have a long way to go before we need too worry about taking Levinas' ideal too far. Upon much reflection, I believe I should have added another argument. While it may be true that the State of Israel could not have survived if it utilized Levinasian ethics, it is equally true and perhaps more poignant to say that there may have no Holocaust if more people had a grasp of Levinasian ethics.

When Jacob finally looked into Esau's face and recognized him as a distinct and dignified being, their years of enmity disappeared. We all know that life is rarely so clear. There are people who will look directly into the "destitute" faces of the others, and despite the fact that the face commands, "Thou shalt not

[13] Ibid., 50.

kill," will commit violence in all of its forms. Still, this is no reason to give up on the idea of giving people permission to look into faces and to receive the looks of others. Emmanuel Levinas said that "there is no moral life without utopianism."[14] I truly believe that recognizing the other through face-to-face encounters generally enhances both our spiritual and ethical lives. My ultimate vision of a better world is one in which it would not be a surprise at all to hear the following as a standard greeting: "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."

[14]Ibid., 27.

APPENDIX A

TABLE OF COMMENTARIES

Each citation lists the source where I found the given interpretation. The interpretations are in the order that they appear in the thesis. Unless noted, the commentary can be found *ad loc.* to Genesis 33:10.

COMMENTARIES IN CHAPTER TWO

1. Targum Onkelos-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה
2. Sforno (Obadiah ben Jacob)-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה
3. Rabbi Bachya ben Asher-*Torah Commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher. Translated and Annotated by Eliyahu Munk.*
4. Saadia Gaon-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה
5. Rabbi Jacob Tzvi Mecklenberg- הכתב והקבלה: באור על חמשה חומשי תורה
6. Or Hachayim (Hayyim Ibn Attar)-*Mabat-The CD-ROM Library:* התקליטור התורני
7. Keli Yakar (Ephriam Solomon ben Haim)-*Mabat-The CD-ROM Library:* התקליטור התורני
8. *Sefer Shaaray Haleshem-* חלק "ב" פרק "יב"-Topic: The Exile and the Exile of The Shekhinah
9. Rabbi Norman Cohen-*Self, Struggle and Change*-Page 114

COMMENTARIES IN CHAPTER 3

10. Targum Yonaton-*Mabat-The CD-ROM Library:* התקליטור התורני
11. Genesis Rabbah-This *midrash* is 78:3, *ad loc.* to Genesis 32:29: בראשית רבה: הערות ומפתחות בידי א•א• הלוי
12. Rabbi Moshe ben Chayim Alshech- ספר תורת משה מוהר"ר משה אלשיך
13. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki)-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה

14. Jacob ben Asher-פירוש התורה לרב יעקב בעל הטורים
15. Keli Yakar-*Mabat-The CD-ROM Library:* התקליטור התורני
16. Rabbi Moshe ben Chayim Alshech- ספר תורת משה: מוהר"ר משה אלשיך
17. Rabbi Tzadok Ha-Kohen- ספר פרי צדיק: על התורה ור"ח וחנוכה
18. *The Zohar* 163b on Exodus Terumah. Translated by Maurice Simaon and Dr. Paul P. Levertoff, pages 63-65.

COMMENTARIES IN CHAPTER 3 CONTINUED

19. Rabbi Bahya ben Asher-*The CD-ROM Library*: התקליטור התורני
20. *Sefer Chassidim*- Chapter 178, ספרים היוצים לאור בפעם ראשונה: על ידי חברת מקיצי נרד
21. Ibn Ezra Abraham-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה
22. Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi)-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה
23. Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben Gershom)- חמישה חומשי תורה ועם ו לוי בן גרשום
24. Rabbi Jacob Culi- ילקוט מעם לועז: והוא אוצר האגדה הפירושים וההלכה על תורה נביאים וכתובים
25. Rabbi Tier-באר מים חיים
26. Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman- ספר בראשית: עם פירושו הרב דוד צבי הופמן
27. Nahum Sarna-*The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*

COMMENTARIES IN CHAPTER 4

28. Samuel David Luzzato-באור על התורה
29. Genesis Rabbah-This *midrash* is 75:10, not *ad loc.* to 33:10: בידי א•א• הלוי
30. The Talmud 41b
31. Rabbi Isaac Elijah Landau-מאוצרנו הישן
32. Rabbi Jonathan Eyebeshutz-יערות דבש חלק "ב" דרוש "ה"
33. Story About Rabbi Eyebeshutz- מבחר אמרים: ליקוטי מאמרים, אמרות, משלים סיפורים על פרשיות התורה
34. Genesis Rabbah 78:12-This is the *midrash ad loc.* to 33:10: בראשית רבה: הערות ומפתחות בידי א•א• הלוי
35. Ramban-תורת חיים-חמשה חומשי תורה
36. Abravanel-פירוש על התורה: דוד יצחק אברבנאל
37. Rabbi Baruch Epstein- עיטורי תורה: דברי חכמה, בינה ומוסר יסודתם בהררי קודש, במורשת גדולי ישראל
38. Malbim (Meir Yehuda Leibush)-התורה והמצוה
39. Isaac ben Moses Aramah- ספר עקדת יצחק: חובר הפלא ופלא על חמשה חומשי תורה ועל חמש מגלות
40. Rabbi Moshe Yehiel Ha-Levi Epstein- ספר אש דת על התורה סדרת באר משה
41. Reb Nahman of Bratslav- ספר ליקוטי מוהר"ן
42. Tzvi Elimelech-ספר אגרא דכלה: על חמשה חומשי תורה

43.Moses Teitelbaum-ספר ישמח משה
44. Genesis Rabbah-Another part of the *midrash* that is *ad loc.* to 33:10:
בראשית רבה: הערות ומפתחות בידי א•א• הלוי
45. Leslie Brisman-*The Face of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis*, page 91.
46. Robert Alter-*Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, page186.
47. Rabbi Jonathan Eyebeshutz-ספר פרדס יוסף: על התורה
48. Tzvi Elimelech-ספר אגרא דכלה: על חמשה חומשי תורה
50. Rabbi Tzvi Kalischer- אבני חן: על חמשה חומשי תורה
51. Rabbi Norman Cohen-*Voices From Genesis*, page 123.
52. Walter Brueggemann-*Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*, page 134.
53. Rabbi Mordechai Gafni-*Genesis* (Side B of 'VaYetze-VaYishlach audiotape from the Milah Institute)
54. Elie Wiesel-From *Wrestling With Angels* by Naomi Rosenblatt, page 304.
55. Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg-From *An Open Heart: The Mystic Path of Loving People* by Yitzhak Buxbaum, pages 45-46.

APPENDIX B

RELATED TEXTS

In the course of my research, I have come across some wonderful texts having to do with 'face' that did not quite fit anyw[illegible]re within the body of the thesis because they do not speak directly to Genesis 33:10. Two of my favorites are summarized on these pages.

'IN YOUR FACE'

The first text was brought to my attention by my teacher Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. It is Hasidic in origin, written by Nafali Tsvi Horowitz of Ropczyce (1760-1827). Rabbi Kushner has given the piece a title: "In Your Face!"

The text is discussing how to reconcile the fact that human beings are unable to see God's face with the passage in Deuteronomy 5:4 that says: "Face to face God spoke to you on the mountain out of fire," and Psalm 16:8: "I have set God before me always."

Horowitz then says that the 'ineffable' name for God, YHVH, is hinted at in the Hebrew letter 'aleph,' because the 'aleph' is comprised of two 'yoods' and one 'vav', and the numerical value of those letters is 26, the same as the value of YHVH.

(א=י ו י)

And lo and behold, this truth is in the face of every human being:

בפני האדם 2 עינים דוגמת צורה 2 יודיין והחוטס
דוגמת וא"ו והוא דוגמת אל"ף ועל זה, "בצלם אלהים
ברא אתו•" כי בצורת האדם חקוק צורת אות "א" שמורה
שם הוי" והנה ידוע שצלם הוא האור המקיף נגד צורה
של אדם••על זה לצייר תמיד נוכחינו צלם זה לידע
שחותם ה" נגד פניו ולדמות צורה ליצרה•••זכינו
לעמוד הנבחר ושמענו יוצא האות אל"ף זה נכלל ונתגלה
לנו צורה האות אל"ף "וכל העם רואים את הקול" שהיה
רואים את הנשמה ראינו צורה ה אל"ף שמורה על שם
הוי" וראו והבינו שזה גם כן צורה פניכם למען תהיה
יראתו על פניכם נבלתי תחטתו "ויומר משה אל-העם אל-
תיראו כי לבעבור נסות אתכם בא האלהים ובעבור תהיה
יראתו על-פניכם לולתי תחטאו" כי בשאדם הולך תמיד
במחשבה זה לא במהרה הוא חוטא

(In the face of man, there are two eyes which are in the form of the two 'yoods.' And there is a nose, which is like a 'vav.' And this (the two 'yoods' and the 'vav')

is the likeness of the letter 'aleph', and this 'aleph' (in our face) is the meaning of, "In the image of God He created them" -Genesis 1:27-Because, this (God's) image is stamped onto each person in the form of the letter 'aleph.' And this 'aleph' points towards the name YHVH. And it is known that this image is the light which surrounds every one of us. And this form is always before us, it is known that the seal of God is in each face, for that which is formed should reflect that which formed it...And we, the chosen, merited to stand and hear the voice which came out as an 'aleph.' Revelation came to us in the form of the letter 'aleph.' As it is written, "And all of the people SAW the sound."-Exodus 20:15- The saw what they heard...what the saw was the form of the letter 'aleph' which points towards the name YHVH. And they saw it and they understood that this form was also on everybody's face. And therefore, the 'awesomeness of God' would be on everybody's face so that they would be without sin. As it is written, "Moses said to the people" Do not be afraid! For it is to test you that God has come, to have the awe of him be upon you, so that you do not sin."-Exodus 20:17- For if a person lives his life always thinking this, he will not be so quick to sin.)

As to the initial questions, 'seeing God face-to-face, and 'setting God before you always' is explained by the 'aleph,' comprised of our two eyes ' ' and our nose ׀ , in each of our faces. This 'aleph' equals YHVH in gematria, therefore the aleph in our face is the 'stamp of God.' God is before us, then in a most concrete way, when we look into the face of another person, for 'that which is formed should reflect that which formed it.' Seeing God face-to-face brings the text to revelation. It is said that all that was heard at Sinai was the sound of the 'silent' letter 'aleph.' The 'aleph' of the first word of revelation, אנכי.

But Torah said that the people not only heard revelation, but they saw it too. That is, they saw the word of God every time they looked at another person's face. The faces have the 'aleph' which points to God's name, which reminds us of God's word. The prooftext from Exodus uses a face idiom, פניכם which Horowitz translates literally to mean 'the awe of God will be IN YOUR FACE.' When we look into one another's faces, we 'see God' and this fact (God is set before us always), concludes Horowitz should make us less likely to sin.

This text corresponds somewhat with Rabbi Jacob Culi (page 66) who wrote also used a face metaphor when he wrote, 'Jacob mentioned to Esau that there was a divine being in his face.' It is also reminiscent of Avivah Zornberg's statement, "Jacob greeted the godliness in Esau's face." (page 94) But most of all, this text is Levinasian!

Levinas says that the face of the other is "the manifestation of height in which God is revealed.". Horowitz also connects the face to God; in each face there is an 'aleph' which represents God. Levinas makes a further claim: that being made in God's image means we carry a 'trace' of God. Horowitz calls it

"the light which surrounds each one of us." Both believe that 'seeing God's face' at Sinai meant hearing God's word. For both though, the idea that we all are created in the image of God is not concrete enough to explain ethical behavior. Levinas solves this problem by positing that the face itself, in it's 'poverty' reminds us of our obligations. Horowitz claims that the reminder is that our very faces contain the 'aleph' which is also a symbol which represents God. For Levinas, when I am face-to-face with another person, and truly recognize the fact the 'dimension of God opens forth from his face,' I know that I am obligated to treat him with kindness and compassion. For Horowitz, when we realize that everybody's face has the 'stamp' of God (that God is in every face that we encounter) so that God is before us always, we cannot be so quick to sin.

Levinas' 'Hasidic problem' must be merely stylistic for on the basis of this text, he and the Hasidim seem to speak the same language.

'AS A FACE IS TO A FACE IN WATER, SO IS THE HEART OF A PERSON WHO FACES ANOTHER'

The second text is a commentary by Rabbi Joseph Hayyim Sonnenfeld, a late 19th, early 20th century rabbi. He uses a classic style of Jewish sermons in which he begins with a biblical text from The Prophets or The Writings, and ends up relating it to a Torah passage. In this case, the Torah passage is Jacob and Esau's reunion, the narrative directly before Jacob makes his comment to Esau in 33:10.

He begins with Proverbs 27:17-

כמים הפנים לפנים כן לב האדם לאדם

("As a face is to a face in water, so is the heart of a person to another")

Sonnenfeld begins by relating the story of a rabbi who was having problems with an individual in his synagogue. This individual was bothering so many people that the rabbi finally asked him to leave. Later, this individual sees the rabbi away from the synagogue and takes the opportunity to go after him in a violent rage. He comes face-to-face with the rabbi, and suddenly the individual relaxed and left peaceably.

The students of the rabbi later ask him how he accomplished such a feat. the rest of the commentary is the response:

When I saw that the informer was galloping on his horse and coming closer and closer, I searched for one line from the holy Torah. And behold a line from Proverbs came to me--(27:17) 'Like a face to a face in water, so is the heart of a person to another person.' Immediately I began to think in order to find merit in this person. About how unfortunate and how he needed compassion over the low ethical depths into which he had sunk. And who knows, maybe if he had received a proper education in his childhood he would not have reached the place he has reached. So I continued to try and find merit until my compassion was stirred up and it happened that in my heart there was nothing but good about him.

And with my focus being thus, the principle of 'Like a face to face in water' was activated, and into his heart was entered good thoughts and he began to think, 'Maybe the rabbi is correct. It certainly could be that he did what he did with pure intentions, for the sake of heaven, not for the sake of a fight.' And of course, with all of these thoughts within him, his heart softened and he reached a certain level of character and sought forgiveness. This is like when the messengers said to Jacob, 'We came to your brother Esau but Esau behaved to Jacob as an evil person who still hates him.' And truly, Esau hated Jacob, but so to did Jacob hate him because, 'those who hate you, God, I will hate.' And then the Torah says, "And Jacob lifted up his eyes and saw Esau coming close with four hundred men with him.' When Jacob saw the danger that was coming close, what did he do? 'He bowed to the ground seven times until he came close to his brother.' Jacob was bowing in order to force his thoughts and find merit in Esau, until they were really brothers, as it says, "they came close." Through Jacob's thought of Esau's merit, a brotherly feeling was awakened in Esau...'And Esau ran toward him and hugged him.' Rabbi Simeon ben Johai said, 'Is it not well known that Esau hated Jacob? But at that moment his compassion was stirred and he kissed him with his whole heart.

Sonnenfeld's tale of the angry congregant is obviously an allegory for the Jacob-Esau reunion. Sonnenfeld's take on face-to-face encounters is different than Levinas. For Levinas, the face of the other should transform us compel us to be ethical. Sonnenfeld switches the protagonist; if I am facing the other, I am the agent of transformation, I have the ability to compel him or her to act ethically.

Sonnenfeld emphasizes the heart's role in the face-to-face encounter. As the Proverb suggests, if your heart is positive and loving, the heart of the other who you face can look the same-just like the face you see reflected in water is your mirror image. To Sonnenfeld, Esau truly had evil intent when he came to meet Jacob. Jacob, fighting with his heart, forced himself to find love for Esau. This is what he was doing when it appeared he was bowing to Esau-he was concentrating on loving Esau! Esau, face-to-face with Jacob's love, was transformed.

While Levinas teaches us how the other can have a powerful effect on us, Soonnenfeld's lesson is equally instructive-we can have a powerful effect on others. (It is incredibly reminiscent of Martin Luther King's ideology) Both men teach us that facing the other is the ultimate way that transformation occurs.

This text is similar to the commentary of Rabbi Tzvi Kalischer (page 92), who also wrote that Esau's heart was changed suddenly upon seeing Jacob. But Kalischer ascribes this transformation to God (which is why Jacob said that when he saw Esau, he saw God), while Sonnnenfeld gives more of the credit to Jacob. But Kalischer does believe people are the agents of this potential for transformation as he says at the end of his comment, 'when a person speaks to a person, his heart is turned to God.'

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