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"Masoretic Midrash: Cantillation as Commentary"

Cantor Daniel Sklar – Thesis Summary

For millenia, biblical chant has served to ornament the biblical text and to lift the words from the page, weaving text and melody into a braided cord of tradition. So inextricably linked are the two that to privilege one discipline above the other would be a disservice to the scribes and scholars who painstakingly preserved our texts over the centuries and also to the student of Torah, whose inevitable aim is a deeper understanding of the text. This study will examine the cantillation markings of the Hebrew bible in an effort to utilize their grammatical and musical forms as a layer of commentary and to compare and contrast the trope with classical midrashim.

The study is divided in two parts, or chapters. Part One explores the historical background of cantillation and provides an introduction to the tropes themselves. Part Two presents the reconciliation scene between Jacob and Esau (Gen 33:1-18) as a model for cantillation exploration with first, an explanation of the plain meaning of the text, followed by questions posed by the text and its trope. This section includes a verse by verse exegetical commentary on the tropes followed by a commentary on selected, relevant, classical midrashim.

The Conclusion will determine to what extent the accentuation system of the Masoretes can be seen as complementary to the classical midrashim or whether the two types of commentary are more antithetical in nature. The thesis is based upon a close reading of the Masoretic biblical text and involves relevant classical midrashim, as well as scholarship on the history of the cantillation markings themselves.

MASORETIC MIDRASH: CANTILLATION AS COMMENTARY

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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And though many years have passed, I cannot say exactly how many, but more at all events than two thousand years, they have not altered even a single word of what had been written by [Moses].

-Philo the Jew (as retold by Eusebius of Caesarea- transl. by E.H. Gifford)

[Attributed to R. Meir]: *When I came to R. Ishmael he said to me, "My son, what is your profession?" I answered him, "I am a scribe." He said to me, "My son, take care in your work for your work is the work of heaven; and if you should omit but one letter or add a single letter, you would cause the destruction of the entire world and everything in it."*

BT. *Eruvin* 13a

Rabbi Shefatiah further said in the name of Rabbi Johanan: "If one reads the Scripture without a melody or learns the Mishnah without a tune, of him the Scripture says (Ezekiel 20:25), 'Moreover, I gave them laws that were not good...'"

BT. *Megillah* 32a (transl. by Joshua Jacobson)

Occasionally the speaker is assisted by movements of his eyes, his eyebrows, or his whole head and both hand- in order to express anger, pleasure, supplication or haughtiness, to whatever degree he desires. for in the poor remnant of our language which has been preserved in writing, a language created and instituted by God, are implanted subtle elements that serve to promote the complete understanding of the intent of the speaker, taking the place of the above-mentioned ubiquitous gestures used in oral communication.

These are the accents [te'amim] with which the holy text is read. They signify the places where the speaker intended to pause between two thoughts or the place where he intended to connect words together. They separate question from answer, subject from predicate, words spoken in haste from more deliberate speech, command from supplication. One could write volumes on this subject!

-Yehuda Ha-Levy (from *The Kuzari*- transl. by Joshua Jacobson)

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Introduction

For millenia, biblical chant has served to ornament the biblical text and to lift the words from the page, weaving text and melody into a braided cord of tradition. So inextricably linked are the two that to privilege one discipline above the other would be a disservice to the scribes and scholars who painstakingly preserved our texts over the centuries and also to the student of Torah, whose inevitable aim is a deeper understanding of the text. This study will examine the cantillation markings of the Hebrew bible in an effort to utilize their grammatical and musical forms as a layer of commentary and interpretation.

Part One explores the historical background of cantillation, provides an introduction to the tropes themselves, and commences the search for the meaning behind the tropal system with an analysis of two unusual tropes. Part Two presents the reconciliation scene between Jacob and Esau (Gen 33:1-18) as a model for cantillation exploration with first, an explanation of the plain meaning of the text, followed by questions posed by the text and its trope. This section includes a verse by verse exegetical commentary on the tropes, followed by a commentary on selected, relevant, classical midrashim.

The Conclusion will determine to what extent the accentuation system of the Masoretes can be seen as complementary to the classical midrashim or whether the two types of commentary are more adversarial in nature.

Part One:
Background of the Trope System

a. The Work of the Masoretes

Rabbinic Judaism began in earnest with the recognition of an Oral Torah (תורה שבעל פה), equal in authority, but separate and distinct from the Written Torah (תורה שבכתב). This division raises a host of questions related to canonization and the scribal enterprise writ large, but a basic and fundamental question born of this division is, "How did the Written Torah come to be written?" In the early stages of its development, its successful transmission was wholly dependent upon anonymous but dedicated generations of scribes, *soferim*:

> Transcribers who were skilled in the exact copying of the Bible and were therefore legally recognized as people knowledgeable in Torah, and who were accomplished scholars of it. The term *soferim*, which in the beginning was a term for scholars of the Torah in general (*divrei soferim*, M. *Sanh*. 11:3), in time became limited to those scholars who specialized in the Written Law and in its exact transmission.[1]

By the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, attributions became pro forma, and glimpses of the heretofore unseen world of the scribes and the scribal enterprise began to emerge:

> R. Hisda found R. Hananel writing scrolls without a copy. He said to him, "You are qualified to write the whole Torah by heart," but these are the words of the Sages: It is forbidden to write one letter that is not from a copy. Considering this point, he said, "You are qualified to write the whole Torah by heart." From this we may derive that he could produce them correctly, and [we see] that R. Meir wrote [as well].[2]

By the time of this Talmudic passage, the work of the scribe was that of a manuscript copyist, despite R. Hananel's unorthodox practice of writing from memory. But before this period of the scribal enterprise, the work was, in fact, carried out by means of oral transmission. Even in this early stage, instructional aids such as pagination, scoring of lines, paragraph formulation,

1. Aron Dotan, "Masorah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2d ed., p. 606.
2. BT. *Megillah* 18b.

sections with special text settings (such as the songs), and the very order of the books themselves became a part of the holy writ. Exceptional markings, including enlarged or diminished letters, suspended letters, as well as diacritical marks above certain words were also codified at this early stage in the development of the Written Torah and are present in the scrolls we read today.

This paper will focus on the next wave of textual innovations that developed after the canonization and sanctification of the Torah scroll. As with the oral transmission of the holy Torah text, these new study aids were originally an oral tradition that was eventually written down and includes the development of the vocalization and accentuation of the text, the result of the meticulous work of the Masoretes:

> *Massorah* originally signified "tradition" in its widest sense.[2] Subsequently its significance was restricted to a particular kind of tradition. It came to connote that vast system of literary labours carried on between the second and tenth centuries C.E. by the *Soferim*, or Professional Scribes and their successors, the Masoretes proper, in connection with the transcription and critical annotation of the Scriptures. These labours were of a varied character, and their object was to establish a standard and infallible text of the Sacred Writings in conformity with "traditions" which had been "handed down" (מסר) by Scriptural experts from early times.[3]

[2] See *Mishnah Shekalim*, vi. 1.

The Masoretic period can be broken down into three, distinct units: the talmudic period, the post-talmudic period until the landmark grammatical treatise *Sefer Dikdukei ha-Te'amim* of Aaron ben Asher in the tenth century, and the flourishing field of grammatical study from ben Asher's day until the present. Of particular interest to our study is the second period, during which time the vowel and accent markings went through their own process of codification. The

3. Isidore Harris, "The Rise and Development of the Massorah. I," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 128-129.

reigning theory as to the dating of the vocalization system posits its origin in the early part of the seventh century.[4] This dating allows for the completion of both the Syrian vowel system, as well as an early musical notation upon which the Hebrew system is based. The vowels signs are commonly, and most likely mistakenly, credited as an innovation of the school of Masoretes in Tiberias. Harris makes three arguments for Babylonian origins; the second (dealing with regional differences in the pronunciation of the vowel *kamatz*) and third (which points to regional differences in *beged kefet*- the letters which receive a *dagesh* at the beginning of a word and after closed syllables) make a compelling case:

> (2.) The derivation of the term *Kamez*, just given, is only applicable to the *o*, or German sound of *Kamez*; and this was the pronunciation which (under the influence of the Syrian *Sekofo*) prevailed in Babylon. In Palestine, on the contrary, as among the Sephardic Jews of the present day, the *Kamez* was always pronounced like *Patach*.[2] (3.) The authorities of Tiberias are known to have classified the letter ר with the בגדכפת,[3] and it has been mentioned that the grammarians, however, do not treat ר under this category, from which it would appear that the system of punctuation on which our grammars are based has not emanated from Tiberias, or any portion of Palestine.[4]

[2] Graetz, *Monatsschr.*, 1881, p. 429.

[3] Ibn Gannach in ספר הרקמה, end of מתיחדים בתקונם" שער ב- ולריש גם כן ענינים אנשי טבריה כי הם הצחים בלשון מכל העברים. This double pronunciation of ר which prevailed in Palestine appears to have been due to the influence of the *spiritus asper* and *lenis* of the Greek ρ: Geiger in *Jüd. Zeitschr.*, x., p. 21.

[4] Luzzatto (*Dialogues*, pp. 103 and 107, and *Prolegomena*, p. 13, *sq.*), who is of opinion that the vowel signs were the invention of the Babylonian רבנן סבוראי.

Irrespective of the place of origin for the vowels and the accents, Tiberias would, in time, come to eclipse other traditions and emerge as the authoritative source for vocalization and accentuation. Ambiguous as the dating for the Hebrew vowel system may be, the accents are equally difficult to date, though their introduction in writing would have been roughly

4. Isidore Harris, "The Rise and Development of the Massorah (Concluded)," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, p. 237. *Ibid*, p. 236.

contemporaneous with the vocalization:

> Like the vowels, the accents (טעמים) helped to fix the sense of the unpointed text, the vowel points indicating the meaning of individual words, and the accents showing their syntactical relation to each other. This relation had been expressed from the earliest times by a kind of modulation or cantillation, which was employed both in the school and the synagogue, whenever the Scriptures were recited. The references to cantillation in the Talmud[1] [5] prove that the custom is at least as old as the commencement of the second century. When, however, *written* signs were introduced, they served the additional purpose of marking by their position the tone-syllable of each word, whence the name "accents," by which they are at present known. The origin of the accent system is too abstruse a subject to be treated here... ...Suffice it to say that in the Hebrew accents, as in the vocalization, we can trace the influence of the Syrian grammarians, who, as early as the fourth century, had commenced to elaborate a system of interpunctuation, which they completed about the commencement of the seventh century.[6]

[1] See Wickes' Introduction to his טעמי כ'א ספרים.

Having posited a *terminus a quo* at the beginning of the seventh century, Harris convincingly narrows the dating by demonstrating the *terminus ad quem* could not have been much later. He gives a host of reasons for limiting the end date, but the first three are most relevant to our study: first, the Hebrew vowel system must have been in place before Arabic influence; second, the "highly developed" state of the system already by the time of Asher the Elder (Aaron ben Asher's father), in the later part of the eighth century; and third, Aaron ben Asher's own mistaken attribution of the system to the men of the Great Synagogue, "so that by the end of the ninth century the signs must have been old enough for their origin to have been forgotten."[7]

In an attempt to explain the paucity of materials as these systems were developing, Harris posits a theory of Joseph Derenbourg, another late nineteenth century scholar:

5. See BT *Megillah*, 3a; BT *Nedarim*, 37b; and JT *Megillah*, 4:1.
6. "Rise and Development (Concluded)," pp. 236-237.
7. *Ibid.* p. 238.

> Of course neither system of graphic signs could have been introduced at a single stroke. They had to make their way gradually and tentatively. It is most likely, as Derenbourg supposes,[1] that they were first employed in the instruction of young children; and if this was so, we can understand how for a long while the higher academies would take no notice of the invention, so that its origin soon became shrouded in obscurity.[8]

[1] *Revue Critique*, Jan. 21, 1879, p. 455, *sq.*; Berliner's *Magazin*, 1876; *Zur Geschlichte der hebräischen Punktation*, Cf. Graetz *Gesch.*, v., p. 154; Weiss, *loc. cit.*

Having reconstructed to the best of our ability the origins of the vocalization and accentuation systems that found their full expression in the Masoretic school of Tiberias, a question emerges that has far-reaching implications for the way we understand our sacred text and its supporting grammatical structures:

> Were the vocalisation and accentuation of the Scriptures constructed independently of tradition, as Masclef[2] and others have asserted? No question can have a profounder interest for Jews than this. For if it be answered in the affirmative, then our current and so-called "traditional" exegesis is deprived at a stroke of all authority and certainty... ...However, there is every reason to suppose that the graphic signs invented by the Massorites were employed for the sole purpose of *fixing the traditional vocalisation and punctuation.* The Massoretic system doubtless reproduced, with as much exactitude as possible, the precise mode of pronunciation and cantillation which had been in force since time immemorial. The substantial agreement in regard to punctuation between the Babylonian and Palestinian schools, notwithstanding that they worked in independence of each other, is itself a proof that the system common to both was shaped on the lines of tradition. It was this fidelity to tradition which gave the Massorites their name.[9]

[2] *Grammatica Hebraica aliisque inventis Massorethicis libera.* See in particular Vol. II., ch. 8.

Harris has unabashedly come down on the side of traditionalists who would substantiate the *te'amim* as having the air of a *mi-Sinai* (from Mt. Sinai) provenance. This is not surprising, for to do otherwise, in his estimation, is to undermine the very authority of the text. But his own

8. "Rise and Development (Concluded)," pp. 232-233.
9. *Ibid.* p. 239.

observation of "substantial agreement" begs the question, "What of those instances of disagreement between the two schools?"

The implications of differences in punctuation cannot be overstated. Lynne Truss, in her grammar book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, playfully demonstrates the dangers of misplaced or omitted commas in the following examples:[10]

> The kids, who got ice cream, were very happy.
> The kids who got ice cream were very happy.
>
> The student, said the teacher, is crazy.
> The student said the teacher is crazy.

In the first statement of the first example, the kids all partake in the dessert treat, while only a select group of them get it in the following statement. In the second example, the two statements form two entirely opposing opinions. Joshua Jacobson, in his expansive work, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible*, shows similar difficulties relating to the biblical text. In the following example, he notices a difference between the text of the Hebrew Bible and that of the Septuagint:[11]

> The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Septuagint Pentateuch was created in Alexandria in the third century b.c.e. While there is a high degree of correspondence between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text, that correspondence is not total.[30]

וַתֹּאמַרְן ׀ הַמְיַלְּדֹת אֶל־פַּרְעֹה
כִּי לֹא כַנָּשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיֹת הָעִבְרִיֹת
כִּי־חָיוֹת הֵנָּה
בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמְיַלֶּדֶת וְיָלָדוּ׃

> *The midwives said to Pharaoh,*
> *"Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women.*
> *They are vigorous;*
> *before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth."*

10. Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006), pp. 17-20.
11. Joshua Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), p. 369.

> The Masoretic punctuation divides the second half of the verse after כִּי־חָיוֹת הֵנָּה (*They are vigorous*). But the Septuagint reflects a greater disjunction on הַמְיַלֶּדֶת (*the midwife*).
>
> *And the midwives said to Pharaoh,*
> *"The Hebrew women are not as the women of Egypt,*
> *for they are delivered before the midwives go into them.*
> *So they bore children."*
>
> Based on the Greek translation, we can reconstruct a likely Hebrew original and (anachronistically) supply the punctuation signs that the Masoretes would have added to such a verse, had they agreed with this interpretation.
>
> כִּי־חָיוֹת הֵנָּה בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמְיַלֶּדֶת
> וְיָלֵדוּ׃

[30] See Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 70-71.

Jacobson skillfully shows the vastly different translations that can result from the smallest change in grammar. According to the Masoretic punctuation, the text portrays the Hebrew women as stalwart, but this sense is completely lost in the Septuagint. The *te'amim* are of such vital importance that a scholar of Rashi's stature implies that he would be lost without them:[12]

> אלמלא שראיתי טעם המקרא לא הייתי יודע לפרשו.
>
> *Had I not seen the punctuation of the te'amim,*
> *I would not have known how to interpret this verse correctly.*
> -Rashi[66]

[66] In reference to Ezek. 1:11.

Rashi's statement testifies to the import of the *te'amim* for interpretation, but what of competing traditions? Even as late as the twelfth century C.E., Abraham Ibn Ezra begrudgingly admits other systems were still being used.[13] He admonishes:

12. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible*, p. 24.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

כל פירוש שאיננו על פירוש הטעמים,
לא תאבו לו ולא תשמע לו.

Any interpretation that conflicts with the punctuation of the te'amim, don't be attracted to it and don't listen to it.

-Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra[65]

[65] Ibn Ezra, *Sefer Moznayim* (Offenbach edition, 1791, p. 4).

We can make the claim that the Tiberian Masoretes were the more skilled grammarians, but we can hardly make a claim as to the older tradition. Furthermore, if the authenticity of their system is called into question, what are we to make of the mountains of midrash that hang on the minutiae of this system of vocalization and accentuation? Or worse, what are we to make of the midrashim that make a case based upon a misunderstanding of Masoretic intention? With these questions in mind, let us turn our attention to the trope system itself, its function, and the meaning of *its* names.

b. The Tropes and their Grammatical Function

The accentuation signs of the Tiberian Masoretic system serve three purposes: they divide the verse into clauses, they give melodic indications regarding the proper chanting of the text, and they also show the syllabic emphasis of each word. The signs themselves can be divided into two categories: disjunctives and conjunctives. As these category headings suggest, disjunctives serve to close a clause and therefore represent many levels of pausal strength. The first class disjunctives are known as קיסרים, "emperors." These two signs are the strongest pausal points and are grammatically akin to the period and the comma. סוף-פסוק ("end of verse"), also known as סילוק ("end"), is the period at the end of a verse and is the strongest tropal division.

אתנחתא (Ar.- "rest") is essentially a musical comma and serves to divide the biblical verse in half. Verses seldom contain identical word counts before and after אתנחתא, but the clauses are of equivalent grammatical status. The second class disjunctives are known as מלכים, "kings," and are second only to the קיסרים in terms of pausal strength. This class is composed of: סגול (Ar.- "bunch of grapes"), which serves to divide the first half of a particularly lengthy verse; שלשלת ("chain"), which is employed when the first half of the first half of a verse is only one word; זקף-קטון ("raise pinky finger"), which subdivides half verses; זקף-גדול ("raise thumb"), which also serves to subdivide half verses and is employed when only one word is present; and רביעי ("lying down," also possibly related to "four"), which is employed as a partial pausal point. The third class disjunctives are known as מישנים, "viceroys." These signs are: טפחה ("hands-width"), which foreshadows סוף-פסוק and אתנחתא; פשטא (possibly "outstretched hand"), which always occurs before זקף-קטון; יתיב ("sitting down"), also precedes זקף-קטון; זרקא ("to throw around"), which always leads to שגול; and מונח-לגרמיה ("by itself"), a sign found between two words and occurs before רביעי. The fourth class disjunctives are known as שלישים ("ministers"). These include: תביר ("broken"), which leads to טפחא; גרש ("expulsor"): גרשיים ("double" גרש); תלישא-גדולה ("great plucking out"); פזיר (Ar.- "whip"); and קרני-פרה ("cow's horns"), which replaces פזיר and occurs only once in the Torah. The last sign that Dr. Eliyahu Schleifer considers to be an "auxiliary disjunctive" is פסק.[14] Not to be confused with מונח-לגרמיה, the פסק is a sign that is frequently employed to prevent a word ending in a vowel

14. Eliyahu Schleifer, "Lectures from cantillation class in Jerusalem, Fall 2001."

to elide with the subsequent word. The disjunctive power of פסק is more a function of proper enunciation than a pausal point.

The other trope category is that of the משרתים, "servants." Dr. Schleifer further subdivides this category into "conjunctives with limited disjunction power," "conjunctives," and "aiding signs." As the name "conjunctive" suggests, these signs are leading tropes that rely on partner conjunctives or disjunctives to complete a clause. The "conjunctives with limited disjunction power" are: תלישא-קטנה ("small plucking out"), which function musically as lords (שרים) but grammatically as servants (משרתים); and מרכה-כפולה (double מרכה). The conjunctives are: מרכה (Ar.- "prolonging"), a somewhat unstable sign- it can be influenced by the sign that follows it; מונח (originally שופר מונח- "horn"), which is the most unstable sign- מונח is wholly dependent upon the sign that follows it; מהפך (originally שופר מהפך- "inverted horn"), which is unchanging; קדמא ("comes before"), which is unchanging; דרגא ("step"), which is also unchanging; and ירח-בן-יומו ("one-day-old moon"), a sign which appears only once in the whole of the Tanakh. The "aiding signs" are: מקף, or hyphen, to connect words under one sign; and מתג ("horse's bit") or געיא ("to cry aloud"), which is not to be confused with סוף-פסוק. סוף-פסוק only occurs at the end of a verse on the accented syllable and מתג is not employed on the accented syllable but is used to curb the tendency to read through a word too fast.

The following trope chart, organized by Shelomo Rosovsky, prioritizes the tropes into מפסיקים (disjunctives) and מחברים (conjunctives):[15]

15.Shelomo Rosovsky, *The Tora and its Cantillation* (Jerusalem: Orient and Occident, 1977), p. 156.

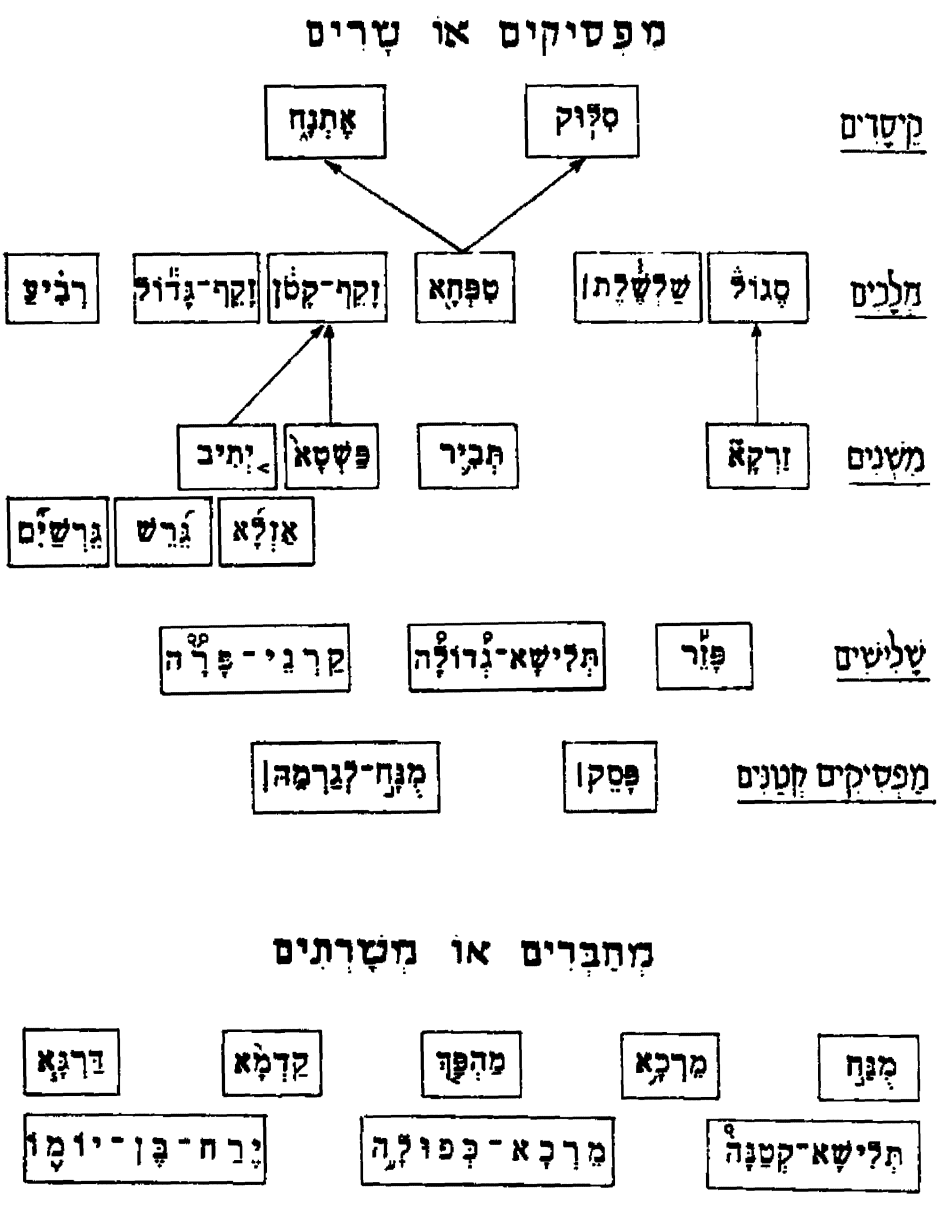

Fig. 1

Another chart in Rosovsky's book graphically portrays the complex relationships of the tropes to one another.[16] Notice many of the signs will potential partner within like categories (conjunctives with conjunctives and disjunctives with disjunctives), but more often than not, the conjunctives display a tendency to partner with disjunctives (the top half of the chart):

16. Rosovsky, *The Tora and its Cantillation*, p. 159.

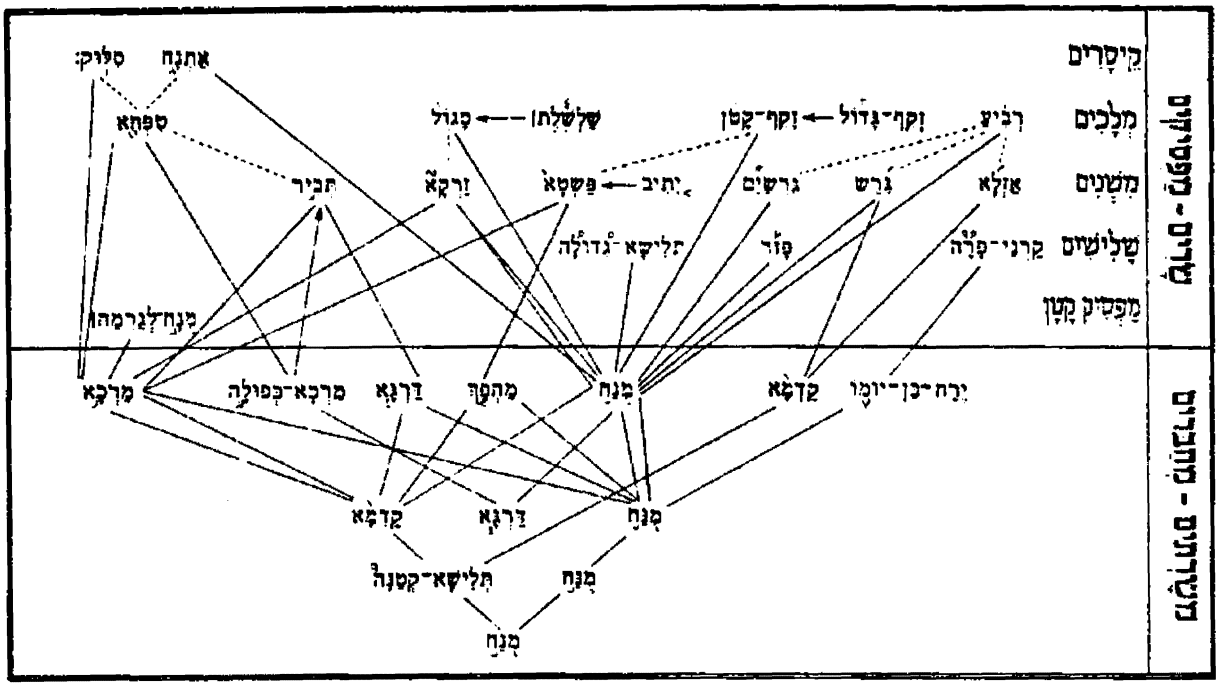

Fig. 2

c. Unusual signs

In this section, we will turn our attention to two unusual trope signs, שלשלת (*shalshelet)* and מירכה כפולה (*mercha k'fulah*), in an effort to see clearly the role the *te'amim* may play in enhancing our understanding of a particular word or phrase. שלשלת only appears seven times in the entire Bible and מירכה כפולה makes fourteen appearances. Since these signs are particularly easy to isolate and examine, they are natural choices to begin our cantillation exploration. Are these unusual signs trying to tell us something extraordinary about the words they adorn? And if so, were the Masoretes consistent in their deployment of these particular signs to convey similar intentions behind the words?

1. <u>שלשלת (*shalshelet*)- The sign of Drama and Delay:</u>

Gen 19:15-16 As morning came, the angels hastened Lot, saying, "Rise, take your wife and your two remaining daughters lest you be swept away in the sin of the city." But he delayed. And the men seized his hand and his wife's hand and the hand of his two daughters, in Adonai's mercy on him, and brought him out and set him outside the city.	Gen 19:15-16 טו וּכְמוֹ֙ הַשַּׁ֣חַר עָלָ֔ה וַיָּאִ֥יצוּ הַמַּלְאָכִ֖ים בְּל֣וֹט לֵאמֹ֑ר קוּם֙ קַ֣ח אֶת־אִשְׁתְּךָ֔ וְאֶת־שְׁתֵּ֥י בְנֹתֶ֖יךָ הַנִּמְצָאֹ֑ת פֶּן־תִּסָּפֶ֖ה בַּעֲוֹ֥ן הָעִֽיר׃ טז וַיִּתְמַהְמָ֗הּ וַיַּחֲזִ֨יקוּ֙ הָאֲנָשִׁ֣ים בְּיָד֔וֹ וּבְיַד־אִשְׁתּ֖וֹ וּבְיַד֙ שְׁתֵּ֣י בְנֹתָ֔יו בְּחֶמְלַ֥ת יְהוָ֖ה עָלָ֑יו וַיּוֹצִיאֻ֙הוּ֙ וַיַּנִּחֻ֔הוּ מִח֖וּץ לָעִֽיר׃

The first שלשלת in Scripture goes a long way toward defining its character for those to come. In this scene, Lot is told in no uncertain terms what he is to do if he is to avoid destruction. And yet he tarries. Lest one be tempted to say that this שלשלת (above the word וַיִּתְמַהְמָ֗הּ- but he delayed) is a show of Lot's lack of faith and his doubt that God will follow through with the destruction, we need only look back to verse 14 to see the meaning behind the שלשלת:

Gen 19:14 And Lot went out and spoke with his sons-in-law, those who had married his daugthers, and said, "Get up and flee from this place for God will bring destruction to the city," but his sons-in-law thought he was joking.	Gen 19:14 יד וַיֵּצֵ֣א לוֹט֮ וַיְדַבֵּר֒	אֶל־חֹתְנָיו֙	לֹקְחֵ֣י בְנֹתָ֔יו וַיֹּ֣אמֶר קוּמ֔וּ צְא֖וּ מִן־הַמָּק֣וֹם הַזֶּ֑ה כִּ֤י מַשְׁחִית֙ יְהוָ֔ה אֶת־הָעִ֖יר וַיְהִ֣י כִמְצַחֵ֔ק בְּעֵינֵ֖י חֹתָנָֽיו׃

This verse explains Lot's thoughts in verse 16 as he tarries. It also shouts out to us from the silence of the פסק that follows ויתמהמה (but he delayed). Lot is overcome with remorse that he will only escape the destruction with his daughters. His love for his sons-in-law is so strong that our שלשלת implies he would rather be destroyed himself than face the reality that he must leave them behind.

Gen 24:10-14 The servant took ten camels from his master's camels and set out with all of his master's bounty, and he rose and went to Aram-Naharaim, to the city Nahor. He knelt the camels outside the city at the well at evening time, the time of coming out to draw [water]. And he said, "Adonai, God of my lord Abraham, please make this happen for me today, bestow kindness upon my lord Abraham. Here I stand by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople come out to draw water. Let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please tip the jar so I can drink,' say, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' Let it be her that you decide for Your servant, for Isaac, and by this I will know that you have acted kindly with my lord."	Gen 24:10-14 י וַיִּקַּח הָעֶבֶד עֲשָׂרָה גְמַלִּים מִגְּמַלֵּי אֲדֹנָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ וְכָל־טוּב אֲדֹנָיו בְּיָדוֹ וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־אֲרַם נַהֲרַיִם אֶל־עִיר נָחוֹר׃ יא וַיַּבְרֶךְ הַגְּמַלִּים מִחוּץ לָעִיר אֶל־בְּאֵר הַמָּיִם לְעֵת עֶרֶב לְעֵת צֵאת הַשֹּׁאֲבֹת׃ יב וַיֹּאמַר	יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנִי אַבְרָהָם הַקְרֶה־נָא לְפָנַי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה־חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנִי אַבְרָהָם׃ יג הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי נִצָּב עַל־עֵין הַמָּיִם וּבְנוֹת אַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר יֹצְאֹת לִשְׁאֹב מָיִם׃ יד וְהָיָה הַנַּעֲרָ אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיהָ הַטִּי־נָא כַדֵּךְ וְאֶשְׁתֶּה וְאָמְרָה שְׁתֵּה וְגַם־גְּמַלֶּיךָ אַשְׁקֶה אֹתָהּ הֹכַחְתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ לְיִצְחָק וּבָהּ אֵדַע כִּי־עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם־אֲדֹנִי׃

This שלשלת (above וַיֹּאמַר- and he said) may seem enigmatic, but all the clues are apparent in verses 12 and 14. Abraham's unnamed servant is about to offer an extemporaneous prayer to the God of his master Abraham. This is clearly a שלשלת of fear and trepidation. If this is not so, why would the servant invoke אדני אברהם (my lord Abraham) twice in the initial request and once in conclusion- אדני (my lord)? The servant makes frequent mention of Abraham and even a nod to Isaac because he feels unworthy of addressing God and is quick to point out humbly and often that he is praying on behalf of his master Abraham.

Gen 39:7-9 And it was after these things that his master's wife lifted her eyes to Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused. And he said to his master's wife, "Behold, my master doesn't concern himself with that which is in the house and everything he has, he has placed in my hands. He is not even greater than me in this house and has not withheld anything from me, save for yourself, because you are his wife. How could I do this great and wicked thing and sin before God?"	Gen 39:7-9 ז וַיְהִי אַחַר֙ הַדְּבָרִ֣ים הָאֵ֔לֶּה וַתִּשָּׂ֥א אֵֽשֶׁת־אֲדֹנָ֖יו אֶת־עֵינֶ֑יהָ אֶל־יוֹסֵ֔ף וַתֹּ֖אמֶר שִׁכְבָ֥ה עִמִּֽי׃ ח וַיְמָאֵ֗ן ׀ וַיֹּ֙אמֶר֙ אֶל־אֵ֣שֶׁת אֲדֹנָ֔יו הֵ֚ן אֲדֹנַ֔י לֹא־יָדַ֥ע אִתִּ֖י מַה־בַּבָּ֑יִת וְכֹ֛ל אֲשֶׁר־יֶ֥שׁ־לֽוֹ נָתַ֖ן בְּיָדִֽי׃ ט אֵינֶ֤נּוּ גָדֹ֙ול בַּבַּ֣יִת הַזֶּ֔ה מִמֶּ֖נִּי וְלֹא־חָשַׂ֤ךְ מִמֶּ֙נִּי֙ מְאוּמָ֔ה כִּ֥י אִם־אוֹתָ֖ךְ בַּאֲשֶׁ֣ר אַתְּ־אִשְׁתּ֑וֹ וְאֵיךְ֙ אֶֽעֱשֶׂ֣ה הָרָעָ֣ה הַגְּדֹלָ֣ה הַזֹּ֔את וְחָטָ֖אתִי לֵאלֹהִֽים׃

This particular שלשלת (above the word וַיְמָאֵן- but he refused) inspired many commentaries because it heightens Joseph's apparent nobility even further. The undulations of the music for the trope itself almost convey a wrestling match with Joseph fighting for his honor and chastity against Potiphar's wife, the very picture of womanly seduction and lust. The פסק also paints a picture of Joseph freeing himself from this woman's clutches as he prepares to speak.

Lev 8:22-23 He brought the second ram close, the ram of ordination, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the ram. And it was slaughtered. And Moses took from its blood and put it on the earlobe of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot.	Lev 8:22-23 כב וַיִּקְרַ֕ב אֶת־הָאַ֖יִל הַשֵּׁנִ֑י אֵ֚יל הַמִּלֻּאִ֔ים וַיִּסְמְכ֥וּ אַהֲרֹ֖ן וּבָנָ֥יו אֶת־יְדֵיהֶ֖ם עַל־רֹ֥אשׁ הָאָֽיִל׃ כג וַיִּשְׁחָ֑ט ׀ וַיִּקַּ֨ח מֹשֶׁ֜ה מִדָּמ֗וֹ וַיִּתֵּ֛ן עַל־תְּנ֥וּךְ אֹֽזֶן־אַהֲרֹ֖ן הַיְמָנִ֑ית וְעַל־בֹּ֣הֶן יָד֗וֹ הַיְמָנִית֙ וְעַל־בֹּ֣הֶן רַגְלֹ֔ו הַיְמָנִֽית׃

This שלשלת (above וַיִּשְׁחָט- and it was slaughtered) underscores the drama and the pomp and circumstance of the first ordination ceremony. The ritual slaughter is the climax of the ceremony and it comes squarely between the acquiescence of those about to be ordained and the physical enactment of anointing. The sense of drama is explicit, but the sense of delay is implied in the slow and careful rite of anointing.

Several commonalities emerge as we examine these four instances of שלשלת side by side. The פסק that follows each שלשלת is the most glaring feature. Not only is the שלשלת a second class disjunctive with the understanding that its power of separation is strong, but this pausal is delineated even further in each case by the presence of the פסק. The text implores us to wait a beat before moving on. All of these scenes and their corresponding שלשלת describe a moment of hesitation. In all cases, there is heightened drama that would cause the heart to race and the blood to pound in the veins of the involved parties. שלשלת seems to be jumping in right at the climactic moment, as if to say, "The tension has reached a fever pitch, now delay a moment and I will return your heart rate to normal."

2. מירכה כפולה (*mercha k'fulah*)- The sign of Angst and Appeal:

Gen 27:24-25 He asked, "Are you he, my son Esau?" And he said, "I am." Then he said, "Approach me and I shall eat of my son's game in order that I may give you my soul's blessing." And he drew near to him and he ate and he brought him wine and he drank.	Gen 27:24-25 כד וַיֹּאמֶר אַתָּה זֶה בְּנִי עֵשָׂו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי׃ כה וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּשָׁה לִי וְאֹכְלָה מִצֵּיד בְּנִי לְמַעַן תְּבָרֶכְךָ נַפְשִׁי וַיַּגֶּשׁ־לוֹ וַיֹּאכַל וַיָּבֵא לוֹ יַיִן וַיִּשְׁתְּ׃

The מירכה כפולה (under the word לוֹ- to him) in verse 25 addresses Jacob's inner conflict. He has just learned that Isaac is convinced by the deception and is preparing to make the blessing. This trope may be the text's only hint at Jacob's misgivings and may belie his apparent readiness to consummate the deceit, especially since the מירכה כפולה occurs on לוֹ, to him; namely, his actions vis a vis his father.

Ex 5:15-16 And the officers of the Israelites came and cried to Pharaoh saying, "Why are you doing this to your servants? You don't give any straw to your servants but they say to us, 'Make bricks!' And lo, your servants are beaten when the sin is of your people."	Ex 5:15-16 טו וַיָּבֹאוּ שִׁטְרֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּצְעֲקוּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר לָמָּה תַּעֲשֶׂה כֹּה לַעֲבָדֶיךָ׃ טז תֶּבֶן אֵין נִתָּן לַעֲבָדֶיךָ וּלְבֵנִים אֹמְרִים לָנוּ עֲשׂוּ וְהִנֵּה עֲבָדֶיךָ מֻכִּים וְחָטָאת עַמֶּךָ׃

The מירכה כפולה in verse 15 (under the word תַּעֲשֶׂה- doing) obviously conveys a sense of lamentation. The officers and the workers under them have been given a nonsensical and totally impractical order that Pharaoh fully expects to be carried out. The sign may also mark a turning point in the relationship between the taskmasters and the officers. In verse 14, the taskmasters physically beat the officers of the Israelites, whereas prior to this verse, the taskmasters and officers act in concert to exact work from the Israelites. The מירכה כפולה in verse 15 may have less to do with the absence of straw and more to do with the lowered status of the שוטרים themselves.

Num 14:1-4 The whole community gave voice and the people wept that night. There were rumblings against Moses and Aaron among all the Israelites and the whole community said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does Adonai bring us to this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and little ones will be as booty. It would be better for us to return to Egypt." And they said each to his brother, "Let us set out and return to Egypt."	Num 14:1-4 א וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת־קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכּוּ הָעָם בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא׃ ב וַיִּלֹּנוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן כֹּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל־הָעֵדָה לוּ־מַתְנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לוּ־מָתְנוּ׃ ג וְלָמָה יְהוָה מֵבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לִנְפֹּל בַּחֶרֶב נָשֵׁינוּ וְטַפֵּנוּ יִהְיוּ לָבַז הֲלוֹא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיְמָה׃ ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו נִתְּנָה רֹאשׁ וְנָשׁוּבָה מִצְרָיְמָה׃

The מירכה כפולה in verse 3 (under the word טוֹב- better) underscores the loudest and most bitter complaint of the Israelites in the desert, "Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" Is it

any wonder that God's wish in verse 12 is nothing short of destroying and disowning the Israelites and starting again with the seed of Moses? A more nuanced read of מירכה כפולה in verse 3 informs the reader that the angst of the verse is shared equally by the Israelites, frustrated by the hopelessness of their situation, and by God, frustrated by the audacity of the Israelites' complaint.

Lev 10:1-2 And Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fireholder and put fire in them. They put incense upon it and they offered before Adonai strange fire that had not been commanded of them. And fire came out from before Adonai and consumed them. They died before Adonai.	Lev 10:1-2 א וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֵן אֵשׁ וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת וַיַּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם׃ ב וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמֻתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה׃

In this case, מירכה כפולה (under the word לֹא- not) reveals God's angst and lament. It falls on "that they were *not* [commanded]," as if to say, "If only these newly ordained sons had followed precisely what had been commanded of them, they would have been strong leaders and eponymous figures themselves." The trope foreshadows a sense of remorse just before the men are killed in the following verse.

The four instances of מירכה כפולה described above convey conflict and lament. In every instance the narrative is at a crossroads, and a status change in imminent for the parties involved. Jacob knows full well at this point that his father's blessing is coming, the officers of the Israelites under Pharaoh now understand that they are themselves slaves, the Israelites in the wilderness have crossed the line with their latest complaint and Nadav and Avihu have crossed a line themselves regarding appropriate offerings in the service of God.

From this brief investigation of the signs שלשלת and מירכה כפולה, it seems clear that

the Masoretes imbued the text with an additional layer of meaning. Each passage presented has a heightened dramatic sensibility and the unusual tropes intensify this even further. The words under שלשלת are a lightning rod that focuses a sense of delay, while the words over מירכה כפולה convey the angst of the characters involved. Furthermore, the parallel emotions expressed in the diversity of verses containing each distinctive trope, indicate a consistency of approach and an intentionality to their implied meanings. But what of more common trope markings? Can subtleties of meaning be drawn from what are seemingly routine tropal clauses? We turn now to an untested narrative, the reconciliation scene between Jacob and Esau, in an effort to answer these questions and to probe further the Maosetic inferences of our text.

Part Two:
Jacob and Esau - A Scene of Reconciliation?

a. The P'shat, or Plain Meaning

Gen 33:1-18	פרק לג
1 Jacob lifted his eyes and saw and lo, Esau is coming. And with him [were] four hundred men. He divided the children between Leah and Rachel and the two maidservants. 2 He put the maidservants and their children first, Leah and her children behind them and Rachel and Joseph behind them. 3 And he went before them and bowed to the ground seven times until he drew close to his brother. 4 And Esau ran to greet him and he embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept. 5 He lifted his eyes and saw the women and children and he said, "Who are these [people] to you?" And he said, "The children with whom God has graced your servant." 6 The maidservants drew near, these [women] and their children and they bowed. 7 And Leah also approached and her children and they bowed. And after, Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed. 8 And he said, "Who are [these people] to you? This entire party that approached me? [And what is your intention?]" He replied, "To find favor in the eyes of my lord." 9 Esau said, "I have plenty, my brother. Let what is yours be yours." 10 Jacob said, "Please don't. Pray, if I find favor in your eyes then take my gift from my hand because just to see your face is to see the face of God and [a sign that] you are pleased with me. 11 Please take my blessing that is brought for you for God has been gracious to me and because I have everything." And when he pressed him, he took [them]. 12 He said, "Let us set out and we will go. I will walk opposite you." 13 But he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are weak and the sheep and the cattle are nursing and [this is a concern] for me. One day's hard driving and the whole flock would die.	א וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה עֵשָׂו בָּא וְעִמּוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הַיְלָדִים עַל־לֵאָה וְעַל־רָחֵל וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַשְּׁפָחוֹת׃ ב וַיָּשֶׂם אֶת־הַשְּׁפָחוֹת וְאֶת־יַלְדֵיהֶן רִאשֹׁנָה וְאֶת־לֵאָה וְיַלְדֶיהָ אַחֲרֹנִים וְאֶת־רָחֵל וְאֶת־יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֹנִים׃ ג וְהוּא עָבַר לִפְנֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַרְצָה שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים עַד־גִּשְׁתּוֹ עַד־אָחִיו׃ ד וַיָּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ׃ ה וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת־הַנָּשִׁים וְאֶת־הַיְלָדִים וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אֵלֶּה לָךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הַיְלָדִים אֲשֶׁר־חָנַן אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עַבְדֶּךָ׃ [רביעי] ו וַתִּגַּשְׁן הַשְּׁפָחוֹת הֵנָּה וְיַלְדֵיהֶן וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֻיִן׃ ז וַתִּגַּשׁ גַּם־לֵאָה וְיַלְדֶיהָ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ וְאַחַר נִגַּשׁ יוֹסֵף וְרָחֵל וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ׃ ח וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לְךָ כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר פָּגָשְׁתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לִמְצֹא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי׃ ט וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו יֶשׁ־לִי רָב אָחִי יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ׃ י וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אַל־נָא אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְלָקַחְתָּ מִנְחָתִי מִיָּדִי כִּי עַל־כֵּן רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים וַתִּרְצֵנִי׃ יא קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּרְכָתִי אֲשֶׁר הֻבָאת לָךְ כִּי־חַנַּנִי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יֶשׁ־לִי־כֹל וַיִּפְצַר־בּוֹ וַיִּקָּח׃ יב וַיֹּאמֶר נִסְעָה וְנֵלֵכָה וְאֵלְכָה לְנֶגְדֶּךָ׃ יג וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדֹנִי יֹדֵעַ כִּי־הַיְלָדִים רַכִּים וְהַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר עָלוֹת עָלָי וּדְפָקוּם יוֹם אֶחָד וָמֵתוּ כָּל־הַצֹּאן׃

14 Go on ahead, please, my lord, before your servant. And I will journey slowly at the pace of the work (the flocks) that is before me and at the pace of the children until I will come to my lord at Seir." 15 And Esau said, "Please [let me] place with you people from among those who are with me." And [Jacob] said, "Why is this that I have found favor in my lord's eyes?" 16 And Esau returned on that day to his journey towards Seir. 17 But Jacob set out towards Sukkot and built for himself a house and for his cattle he made booths and because of this the name of the place is called Sukkot. 18 Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem that is in the land of Canaan in his coming from Paddan-Aram and he encamped before the city.	יד יַעֲבָר־נָא אֲדֹנִי לִפְנֵי עַבְדּוֹ וַאֲנִי אֶתְנַהֲלָה לְאִטִּי לְרֶגֶל הַמְּלָאכָה אֲשֶׁר־לְפָנַי וּלְרֶגֶל הַיְלָדִים עַד אֲשֶׁר־אָבֹא אֶל־אֲדֹנִי שֵׂעִירָה׃ טו וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אַצִּיגָה־נָּא עִמְּךָ מִן־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶּה אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי׃ טז וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עֵשָׂו לְדַרְכּוֹ שֵׂעִירָה׃ יז וְיַעֲקֹב נָסַע סֻכֹּתָה וַיִּבֶן לוֹ בָּיִת וּלְמִקְנֵהוּ עָשָׂה סֻכֹּת עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם סֻכּוֹת׃ יח וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב שָׁלֵם עִיר שְׁכֶם אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן בְּבֹאוֹ מִפַּדַּן אֲרָם וַיִּחַן אֶת־פְּנֵי הָעִיר׃

Even at a surface level, chapter 33 is rife with dramatic tension. The previous chapter initiated the tension by describing a scene wherein messengers send word to Esau and return to relate the ominous sighting of Esau and four hundred men advancing to meet Jaccob. The messengers give no indication as to Esau's disposition or even any word that he received them at all. The reader and Jacob are left with the intended reaction that Esau is coming to avenge his brother's adolescent deception. Indeed, a terrified Jacob saw fit to divide his wives, children and possessions in the event of an attack.

The evening before the meeting, Jacob has a divine encounter with a man who seems to be the physical incarnation of God. Jacob wrestles with the man until dawn and is left with a physical impairment and a new name. The dramatic tension builds by means of Jacob's paranoid preparations and his limp, as the reader knows full well that Esau is a skilled hunter and an outdoorsman. Pitted against each other in a physical confrontation under normal circumstances, Esau would surely emerge victorious.

Esau's advantage is underscored by means of biblical hyperbole: Jacob's naturally inferior physical stature is lessened further as a result of the wrestling match with the angel and again by his own volition as he approaches his brother bowing seven times. Chapter 33 begins with Jacob lifting his eyes to his brother, yet another indication of his "lowered" status, and proceeds with Jacob assuming a posture of supplication. His contrition and physical distress make the scenario that much more unbalanced as Esau approaches with four hundred men (a detail that is introduced in Gen 32:7 and reiterated in 33:1). The tension reaches its climax in verse 4 as Esau, in a surprising twist, runs to embrace and kiss his brother. The plain meaning of the verse could not be clearer, Esau harbors no ill will toward his brother and a sincere reconciliation occurs. Esau notices the women and children accompanying Jacob and asks who they are. Jacob explains that the Lord has graced him with wives and children, and he intends to give some of his possessions to Esau. Esau respectfully declines but Jacob presses him further and he accepts. The scene concludes with Esau's desire to continue on together and Jacob's specious excuses about why he cannot. Ultimately Jacob thwarts his brother's suggestion by intimating that he will catch up with Esau in Seir.

Dramatically, our scene has been developing since Esau's stated intention of Gen 27:41- "Esau harbored animosity [towards] Jacob over the blessing that his father gave to him. Esau said in his heart, 'When the days of mourning my father have come, I will kill my brother Jacob.'" The suspense has been quietly mounting even through the many years Jacob works for Laban. This is precisely why Esau's four hundred men and the text's silence with regard to his demeanor heighten the suspense that much further. By verse 4 of chapter 33, the reader fully expects the brothers to come to blows which makes Esau's actions all the more unexpected and says much about how Esau has matured in the twenty years since they parted company. In his

desire to move forward with his brother to Seir, he is expressing a desire to physically move on with his brother, and to leave the past behind them.

Our text raises many questions to be addressed in the next section. What was Jacob's intention in dividing the women and children? What are the implications of Jacob's action in verse 3 (crossing before the women and children)? Of vital import to our understanding of this entire scene is Esau's motivation in verse 4. Was the kiss disingenuous? Did it imply forgiveness? Does the kiss convey an acceptance and a deeper understanding of Jacob's true character? Why does Esau ultimately accept Jacob's gift, and why does Jacob come up with excuses to part company with Esau? Did he ever intend to meet Esau in Seir, or was he just paying lip service? While we may only speculate about the text's original intention and the answers to these questions, the cantillation markings themselves provide another set of tools in our search for meaning and may present a counterpoint to our classical modes of interpretation.

b. Exegesis and Midrash

In this section, we will move away from the unusual tropes of biblical cantillation and the plain meaning of the text in an attempt to derive meaning from what are seemingly mundane and routine trope combinations. Upon closer inspection, however, it will become clear that while the tropal designations of the Masoretes serve an important grammatical function, they may also operate on the level of biblical commentary. Using the reconciliation scene between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33:1-18 as a model, the following study will test how the tropes may function on two levels: as grammatical punctuation marks with varying degrees of conjunctive and disjunctive power; and as a type of musical stage direction, interpreting the text it serves to punctuate in subtle and often surprising ways.

In order to present the tropes as a type of midrashic, interpretive device, I have structured the material in the following manner: first, each biblical verse is broken out into tropal clauses that divide along disjunctive lines. Notice the carriage return that immediately follows אתנחתא in each verse. This pronounced division clarifies the two halves of most verses. The Hebrew verse is followed by English translation of the verse, which is followed by a commentary on the verse utilizing the tropes' own interpretive capabilities. Last, we will look at select classical midrashim to determine whether certain rabbinic interpretive tendencies accord with the tropes employed in a particular verse, or whether the tropes disagree with the classical midrashim.

א וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו
וַיַּרְא
וְהִנֵּה עֵשָׂו בָּא
וְעִמּוֹ
אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ
וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הַיְלָדִים
עַל־לֵאָה וְעַל־רָחֵל
וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַשְּׁפָחוֹת׃

Jacob lifted his eyes and saw and lo, Esau is coming. And with him [were] four hundred men. He divided the children between Leah and Rachel and the two maidservants.

In verse 1, וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב ("Jacob lifted") exhibit elegant word-painting with the tropal clause קדמא ואזלא. The tropes literally lift Jacob's eyes, cast them down again on עֵינָיו (his eyes) with רביעי only to raise them up again on וַיַּרְא (and he saw) with פשטא.There is an immediacy to the next word וְהִנֵּה (and lo) that is heightened by a repetitious מונח. The Masoretes understood the tension inherent in repetitious sequential lower neighboring tones long before John Williams made sequential half steps infamous in his theme for the 1975 film *Jaws*. The overall effect of the word and the trope gives the reader the impression that Jacob looks up and quite suddenly, Esau is standing close by. וַיַּרְא (and he saw) and וְעִמּוֹ (and with him) are accentuated as third and second class disjunctives respectively, which puts dramatic emphasis on "he saw!" What did he see?! Certainly he sees that his brother is coming, but he also *sees* his brother in a new light. There is fear that Esau may be coming to avenge the wrongs of their youth, but perhaps there is

also some recognition on Jacob's part that his brother has a legitimate grievance and he *sees* the wrong that he committed against his brother. These thoughts may all be present in that moment when Jacob ruminates and sees, and suddenly his brother is upon him, וְעִמּוֹ (and with him); the זקף-קטן almost tempts the reader to fill-in-the-blank... that's right, we already knew from the last chapter that four hundred men are with him! The second half of the verse busies itself with preparations for the encounter.

From the very beginning of this scene, the classical midrashim have a vested interest in buoying the righteousness of Jacob and in casting aspersions on Esau. In Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas,[17] there is a conscious attempt to bolster Jacob's positive attributes and to downplay any notion that his actions in dividing the children may be construed as unfeeling or even cowardly. The midrash accomplishes this task by putting Jacob on the same spiritual level as Abraham and Isaac:

> You will find that the righteous people become [spiritually] uplifted through their eyes, as it is stated, *Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place* (Gen 22:4). Likewise, [it states,] *Abraham raised his eyes and saw that there was a ram* (Gen 22:13). Similarly, *He raised his eyes and behold, three men* (Gen 18:2). And concerning Isaac [it states], *Isaac went out to meditate in the field towards evening and he raised his eyes and saw* etc. (Gen 24:63). And concerning Jacob, *Jacob raised his eyes and saw, and behold, Esau was coming [and with him were four hundred men], so he divided the children.*

Here we see a concerted effort to equate the righteousness of Jacob to that of Abraham and Isaac. The phrase וישא את עיניו (he raised his eyes) is the common thread and Jacob's encounter with Esau is likened to Abraham's test of the Binding of Isaac and to Isaac upon seeing his

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17. Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, *Vayeishev*, 6.

bride-to-be Rebecca. The citations about Abraham demonstrate the parallels between the drama of the *Akeida* and that of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. In both scenarios, the continuation of the line of the Israelites is called into question: Will Abraham destroy his son and negate the promise of multitudes to come? Will Esau avenge himself of Jacob's trickery and extinguish Jacob's line?

Breishit Rabbah takes an opposite tack in the form of a parable of an angry lion (Esau),[18] a forgetful fox (Jacob) and an array of domesticated and wild animals. The fox formulates a plan to appease the lion, but when faced with the adversary, the plan quickly evaporates and the fox leaves the animals to fend for themselves.

> R. Levi said: It happened that a lion was angry with the domesticated animals (cattle) and the beasts. [The animals] said, "Who will go and mollify him?" The fox said, "I know three hundred parables and I will mollify him." They said to him, "So be it." He walked awhile and then stopped in his tracks. They said to him, "Why [did you stop]?" He said to them, "I forgot a hundred." They said to him, "In two hundred, there are [still] blessings [enough]." He walked awhile and then stopped in his tracks. They said to him, "Why [did you stop]?" He said to them, "I forgot yet another hundred." They said to him, "Even in one hundred, there are [still] blessings [enough]." When he got to the place, he said, "I forgot them all, so each one [of you] will have to mollify on behalf of himself."

Even though the parable casts Esau in the role of angry lion, the midrash comes to portray Jacob as losing his ability to intercede or even fight on behalf of his family. The act of dividing the family members is the act of a cowardly Jacob who leaves each to his/her own devices.

18. Breishit Rabbah 78:7.

ב וַיָּשֶׂם אֶת־הַשְּׁפָחוֹת
וְאֶת־יַלְדֵיהֶן רִאשֹׁנָה
וְאֶת־לֵאָה וְיִלְדֶּיהָ אַחֲרֹנִים
וְאֶת־רָחֵל וְאֶת־יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֹנִים׃

He put the maidservants and their children first, Leah and her children behind them and Rachel and Joseph behind them.

The tropal clauses of verse 2 almost form a grammatical barrier between the first, second and third line of defense, with Rachel and Joseph in the most defensible position in the event of an attack. רִאשֹׁנָה (first), אַחֲרֹנִים (behind) and אַחֲרֹנִים (behind) all on the strongest pausal points of the verse clearly demonstrate the pecking order: the maidservants and their kids first (most vulnerable), after them come Leah and her kids and last, Rachel and Joseph. The two instances of אַחֲרֹנִים (behind) parallel each other in their grammatical placement, but their meanings are distinct. Leah and her children are *after* the first line, but Rachel and Joseph are *last*. Jacob's actions here echo his actions in Chapter 32, verses twenty-three through the first half of twenty-five:

וַיָּקָם | בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שְׁתֵּי נָשָׁיו וְאֶת־שְׁתֵּי שִׁפְחֹתָיו וְאֶת־אַחַד עָשָׂר
יְלָדָיו וַיַּעֲבֹר אֵת מַעֲבַר יַבֹּק׃ וַיִּקָּחֵם וַיַּעֲבִרֵם אֶת־הַנָּחַל וַיַּעֲבֵר אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ׃
וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ

And he got up that night and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. When he took them across, he [also] took across all that was his. And Jacob was left by himself.

Here, too, Jacob sends the women and children on ahead and finds himself alone behind them

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all. This is still the Jacob that hid his intentions behind a steaming pot of red stew,[19] behind animal skins that covered his true identity,[20] and now hides behind his wives who he hopes will engender a response from his brother other than murderous vengeance. The pattern breaks with the first three words of the next verse.

Breishit Rabbah supports the idea of lines of defense in the following passage:[21]

He put the maidservants and their children first, Leah and her children behind them and Rachel and Joseph behind them. This is to say [that those who were] last [were the most] dear [to him].	וישם את השפחות ואת ילדיהן ראשונה, הדא אמרה אחרון אחרון חביב

The midrash understands the arrangement of the wives in verse 2 as Jacob's calculated defensive strategy. Pesikta Rabbati elaborates on the lines of defense,[22] seeing Joseph and his progeny as the perennial foils to the descendants of Amalek. The following passage explicitly details the rationale behind the placement of Jacob's wives and children:

> When Jacob was coming from Paddan-Aram, and Esau began to advance toward him and toward his children to kill them, and since Jacob saw [his intention] from the start, he became frightened and anxious: *Then Jacob became very frightened and anxious* (Gen 32:8). At that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to him and said: "Look, the children of Rachel are with you, but you are afraid. [As sure as] you are living, there will come a time for them to exact punishment from Esau whenever he stands [against] your children." When Jacob saw God's position, he took [care] to protect Rachel and her children. And from the way he acted you know that the Holy One, blessed be He, had told him to do [this]. He divided his people into camps so *if Esau should come to one camp, then the camp which is left, may [yet] escape* (Gen 32:9). [Actually], he divided them into four camps, placing Rachel above them all (as a

19. Gen 25:29-34.
20. Gen 27:16.
21. Breishit Rabbah 78:8.
22. Pesikta Rabbati 13:4.

> priority). As it is written, *He put the maidservants and their children first* (Gen 33:2). You see that the handmaids were first, and behind them their children; behind these, *Leah and her children after* (ibid.); and then behind these, *Rachel and Joseph* (ibid.). Jacob said [to himself] that even if all of his children are killed, with only Rachel's son remaining: I will [still] be delivered by Rachel's son: *The camp which is left, may [yet] escape* (Gen 32:9). Why is that? Because Rachel's children are the ones who are to exact punishment from this evil seed of Amalek. *Out of Ephraim [come those] whose roots are in Amalek* (Judg. 5:14).

Here, the burden of responsibility for Jacob's actions is placed upon God. The prioritization of the family, indeed, of one human life against another, is ordained from on high as God explains that Rachel's children have a higher calling, and must be spared at all costs.

ג וְהוּא עָבַר לִפְנֵיהֶם
וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַרְצָה שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים
עַד־גִּשְׁתּוֹ עַד־אָחִיו׃

And he went before them and bowed to the ground seven times until he drew close to his brother.

Now, for the first time, Jacob crosses to the front. In Chapter 32, verses twenty-five and following, Jacob wrestles with an angel but he was also wrestling with himself. Would he continue to deceive as in the past or would he now learn accountability? In the previous verse, Jacob also found himself alone at the back of his family, but he wastes no time in crossing to the front at the beginning of verse 3. The selflessness of this act marks a new willingness to be vulnerable as he leaves himself exposed and unprotected. The simplicity of the action is conveyed in three words with the simplest of tropal clauses (טפחא מונח אתנחתא). Jacob is trying on his new name. This is further evidenced by his supplication before his brother. The מהפך and פשטא of וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַרְצָה (he bowed to the ground) musically depict the physical up and down of the bowing as Jacob approaches Esau.

In Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Jacob's newfound chivalry does not go unnoticed.[23] The midrash asks what is meant by the first half of the verse, *And he went before them*, and concludes that Jacob selflessly goes on ahead as protector, "If the blows should come, let them strike me and not my children." As with verse one, Breishit Rabbah goes to great lengths to equate the compassion of

23. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 19:3.

Jacob to that of Abraham;[24] and, like Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, sees Jacob's gesture as that of the chivalrous protector. Breishit Rabbah goes on to put a legalistic spin on the seven-fold bow and in doing so, casts Esau in the role of arbiter and Jacob as defendant.

> *And [he] bowed to the ground seven times.* Why seven? Because [it is written], *A righteous man falls seven [times] and gets up* (Prov. 24:16). Another interpretation: Why seven? [It was as if] he said to him, "Picture yourself as if you are before seven gratings[25] and you sit and offer judgment. I am judged before you and you are filled with compassion for me." R. Hanina bar Yitzchak said, "He did not stop prostrating himself and he went on prostrating until he had brought [Esau] from the attribute of judgment to the attribute of compassion."

This text tacitly implies that Esau has been wronged and it was incumbent upon Jacob to appeal to his brother's good graces. The physicality of the bowing is picked up by both the trope and the midrashim, and the two work in concert to demonstrate the humility of the Patriarch.

24. Breishit Rabbah 78:8.
25. These physical partitions appear to be something akin to a security measure to protect judges of the time of the midrash.

ד וַיָּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ
וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ
וַיִּבְכּוּ׃

And Esau ran to greet him and he embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

Verse 4 is overwhelmed by active, third-person singular verbs- וַיָּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ (Esau *ran* to *greet* him and *embraced* him and *fell* upon his neck and *kissed* him). In addition to the stark contrast between Jacob as onlooker (וַיַּרְא) and Esau as runner and doer (וַיָּרָץ), this string of active verbs harkens back to Gen 25:34 and Esau's actions as he showed his contempt for the birthright- וַיֹּאכַל וַיֵּשְׁתְּ וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֶז (he *ate* and *drank* and *got up* and *went* and *spurned* [the birthright]). Beyond the obvious difference of the stated actions of the verbs, two notable distinctions emerge. First, the direction of the verbs in chapter 25 leads Esau away- away from his brother, away from the house, away from familial obligation. A physical distancing takes place between "*ate*" and "*went*," and the last verb וַיִּבֶז (he spurned) is a show of the emotional distancing that will ultimately keep the brothers apart for over twenty years. In chapter 33, Esau is presented again with a string of active verbs, but the direction of these verbs has been reversed. Chapter 25 concludes with running *away* and chapter 33 begins with running *toward* his brother. Chapter 25 shows a picture of a self-absorbed Esau, looking out for his own interests and in chapter 33, four of Esau's five actions are dependent upon his brother. The last two verbs in the list may tell us more about the sincerity of Esau's gesture. וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו (he fell upon his neck) is Esau's response to וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו (Jacob lifted his eyes) at the beginning

of Chapter 33. The physical discrepancy between the brothers and the emotional distance is negated by Esau lowering himself to meet Jacob at his level. Furthermore, וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ reveals the intimacy of the embrace. This encounter is not an uncomfortable, disingenuous gesture performed at an arm's length. Esau is so close to his brother at this moment that they are no longer face to face, but neck to neck, and it is as if the two are one.

וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ, the fifth verb in the list of Esau's actions, is the source of much controversy. The Encyclopedia Judaica says of unusual points in the biblical text:[26]

> There are dots over 15 words in the Bible and sometimes also under them, one dot over each letter of the word or over some of the letters... ...These dots are a very ancient tradition, the evidence concerning some of them going back to the second century C.E.... ...There have been various theories put forth concerning the origin and meaning of these dots... ...However, they do not belong to the system of vocalization and they also appear in Torah scrolls designated for public recitation.

Perhaps the diacritical markings do not belie the sincerity of the kiss as many commentators remark, but actually alert the reader to the additional action of a selfless Esau. The marks cry out to us to compare the Esau of וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׁתְּ וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֶז (he ate and drank and got up and went and spurned [the birthright]) to the Esau of וַיָּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ (Esau ran to greet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him). He is no longer a self-absorbed youngster. Esau, the man, is genuinely concerned about his brother. The most compelling proof for the very real emotion being expressed in this verse is the weight of the סוף-פסוק under וַיִּבְכּוּ. Normally, אתנחתא divides the biblical verse more or less into halves. Here וַיִּבְכּוּ is considered half of the verse and though this clause is but a single word, the word

26. Aron Dotan, "Masorah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2d ed., pp.607-608.

and the emotions conveyed by it more than make up for its lonely word count. וַיִּבְכּוּ fills the second half of this verse with raw emotion that is mutual. There can be no mistaking the authenticity of the reconciliation. The bitter irony, of course, is that the reconciliation and the emotions laid bare only occupy the textual space of one word, which effectively foreshadows the brothers' divergence at the end of the passage and realistically portrays the transience of these pure moments of meeting in human experience.

Verse 4 and the mysterious markings above וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ spawned intense debate among the rabbis as to Esau's true intentions behind the kiss. Breishit Rabbah spells out both sides of the *machloket* (debate):[27]

> *And Esau ran to greet him, and kissed him.* [There are] dots above it (וישקהו). R. Shimon ben Eleazar said, "Everywhere that you find the writing is longer than the dots, you [must] explain the Scripture. [If] the dots are longer than the writing, you [must] explain the dots. Here, the word is not longer than the dots and the dots are not longer than the word, which teaches that he was overcome with feeling at that moment and he kissed him with all of his heart." R. Yannai said to him [in response], "If that is so, why the dots over it (וישקהו), if not to teach that he didn't come to kiss him (לנשקו), but rather to bite him (לנשכו), but the neck of our father Jacob had changed as if it were made of marble and the teeth of this wicked man were blunted." And so "they wept" (ויבכו) actually serves to teach that this one wept on account of his neck and the other wept because of his teeth. R. Abahu comes to this conclusion in the name of R. Yochanan from here, "Your neck is like a tower of ivory..." (Song of Songs 7:5).

R. Shimon and R. Yannai represent the opposite ends of the spectrum with respect to the kiss. The former believes the dots are an indication of the kiss's sincerity, while the latter believes the

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27. Breishit Rabbah 78:9.

dots reveal a subtle and sinister wordplay. Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas concurs with R. Yannai's pessimistic reading of verse 4,[28] concluding, "The dots [above] וישקהו [show] that it was not a sincere kiss." The "biting" wordplay is also picked up and elaborated in the parable of a wolf (Esau) and a ram (Jacob):

> *And they wept.* Why did they weep? [There is] a parable to which this can be compared, that of the wolf that came to kidnap the ram. [When] the ram began to gore him, he (the wolf) sunk his teeth into the ram's horns. This one cried and that one cried. The wolf cried that he wasn't able to do anything (inflict any damage), and the ram cried that [the wolf] might return to kill him. This is like Esau and Jacob. Esau cried that Jacob's neck had turned to marble and Jacob cried that Esau might still bite him again. Concerning Jacob, Scripture says, *Your neck is like a tower of ivory* (Song of Songs 7:5). And concerning Esau, it is written, *You shatter the teeth of the wicked* (Ps 3:8).

Sifrei Bemidbar seems to straddle both sides of the argument,[29] admitting, "[The] dots above it [indicate] that he did not kiss him with all his heart," however the midrash calls upon a rather authoritative source to give a more nuanced read, "R. Shimon ben Yochai said, 'It is commonly thought that Esau hated Jacob, but he had a change of heart at that moment and he kissed him with all his heart as he left him.'" Here, the dots come to show that at the exact moment of the kiss, Esau kissed his brother with all of his heart, though this may not have been his original intention.

Massechet Kallah Rabbati of the Massechtot Ketanot (minor tractates of the Babylonian Talmud) goes to great lengths to link Esau's kiss to the kiss of Laban when he welcomes Jacob into his household.[30] It is as if Esau knows of Laban's greeting of Jacob and the trickery it foreshadows. The midrash casts them as partners in deceit. "*Laban ran to greet him.* (Gen

28. Midrash Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas, *Vayishlach*, 4.
29. Sifrei Bemidbar, *pisqa* 69.
30. Massechet Kallah Rabbati 3:15.

29:13). He asked to kiss him and not to search him; he embraced him, and came around to kiss."

This midrash further explicates a grammatical point relating to the verb form of וינשק:

> [The wording of the text] is also precise where it is written וינשק (he kissed- *pi'el*) and not וישק (he kissed- *pa'al*). Deduce from it- here [where] it is written וישק, he kissed (*pa'al*) them and came around to embrace them. And what [is the difference] between the *pa'al* and the *pi'el* form? וינשק (*pi'el*) is [performed] with the whole body and וישק (*pa'al*) is with [only] the mouth.

The above assumes the reader's knowledge of midrashim akin to Breishit Rabbah 70:13, which explains the lengths to which Laban is willing to go to ferret out silver or precious stones that he believes must be somewhere on Jacob's person, only to be disappointed when his search comes up empty. Massechet Kallah Rabbati reads the *pi'el* form of "to kiss" (וינשק) as an all-encompassing, probing kind of action. This passage is not particularly concerned with fair and balanced reporting, as the association of Esau with Laban only serves to denigrate further Esau's character and his purpose. "Come [and] hear: *Esau ran to greet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him.* The dots liken [this situation] to Laban [who also *ran to greet him (Jacob) and embraced him and kissed him*]." The passage concludes with the now familiar imagery of Esau pouncing on Jacob's neck with sharpened teeth, only to break his teeth on Jacob's miraculous neck of marble. The miraculous event is given a waxy veneer in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah:[31]

> He did not come to kiss him but to bite him and Jacob's neck became as of marble and the teeth of the evil one darkened and melted like wax. And what does ויבכו (they cried) come to teach? That this one cried about his neck and this one cried about his teeth.

31. Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, 7.

The midrash does not mince words and mounting evidence suggests that the lion's share of midrashim on this event concur with the above assessment of Esau as the רשע (wicked one). Observe the conflation of the ulterior motivation behind the kiss and the wicked Esau in Midrash Mishlei.[32] "The dots above וישקהו [serve] to teach that he didn't kiss him so much out of love but rather out of hate. R' Shimon ben Mansiyah said, 'What was the wicked Esau thinking at that exact moment? Did he love him at all or hate him?' He said: [Esau] hated him completely." As if "wicked" wasn't denigrating enough, along comes Aggadat Breishit to dehumanize Esau as well,[33] "*And Esau ran to greet him-* that he was called a wild animal, as it is written, 'Rebuke the beast of the reeds!' (Ps 68:31)." Yalkut Sh'moni also emphasizes the dehumanization of Esau by foregoing the weaponry of man,[34] "I won't kill him with bow and arrows, but rather with mouth and teeth and suck his blood."

All of these midrashim go to great lengths to read an entire world into six dots and the substitution of a *kaf* for a *kuf* (וישקהו- "he kissed him," and וישכהו- "he bit him"). To the midrashic mind, these dots can only point to Esau's dark, ulterior motivations and whether there is even a moment of sincerity is irrelevant. Esau's wickedness is almost genetic and no amount of diacritical markings will convince the rabbis otherwise.

32. Midrash Mishlei, 26:24.
33. Aggadat Breishit, 69.
34. Yalkut Sh'moni I, *remez* 130.

ה וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־עֵינָיו
וַיַּרְא אֶת־הַנָּשִׁים וְאֶת־הַיְלָדִים
וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אֵלֶּה לָךְ
וַיֹּאמֶר
הַיְלָדִים
אֲשֶׁר־חָנַן אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עַבְדֶּךָ׃

He lifted his eyes and saw the women and children and he said, "Who are these [people] to you?" And he said, "The children with whom God has graced your servant."

Esau is the first to break the embrace as he immediately notices the women and children who are accompanying Jacob and asks after them. Esau's actions mirror those of Jacob at the beginning of the passage: וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא (Jacob lifted his eyes and saw- verse 1) and וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא ([Esau] lifted his eyes and saw- verse 5). Both verses have upward melodic motion before downcast eyes on רביעי, but what the brothers see and how they respond to their respective visions are contrasting. When Jacob first saw Esau, the פשטא created the sense of a deer caught in the headlights. He was frozen and transfixed on his brother's proximity. Contrastingly, Esau's וַיַּרְא (and he saw) is underscored by a מונח, which conveys a sense of further investigation. He is not transfixed, but curious and active. If word painting is any indication, it is as if he studies the women up and down to try to understand their presence at the reunion. His question in the second half of the first phrase is underscored by the simplest of tropes with the question mark poised inquisitively on אתנחתא. "Who are they to you?" Jacob's response begins with two זקף-גדולים in sequence on וַיֹּאמֶר הַיְלָדִים (he said, "The children"). The repetitive second class

disjunctive serves as a musical stutter and hints that Jacob was so overcome with emotion in the embrace that it takes him longer to recover than his brother as he clumsily introduces his children. There can be no doubt that the repetitive trope exposes Jacob's disorientation as Esau earlier in the verse notices both Jacob's wives *and* the children, but Jacob references only the children in his introduction. Finally, this verse introduces a new power dynamic to the brothers' relationship. Jacob refers to himself at the end of the verse as עַבְדֶּךָ (your servant), which provides a linguistic counterpart to his physical diminution throughout this scene. Furthermore, he consciously reverses God's pronouncement to Rebecca before the twins are born in chapter 25, verse 23: וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר (and the elder shall serve the younger).

It should come as no surprise that Esau's genuine curiosity and interest in his brother's life and family are called into question in the classical midrashim. In Breishit Rabbati, Esau seems utterly flummoxed by the idea that his brother has done well for himself in this world.[35] He opines:

> "Jacob, my brother, is it not so [that] you said to me, 'You cast [your lot] in this world and I will cast [mine] in the next.' How is it that you are able to use this world [to your advantage] like me?" This is what is meant by, *Who are these [people] to you?*

It is as if Esau's act of spurning the birthright and even being duped out of the blessing were part of an unspoken agreement that he forfeit the promise of a glorious future in favor of a comfortable present. Esau's assumption in this Faustian bargain is that Jacob's existence will be one of subsistence and he is incredulous that his brother has found a measure of success. Jacob explains that though his reward is the world to come, God chose to favor him with success in this

35. Breishit Rabbati 150-151.

world as well. This is the meaning of חן (God's graciousness) in verse 5. חן, "grace" or "favor," is a leading word in this entire episode and will reappear in verses 8, 10, 11 and 15. Four of the five occurences of the word will display a symmetry and a divine purpose that ultimately find fulfillment in the fifth חן, which depends upon human interaction and resolution.[36] To Esau's credit (and that of Breishit Rabbati), after Jacob's explanation, he no longer begrudges his brother and comes to understand that if his brother merits the world to come, all the moreso (על אחת כמה וכמה) that he should enjoy a share in this world as well.

36. See pp. 65-66.

ו וַתִּגַּשְׁן הַשְּׁפָחוֹת

הֵנָּה וְיַלְדֵיהֶן וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֻיִן׃

ז וַתִּגַּשׁ גַּם־לֵאָה

וִילָדֶיהָ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ

וְאַחַר

נִגַּשׁ יוֹסֵף

וְרָחֵל וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ׃

6 The maidservants drew near, these [women] and their children and they bowed.

7 And Leah also approached and her children and they bowed. And after, Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed.

In verse 6, the handmaids approach first as their physical proximity is closest to Esau. This verse mirrors the positioning of verse 2, as this group was seen as the most expendable. The tropes may hint at their dispensable nature as the Masoretes did not see fit to even divide the verse into halves (notice the omission of אתנחתא- וַתִּגַּשְׁן הַשְּׁפָחוֹת could well have been accentuated with טפחא and אתנחתא). The tropes also suggest a musical processional (trotting out the wives and children) which will be picked up in the following verse.

The first half of verse 7 follows the same tropal pattern as verse 6 with the semantic difference of אתנחתא instead of סוף-פסוק. The second class disjunctive רביעי is employed over וְאַחַר (and after), which draws a grammatical distinction between Joseph and Rachel, and the women and children who precede them. Curiously, the pattern of דרגא תביר is broken as Joseph approaches. מרכא תביר is functionally equivalent but less ornate and a possible reason for the

substitution may lie in the only change in order from verse 2. The reader will notice that in verse 2, Rachel is followed by Joseph in the last and most defensible position of the lineup. Here, as the women and children approach Esau, Joseph comes before Rachel with a diminished tropal cadence. The change in trope sequence is a calculated change on the part of the Masoretes to lessen the competition between Joseph and Rachel. Joseph comes before Esau unadorned and does not detract from Rachel's presence. The text in verse 2 wants to protect Joseph, the youth and the future he represents at all costs, while the text in verse 7 wants the reader to make no mistake that Rachel is most dear to Jacob and there is a possessive fear of losing that which he loves the most to his brother.

The classical midrashim notice the change in order, but are quick to attribute the switch to the concerns of an intuitive and protective son. Joseph is inevitably credited with taking the initiative and approaching before his mother. Breishit Rabbah finds a textual basis for Joseph's chivalry:[37]

> *The maidservants drew near, these [women] and their children and they bowed. And Leah also approached and her children* etc. But regarding Joseph, it is written, *And after, Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed.* [The change in order] is because Joseph said, "This wicked one (Esau) has a deceitful gaze, let him not cast his eyes at my mother." And he extended his height and covered her. It is written of this, *Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine to the eye* (Gen 49:22). *A fruitful vine* [because] he increased before the eye.

Joseph supercedes his mother because he notices הרשע הזה עינו רמה (this wicked one (Esau) had a deceitful gaze). The word choice רמה (deceive) harkens back to Gen 29:25 after Jacob has consummated his marriage to Leah, when he cries out לָמָּה רִמִּיתָנִי (why did you deceive me)?

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37. Breishit Rabbah 78:10.

The midrash takes the root (רמה) which connotes a kind of sexual deceit perpetrated by Laban and weaves it into an unfounded lechery on Esau's part. Joseph recognizes that Esau has eyes for his mother and approaches before her in an effort to conceal her. The midrash invokes Jacob's blessing of Gen 49:22 in which Joseph is described as פורת (fruitful), and explains that like a fruitful vine, when Joseph went before Rachel, he extended himself to his full height to conceal her [from Esau's naughty gaze]. This is yet another midrashic effort to read deceit and lust into Esau's intentions, even in a verse where Esau is wholly absent.

Pesikta Rabbati is even more blunt,[38] "Joseph gave his life for his mother's honor, but Esau wanted to kill his mother. [At the time he emerged from his mother's belly], he ripped her womb [as the proof text shows], *Because he pursued his brother with the sword and destroyed the womb [from whence he came]* (Amos 1:11)." The midrash further explains the moment that Jacob [would] give his life for his mother's honor as the moment he approached Esau before his mother for the same reasons described in Breishit Rabbah. Again, Joseph is presented as the dutiful son, while Esau is seen as capable of matricide.[39]

38. Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.
39. See also Breishit Rabbah 63:6 in this regard.

ח וַיֹּאמֶר
מִי לְךָ
כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר פָּגָשְׁתִּי
וַיֹּאמֶר
לִמְצֹא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי׃

And he said, "Who are [these people] to you, this entire party that approached me? [And what is your intention?]" He replied, "To find favor in the eyes of my lord."

Verse 8 contains a striking reversal of verse 5. In verse 5, Esau is quick to blurt out, "Who are these [folks] to you?" and Jacob's response is a longer explanation of how God graced God's servant. Here, Esau is beginning to understand Jacob's implication and so his initial inquiry is prolonged with more detail- כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר פָּגָשְׁתִּי (this entire camp that approached me). The trope זקף-גדול over Esau's וַיֹּאמֶר (he replied) is an imitative and somewhat playful echo of Jacob's initial musical stutter in verse 5 (וַיֹּאמַר הַיְלָדִים), as if he is chiding his brother, followed by a playful and imitative gesture on מִי לְךָ (who are [they] to you) that is reminiscent of Joseph's bowing gesture (and tropal clause) in the preceding verse. In contrast, Jacob's initial response is abbreviated, as if to say, "I already spelled out my proposition and you get the gist." Jacob's doubly repetitive וַיֹּאמֶר, replete with זקף-גדול, effectively ends the sibling one-upsmanship by its musical insistence, "I said it before, I'll say it again so that you understand full well my meaning." Furthermore, Jacob reiterates the new power dynamic in their relationship (introduced in verse 5) by again assuming a subservient role- his response ends with אֲדֹנִי (my lord).

Contrastingly, the classical midrashim do not treat this verse with levity or with subservience, but rather with the full weight of Divine intervention. Breishit Rabbah seizes upon כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה (this entire camp) in an attempt to bolster Jacob's household with a Divine presence,[40] which tips the numbers game in his favor, proving the adage that there is power in numbers:

> *And Jacob sent messengers* (Gen 32:4). Come and see what is previously written of the matter, *And Jacob said when he saw them,* how large is [this} *camp of God?* Some two thousand ministering angels, as it is written, *God's chariots are many tens of thousands, God is with them [as at] Sinai in holiness.* And he called the name of the place *Machanaim* (two camps). What do the two camps come to teach? That [God] gave to Jacob some four thousand ministering angels in the guise of the king's platoon- some of them dressed in armor, some of them riding horses and some foot soldiers. He met those in armor and said to them, "Who do you represent?" They said to him, "[We're] with Jacob." He met the horsemen and said to them, "Who do you represent?" They said to him, "[We're] with Jacob." He met the foot soldiers and said to them, "Who do you represent?" They said to him, "[We're] with Jacob." [This is what is meant by] the Scripture, *Who is this entire camp that approached me to you?*

The midrash explains that some two thousand angels were part of this company. When Esau learns that they are all with Jacob, he frames his question מִי לְךָ כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הַזֶּה (who is this entire company)? This verse raises the stakes from verse 5 and the midrash understands in this restated question that the size of the group to whom Esau refers seems to have grown. Whereas in verse 5 the midrash depicts Esau as puzzled by his brother's affluence, the midrash of verse 8 has a decidedly militaristic feel. The midrash also turns the tables on our biblical text by taking the threatening presence of Esau and his four hundred and giving Jacob five times as many "troops," with that much more a formidable presence.

Breishit Rabbah goes on to describe just how fiercely loyal these ministering angels are

40. Breishit Rabbah 75:10.

to Jacob.[41] The night prior to Jacob meeting Esau, these units of angels kept meeting up with Esau's men:

> All that night, the ministering angels were gathering into units and groups and kept encountering Esau's soldiers. When they said to them, "Who are you with?" They answered, "[We are with] Esau." They said, "Strike them! Let them have it!" [In an effort] to clarify [they said], "[We are with] Abraham!" And they said, "Let them have it!" [Again] to clarify [they said], "[We are with] Isaac!" And [still] they said, "Let them have it!" But when they said, "[We are with] Jacob's brother," they said, "Cease and desist! They are with us!" And in the morning, he (Esau) said to him (Jacob), *Who is this entire camp that approached me to you?*

The text comes to show that Jacob's status here is exalted even above Abraham and Isaac. Only at the mention of Jacob's name (notice Esau's description as "Jacob's brother"), do the angels desist from their impending onslaught. These midrashim are far removed from the plain meaning of the verse and of Esau's seemingly genuine desire to know more about his brother and the years they spent apart.

41. Breishit Rabbah 78:11.

ט וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו
יֶשׁ־לִי רָב
אָחִי
יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ׃

Esau said, "I have plenty. My brother, let what is yours be yours."

Esau's response to Jacob's response immediately levels the playing field. Not only does he tell Jacob to keep his party intact, he refuses to acknowledge the roles that Jacob has defined. אָחִי (my brother) is treated to a second class disjunctive, זקף-גדול, to emphasize the fact that Esau wants no part of the power dynamics and this meeting has no ulterior motivations.

Ironically, the classical midrashim use this verse to explain Esau's deep-rooted resentment and to legitimize, once and for all, Jacob's questionable claim to the birthright and the blessing. Breishit Rabbah explains the key to Esau coming to terms with the deceit of the past.[42]

> R. Aibo said that "his (Jacob's) claim to the blessings was, in fact, weak (or tenuous)." Where was it strengthened? Here- *My brother, let what is yours be yours.*
>
> R. Eleazar said, "There's no validity to the contract unless the signatories [have signed], so one could not say that if Jacob hadn't tricked his father, he would not have received the blessings." As Scripture says, *My brother, let what is yours be yours.*

The midrash concedes that "[Jacob's] hold on the blessings was, in fact, weak (or tenuous)." This is to say that both the birthright and Isaac's blessing were procured under rather dubious

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42. Breishit Rabbah 78:11.

circumstances. The midrash goes on to set things right and asks, "Where was it strengthened? Here- *My brother, let what is yours be yours.*" This comes to refute any who would say that Jacob's claim to the birthright and the blessing is specious at best, and puts the words of acceptance of their reversed familial roles into Esau's own mouth. The midrash further suggests that יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ (let what is yours be yours) has the validity of an oral contract. The midrash accomplishes two important goals that would be considered a best case scenario in any mediation. On one hand, the wrong perpetrated against Esau is acknowledged and, on the other hand, Esau has made peace with the past and consents to the current state of affairs.

Tanhuma Buber presents the sole midrash that reflects Esau's feelings.[43] In the following passage, Esau doesn't accept Jacob's offer because he shouldn't have to accept as a gift something that was his from the start:

> It's not written here [that] he brought a gift, but rather that he is bringing *back* a gift. I (Esau) said to him (Jacob), "This is a good thing," but I would expect no less from you. He said to him, "What if I gave him my opinion and foisted on him that which he didn't ask to receive." As it is written, *Esau said, "I have plenty."* He is returning things that were taken from Israel by force. And moreso, at the same time, I [should] thank him for it? Esau said, "How long should I be troubled by my brother?" And he left. As it is written, *And Esau took his wives* etc. (Gen 36:6).

Esau does not want to take the gift and he certainly doesn't want to have to thank him for it because it is as if Jacob is presenting stolen goods as a gift. Both midrashim presented above represent two kinds of justification. The first justifies Jacob's claim to the birthright and the blessing and the second justifies Esau's initial denial of what he perceives as stolen property. Neither takes into account the possibility that the exchange could be taken at face value and that this verse is a powerful display of an older brother's concern for the younger, as the tropes seem

43. Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *Vayishlach*, 11.

to indicate.

י וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב
אַל־נָא
אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ
וְלָקַחְתָּ מִנְחָתִי מִיָּדִי
כִּי עַל־כֵּן
רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ
כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים וַתִּרְצֵנִי׃

Jacob said, "Please don't. Pray, if I find favor in your eyes, then take my gift from my hand, because just to see your face is to see the face of God and [a sign that] you are pleased with me.

Jacob concedes on the language of אדון (lord) and עבד (servant), but his speech still rings of subservience with the addition of not one, but two instances of נא ("I pray," or "If it please you"). The cumulative effect of the two פשתאות on נא followed shortly thereafter by a third on חן (favor) give Jacob's exhortation a musical insistence (the פשתא is a dramatic leap of an ascending perfect fifth). The גרשיים over על-כן (because) also contributes to the urgency of Jacob's plea.

While the first half of the verse appeals to Esau's good graces (חן), the second half of the verse shifts its focus from the face of Esau to the face of God. Breishit Rabbah uses the second half of the verse as Jacob's ultimate protection. More than the intercession of an angelic army,[44] and more than Joseph's supernatural growth (in the attempt to conceal Rachel),[45] comparing Esau's

44. See commentary on verse 8.
45. See commentary on verse 7.

face to the face of God is an example of "name dropping" on the highest order and of Jacob's close relationship with the Almighty.[46] A parable is told of a man who invites his friend to a meal, only to intuit that the man wants to kill him:

> Jacob even brought up the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Esau [in an attempt] to frighten and terrify him, as it is written, *Just to see your face is to see the face of God.* A parable likens this statement to a man who invites his friend to a meal and [comes to] realize that [his friend] wants to kill him. He says, "This meal tastes like the meal that I tasted at the palace." [His friend] says [to himself], "The king knows him!" He became frightened and didn't kill him. This is like Jacob when he said to Esau, *Just to see your face is to see the face of God.* The wicked Esau said [to himself], "[Since] the Holy One, Blessed be He, has brought him to such [a place] of honor, I will not be able to overthrow him."

The host casually observes that the meal is reminiscent of a meal he ate at the palace. In doing so, his guest realizes that he has friends in high places and fears for his own life. This is how the second half of verse 10 is read midrashically; as an act of deterrence. The tone of the tropes, however, with its dramatic leaps on the pleading words and imploring favor, suggests otherwise.

46. Breishit Rabbah 75:10.

יא קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּרְכָתִי אֲשֶׁר הֻבָאת לָךְ
כִּי־חַנַנִי אֱלֹהִים
וְכִי יֶשׁ־לִי־כֹל
וַיִּפְצַר־בּוֹ וַיִּקָּח׃

Please take my blessing that is brought for you, for God has been gracious to me and because I have everything." And when he pressed him, he took [them].

Verse 11 is another turning point and it is Jacob's comments in this verse which ultimately persuade Esau to accept the the blessing. The use of the words אדון (lord), עבד (servant) and even נא (please) were not the deciding factors in his decision. When Jacob asks Esau to accept בִּרְכָתִי (my blessing), he effectively takes responsibility for Isaac's stolen blessing and Esau accepts not so much the gift, but the apology that it represents. A striking tropal feature is the פשתא above בִּרְכָתִי (my blessing) which unlocks a musical puzzle posed in the preceding verse. Jacob tried פשתא over נא (please) not once but twice, as if saying to himself, "Surely the dramatic leap and the magic word נא (please) will do the trick." When he tries it the second time to no avail, he changes tactics and moves the dramatic leap to חן (grace), "I'll appeal to my brother's good graces," he thinks. Still Esau does not accept the gift. The two-fold נא (please) of the previous verse was a ploy, but in verse 11, the trope מהפך comes under נא (please) and a dramatic leap of פשתא is employed for the truly magical word בִּרְכָתִי (my blessing) which breaks his brother's silence and allows Esau to accept the gift and his brother's apology. The נא (please) of this verse is more genuine than either נא (please) of the previous verse thanks to

מהפך which contains the greatest descending interval in the entire trope system. This נא (please) is the very act of supplication and its juxtaposition to בִּרְכָתִי (my blessing) is the right formula to get through to Esau.

The classical midrashim don't pick up on the word בִּרְכָתִי (by blessing), so much as the verb form of הֻבָאת ("was brought," *huf'al*, passive). Breishit Rabbah seizes on this grammatical detail to make the point that Jacob was fourteen years at hard labor to acquire his estate, and here his gift "was brought" to Esau as if on a silver platter, i.e., with no work required on Esau's part.[47] The expression "handed to him on a silver platter" is apt, indeed, as the midrash also relates a story in which R Judah HaNasi and Reish Lakish are discussing the evils of Rome, agreeing to neither a borrower nor lender be. During their meeting, a woman brought Reish Lakish a silver tray with a knife on it. He took the knife and later that day, a royal courier paid him a call, saw the knife and took it for his own. That evening, Reish Lakish paid R. Judah another call and found him sitting and laughing. When Reish Lakish asked him why he was laughing, R. Judah parroted back the wisdom of their earlier conversation, "If you take nothing, you will not have to give anything." Another thinly veiled message behind the story is, "Don't become too attached to earthly possessions, as nothing of this world is truly ours to possess." Ironically, the biblical text is rather clear about Esau's reluctance to accept the gift and yet, the midrash goes on to explain that amidst his protestations, he only pretended to draw back, but his hands were actually extended; he verbally refused but physically encouraged the gift. Again, though the end of verse 11 explains that Esau only accepted the gift begrudgingly (he had to be

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47. Breishit Rabbah 78:12.

pressed to take it), Breishit Rabbah portrays Esau as giving a mixed message.

יב וַיֹּאמֶר
נִסְעָה וְנֵלֵכָה
וְאֵלְכָה לְנֶגְדֶּךָ׃

He said, "Let us set out and we will go. I will walk opposite you."

The Esau of verse 4 above (as opposed to the Esau of chapter 25, verse 34) reaches a new level of maturity here. The self-serving verbs of 25:34 (*he* ate, *he* drank) and the relational verbs of 33:4 (*he* embraced *him*, *he* fell on *his* neck) become first-person plural- "let *us* set out, let *us* go" and familial codependence is spelled out in no uncertain terms: "*I* will walk opposite/against/beside (the full range of meaning is intended here) *you*." Here, Esau believes the reconciliation is complete and that he understands the true nature of their relationship. The simplicity and honesty with which he makes his offer is underscored by the simplest of tropal clauses- טפחא מונח אתנחתא טפחא סוף-פסוק.

Midrash Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas leaves much of the adversarial tone of the previous midrashim behind and examines, for a moment, the real emotions of the brothers, with special attention given to Esau.[48]

> It is the custom of the world that [if] a man who has two sons, one the firstborn and the other merely [a son], who receives two portions? The firstborn. Esau came out first as it is written, *The first one came out red* (Gen 25:25). He was deserving to receive two portions, but I (God) did not do this; rather Jacob received two portions.

The first part of this midrash validates Esau's claim to the double portion of the firstborn and the

48. Midrash Tanḥuma Ha-Nidpas, *Teruma*, 9.

reversal of fortune that took place, however, the midrash goes on to conclude:

> And so Esau said to Jacob, *Let us set out and we will go. I will walk opposite you.* Esau said to him, "Let the two of us walk together." Jacob said to him, "Take your world and go," as it is written, *Go on ahead, please, my lord, before your servant... ...until I will come to my lord at Seir* (Gen 33:14). R. Jacob bar R. Chazarti said: In all of Scripture, I have not found that Jacob went to Se'ir. When [will he]? He will go in the world to come, as it is written, *Deliverers will ascend Mount Zion* etc. (Obad. 1:21). Therefore, *I loved Jacob* (Mal 1:2), who is partnered with Esau and eats [his share] in this world, but in the world to come, *He will carry him on His wings, [with] God alone to guide him* etc. (Deut 32:11-12). Similarly, Solomon said, *They will be yours alone, with no strangers [to share] with you* (Prov 5:17).

R. Jacob bar R. Chazarti identifies the problem of verse 14. Jacob speaks of his intention to meet up with Esau in Seir and never follows through. Not content to chalk Jacob's promise up to the category of the little white lie, the midrash utilizes other biblical proof texts to justify Jacob's comment, even delaying Jacob's estimated time of arrival in Seir until the world to come. And while the first part of the midrash appeared to validate Esau's right to the double portion, a closer look at the short verse citation from Malachi reveals the source of much rabbinic mistrust of Esau and the key to his character:

> God said, "I loved you," but you said, "How have You loved us?" "Is Esau not brother to Jacob?," said the Eternal, "I loved Jacob. But I hated Esau. I have made his hills a devastation and [assigned] his property to jackals of the desert. If Edom should say, 'I may be beaten down but I will return and rebuild the ruins,'" so says the Lord of Hosts, "They may build but I will tear down. And they will be called the region of wickedness and the people cursed of Adonai forever (Mal 1:2-4).

ב אָהַבְתִּי אֶתְכֶם אָמַר יְהוָה וַאֲמַרְתֶּם בַּמָּה
אֲהַבְתָּנוּ הֲלוֹא־אָח עֵשָׂו לְיַעֲקֹב נְאֻם־יְהוָה
וָאֹהַב אֶת־יַעֲקֹב׃ ג וְאֶת־עֵשָׂו שָׂנֵאתִי
וָאָשִׂים אֶת־הָרָיו שְׁמָמָה וְאֶת־נַחֲלָתוֹ
לְתַנּוֹת מִדְבָּר׃ ד כִּי־תֹאמַר אֱדוֹם רֻשַּׁשְנוּ
וְנָשׁוּב וְנִבְנֶה חֳרָבוֹת כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
הֵמָּה יִבְנוּ וַאֲנִי אֶהֱרוֹס וְקָרְאוּ לָהֶם גְּבוּל
רִשְׁעָה וְהָעָם אֲשֶׁר־זָעַם יְהוָה עַד־עוֹלָם׃

Esau is first given his second name, Edom, in Gen 25:30,[49] but many verses reiterate that Esau and Edom are one and the same (six other verses in Genesis show the names in parallel- Gen 32:4, 36:1, 36:8, 36:17, 36:19, 36:43). Here, in Malachi, the full implications of God's love and hatred are brought to bear upon Jacob and Esau. The legacy of Edom, and by extension Amalek, is that the entire region is wicked and the people will bear the curse of Adonai forever. On the surface, the midrash appears to give a balanced view of a maligned Esau and a deserving Jacob, but the subversive message makes it clear that even if in this world both may have acquired a goodly portion, as Proverbs attests, in the world to come, Jacob will go it alone.

49. *Esau said to Jacob, "Please [give me] some of that red [stew] to devour, for I am exhausted." [It was] because of this [that he was also] known as Edom* (Gen 25:30).

יג וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אֲדֹנִי יֹדֵעַ כִּי־הַיְלָדִים רַכִּים
וְהַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר
עָלוֹת עָלָי
וְדָפְקוּם יוֹם אֶחָד
וָמֵתוּ כָּל־הַצֹּאן׃

יד יַעֲבָר־נָא אֲדֹנִי
לִפְנֵי עַבְדּוֹ
וַאֲנִי אֶתְנַהֲלָה לְאִטִּי
לְרֶגֶל הַמְּלָאכָה אֲשֶׁר־לְפָנַי וּלְרֶגֶל הַיְלָדִים
עַד
אֲשֶׁר־אָבֹא אֶל־אֲדֹנִי שֵׂעִירָה׃

13 But he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are weak and the sheep and the cattle are nursing and [this is a concern] for me. One day's hard driving and the whole flock would die.

14 Go on ahead, please, my lord, before your servant. And I will journey slowly at the pace of the work (the flocks) that is before me and at the pace of the children until I will come to my lord at Seir."

Verses 13 and 14 are a unit as Jacob refers to his brother three times in these two verses as אֲדֹנִי. This is Jacob's understanding of the relationship. As much as Esau wishes for the two to continue on together, Jacob understands that this may not be for the best. The excuses given in verse 13 sound particularly flimsy as the tropal clause פשפא מונח זקף-קטון undergirds the first excuse in the first half of the verse and the second excuse in the second half (the musical waver of מונח suggests he is grasping at straws). In verse 14, Jacob's gentle journey is treated to nice

word painting with the trope רביעי on the word לְאִטִּי ("gentle" or "slowly"). The downward, stepwise motion of רביעי suggests the slope of a rolling hill and a certain lackadaisical pace.

Jacob's excuses in verse 13 are an excellent launching point for Breishit Rabbah to become allegorical and historical,[50] reading alternatively Moses and Aaron as the weak children and then David and Solomon. The sheep and cattle, read as Israel, are consigned to meet their destruction in the days of Hadrian, emperor of Rome, as foretold by a "hard day's driving" in the biblical verse. With the hindsight of history, the midrash attempts to explain the failure of Moses to see the promised land as well as the ultimate destruction of Solomon's Temple (not to mention the decimation of the Jewish population in Hadrian's time). But this anachronistic retelling is far afield from the plain meaning of the text, which seems to suggest Jacob is fumbling for an excuse as to why he cannot accompany his brother (the children and the animals), with neither excuse making a particularly compelling case.

Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, as previously mentioned in the analysis of verse 12, questions the promise of verse 14 to meet up with Esau in Se'ir and Jacob's lack of follow through.[51] Breishit Rabbah also seeks to exonerate the apparent falsehood.[52]

> *Until I will come to my lord at Seir.* R. Abbahu said: We have poured over the whole of Scripture and have not found that Jacob, our father, went to Esau at Mount Seir in [all of] his days. [Is it] possible [that] Jacob, the Truthful, would deceive him? But when would he have come to him? In the time to come, this is what is meant by, *And deliverers will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau* (Obad. 1:21).

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50. Breishit Rabbah 78:13.
51. Midrash Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas, *Terumah*, 9.
52. Breishit Rabbah 78:14.

Both texts find their answer in the world to come, citing Obad. 1:21 as a proof text, but until such time arrives, the plain meaning of the text suggests that Jacob had no intention of meeting his brother in Seir and his pledge remains unfulfilled.

טו וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו
אַצִּיגָה־נָּא עִמְּךָ
מִן־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי
וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶּה
אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי׃

And Esau said, "Please [let me] place with you people from among those who are with me." And [Jacob] said, "Why is this that I have found favor in my lord's eyes?"

As this section draws to a close, one of two conclusions may be drawn from the verses just prior to verse 15 and from those to come. First (and as verses 13 and 14 would suggest), from the moment Esau suggests that the two of them continue their journey together in verse 12, Jacob knows that this can never be so. If this is the case, his stated intention of meeting up with Esau in Seir (verse 14) is an outright lie and he knows full well that Succot/Shechem will be his next port of call. The other possibility is that Jacob is committed to meeting up with his brother in Seir, albeit at a slower pace, until verse 15. If we allow for the second possibility, what is it about this verse that changes Jacob's mind. The answer may have something to do with the root יצג of אַצִּיגָה (I will place) as well as Jacob's reaction to his brother's gracious offer. When Esau counter-offers to send along people from his party, he says, אַצִּיגָה־נָּא עִמְּךָ מִן־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי (Pray, I will place with you people from those that are with me). The verb that he uses, אַצִּיגָה, which is synonymous with the root שׂים (to place- see Gen 30:38, 41 for equivalency) is an unusual word choice and harkens back to its first usage in the Torah in Gen 30:38 in which Jacob "places the shoots [that he had stripped]" (וַיַּצֵּג אֶת־הַמַּקְלוֹת) in front of the goats' troughs at the

end of his time with Laban. The inauspicious beginnings of the use of this verb form are born in yet another scene of Jacob's deception. It is entirely possible that Jacob hears in his brother's offer a lingering suggestion that although he is forgiven, Esau knows full well that Jacob, the deceiver, has not changed much. His word choice may even suggest that Esau knows full well that Jacob has no intention of meeting up with him in Seir, despite his statements to the contrary. A more nuanced translation of לָמָּה זֶּה אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי may read, "Why is this that I should [suddenly] find favor in your eyes, my lord?" The question implies that a change has taken place. Jacob asked to gain his brother's favor in verses 8 and 10 and even though Esau begrudgingly accepts Jacob's gift, it is unclear until this verse that Jacob feels he has won over his brother's good graces. Perhaps Esau's word choice comes to represent two ideas: first, that he recognizes the deception of their youth (as well as in Paddan-Aram) and second, that he has no intention of exacting revenge and what was in the past is past. Jacob has indeed won his brother's favor, though it brings him no great relief as we shall see from the verses to follow.

Verse 15 also completes a linguistic puzzle that began in verse 5. Having already established חן ("grace" or "favor") as an important leading word that occurs five times in this episode alone, a pattern emerges. In verse 5, God has favored Jacob- אֲשֶׁר־חָנַן אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עַבְדֶּךָ (with whom God has graced your servant). In verse 8, Jacob appeals to Esau's good graces- לִמְצֹא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי (to find favor in your eyes, my lord). In verse 10, Jacob appeals to Esau again to find favor- אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ (if I found favor in your eyes). In verse 11- כִּי־חַנַּנִי אֱלֹהִים (for God has been gracious to me). And in verse 15- אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנִי (I have found favor in my lord's eyes). To simplify the pattern further, grace is "found" from God-Esau-Esau-God-Esau. The first four instances are bookended with God, as if to say only

God is truly capable of bestowing favor. Also from the first four one might conclude that in spite of Jacob's supplications before his brother, he still recognizes that it is ultimately God who bestows favor and that his prosperity is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's will. But the fifth and last חן throws off the symmetry of the previous four. The fifth almost echoes the Yom Kippur liturgical sentiment, "For the sins of man against God, the Day of Atonement atones, but for the sins of man against man, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with each other." For the last occurrence of חן in verse 15 concedes that it is incumbent upon human beings to make peace with one another. If Divine intervention was expected, Jacob and Esau would have waited another twenty years before reconnecting, if ever.

Though it is unclear from our text whether or not Jacob accepts the offer to have some of Esau's party accompany him, Breishit Rabbah informs us that he declined the offer.[53] And just to warn of the dangers of the influence of foreigners, a story is offered of R. Judah Ha-Nasi:

> *And Esau said, "Please [let me] place with you* etc. He (Esau) asked to go with him but [Jacob] refused him. R. Yehudah ha-Nasi was dispatched to the principality, he would review this text and he wouldn't take Romans into his company [for the trip]. One time, [however], he didn't review this [text] and he took Romans along with him. He hadn't even reached Akko before he had sold his horse.

The midrash implies that Esau and those of his party would have been a bad influence on Jacob. While it is not uncommon for the biblical text to warn of the dangers of foreign women and their immoral influence, it is noteworthy that this midrash suggests that even taking along foreign men as travel companions can similarly lead to ignoble pursuits and possibly one's downfall.

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53. Breishit Rabbah 78:15.

טז וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עֵשָׂו
לְדַרְכּוֹ שֵׂעִירָה׃
יז וְיַעֲקֹב
נָסַע סֻכֹּתָה
וַיִּבֶן לוֹ בָּיִת
וּלְמִקְנֵהוּ
עָשָׂה סֻכֹּת
עַל־כֵּן
קָרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם סֻכּוֹת׃

16 And Esau returned on that day to his journey towards Seir.

17 But Jacob set out towards Sukkot and built for himself a house and for his cattle he made booths and because of this the name of the place is called Sukkot.

Verses 16 and 17 should be viewed side by side, for in doing so, a stark contrast emerges. Esau *returns* to his way towards Seir (וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עֵשָׂו לְדַרְכּוֹ שֵׂעִירָה) while Jacob forges a new path (נָסַע סֻכֹּתָה) as he travels towards Sukkot. The tropes further distinguish a musical sort of "You take the high road and I'll take the low..." as witnessed by Esau's מרכה תביר which might be described as a musical "tunneling" and Jacob's פשטא מונח זקף-קטון, a leap of an ascending perfect fifth and ultimately resting on a higher note than where it began (according to the Binder trope,[54] one whole step). Textually, Esau וַיָּשָׁב לְדַרְכּוֹ שֵׂעִירָה (returns to his way towards Seir). This informs the reader that Esau's intended destination has always been Seir as opposed to Jacob who נָסַע סֻכֹּתָה (sets out towards Sukkot). This creates the impression that Jacob is forging a new direction, without a previous destination in mind. And even though the second half

54. The cantillation system transcribed by Abraham Wolf Binder in his book *Biblical Chant* (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1959). This system is favored by the Reform movement.

of the verse smacks of an anachronistic attempt to establish the etymological provenance of the city of Sukkot, it also reveals some of Jacob's tension between transience and permanence. For although he builds a structure of some permanence (בַּיִת- house), the structures that he makes for the cattle (סֻכֹּת- booths) belie the temporary nature of his dwelling there.

Another feature which smacks of Masoretic intervention is the סוף-פסוק under שֵׂעִירָה which separates verses 16 and 17. It is entirely plausible that שֵׂעִירָה could have been punctuated differently and the two verses divided at a different point, if at all. The very words ביום ההוא (on that day) in verse 16 would suggest that this is the case as the construction of the two brothers setting out is parallel and would appear to have occurred at the same time. Another possible punctuation for verse 16 and the first clause of 17 would be: וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עֵשָׂו לְדַרְכּוֹ שֵׂעִירָה וְיַעֲקֹב נָסַע סֻכֹּתָה. But our Masoretic text separates the verses and punctuates שֵׂעִירָה with סוף-פסוק which makes the distancing of the brothers more pronounced and would even suggest an altogether different departure date for Jacob from his brother.

Another peculiarity that Breishit Rabbah notices is that *Esau returned* in verse 16 with no mention of the four hundred men that were accompanying him.[55] The midrash explains that every man went his own way for fear of Jacob:

> *And Esau returned on that day to his journey towards Seir.* And the four hundred men that were with him? What became of them? One by one they fell away, each going his own way. They said [to themselves], "Let's not get burned by Jacob's [glowing] ember." When did the Holy One, Blessed be He, repay them? Later, [as it is written], *None of them escaped, except four hundred young men that rode on camels and fled* (1 Sam 30:17).

55. Breishit Rabbah 78:15.

As elegant as the above midrashic solution is, the omission of the four hundred men serves as a textual device. The biblical text clearly shows a parallelism between verse 16 and 17 and the singular Esau is merely set in contradistinction to Jacob. The parallelism ends with the activities with which Jacob engages in Sukkot, namely his building projects (house and booths). Mekhilta reveals a dispute among the sages about whether the name Sukkot literally suggests that Jacob built booths for the cattle or whether Sukkot just happened to be the name of the place he settled:[56]

> *Towards Succot.* Literally, booths. [Concerning this], it is written, *Jacob set out towards Succot (and built for himself a house and for his cattle he made booths)*- [these are] the words of R. Eleazar. But the sages say: Not [literally] booths, it is [simply] the place. As it is written, *And they journeyed from Succot and made camp in Itam* (Num 33:6). What is Itam, [if not] a place? So, too, is Succot [the name of] a place.

Breishit Rabbah focuses on the length of time Jacob stays in Sukkot.[57] The speculation runs anywhere from eighteen months to nine years:

> *But Jacob set out towards Sukkot.* How many years was our father Jacob in Succot? R. Abba said: It was eighteen months- [living in] Sukkot, [then] Bethel, and [again in] Sukkot. [He was] in Bethel for six [of those] months. R. Berachiah said in the name of R. Levi: During the months spent in Bethel, he (Jacob) would honor Esau with the very same gift. R. Abin said in the name of R. Honiah: [For] nine years he honored Esau with that gift. R. Pinhas said in the name of R. Abba: During those years that Jacob our father spent in Bethel, he did not refrain from making a libation offering. R. Hanan said: Anyone that knows how many libation offerings Jacob our father made in Bethel knows how to calculate [the sum total] of the waters of the Tiberias.

The midrash is careful to point out that the entire time Jacob was in Bethel, he continued to offer gifts to his brother. There is clearly discomfort with the idea that the two brothers part company

56. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishamel, *Massekhta d'Pisha, parshah* 14.
57. Breishit Rabbah 78:16.

in verse 17, never to see each other again until Isaac's burial in Hebron.

יח וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב שָׁלֵם
עִיר שְׁכֶם
אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן
בְּבֹאוֹ מִפַּדַּן אֲרָם
וַיִּחַן אֶת־פְּנֵי הָעִיר׃

Jacob arrived whole (in peace) to the city of Shechem that is in the land of Canaan in his coming from Paddan-Aram and he encamped before the city.

Verse 18 makes a concerted effort to demonstrate just how שָׁלֵם (complete/at peace) Jacob is upon his arrival in Shechem. The tropal clause קדמא ואזלא above יַעֲקֹב שָׁלֵם (Jacob [arrived] whole) is as musically complete as its visual representation on the page. The open and closed brackets are arguably the most self-contained musical unit in the trope system. The second half of the first part of the verse announces Jacob's arrival in Shechem as well as his point of origin in Paddan-Aram, as if to counter the "new direction" theory explored above in verse 17. And yet, the wholeness of the tropal clause above Jacob and the surety with which his journey is presented (as if the origin and destination were known from the start) appears a bit contrived. The מונח רביעי clause under עיר שכם (city of Shechem) is a musical counter to the high flying self-assuredness of קדמא ואזלא just prior. The רביעי has the shape of a downward slide and its conspicuous appearance under שכם (Shechem) ominously foreshadows just how much "wholeness" Jacob will experience in Shechem. Chapter 34 will go on to detail the rape of Dinah which ultimately results in Jacob's family picking up and resettling in Bethel. As Rabbi Norman Cohen posits in the classroom and the lecture circuit, it may well be that Jacob has found some "wholeness" or "completion" simply in the knowledge that the reconciliation of the brothers does not necessarily mean that they ought go off together and live the rest of their lives side by

side in peaceful coexistence. On the other hand, Rabbi Cohen questions whether Jacob really arrives in Shechem "whole" at all? Is such a peace even possible given the nature of human jealousy? Unfortunately, verse 18 leaves us with more questions than answers to the problems raised above. Does Jacob really believe that Esau, his brother, is coming to kill him? Is Esau's kiss sincere? Does Esau believe that his brother has changed and does he even care at this point some twenty years later? Did Jacob intend to meet up with his brother at Seir or was he bound for Shechem all along? And finally, when he arrived at Shechem and camped outside the city, did he do so in peace and with a clear conscience, or did he have misgivings?

And Jacob came in peace or *arrived whole.* Breishit Rabbah utilizes the verse, *Many evils [befall] the righteous one, and Adonai saves him from them all* (Ps 34:20), to sum up the whole encounter.[58] The evil ones are Esau and his men, but Jacob was delivered. The next verse in the psalm is a bridge to the sentiment expressed in Breishit Rabbah 79:5: *Keeping all his bones [whole], not one of them broken* (Ps 34:21). The midrash details all of the many ways in which Jacob arrived whole:

> *And Jacob arrived whole.* Whole of body- accordingly, it is written, *And he was limping on his thigh* (Gen 32:32)- however, this [actually comes to show that he arrived] whole of body. Whole in his children- accordingly, it is written, *If Esau should come to one camp and strike it, the other camp* etc. (ib. 32:9)- however, this [comes to show that he arrived] with all of his children. Whole in his wealth. Even though R. Abun said in the name of R. Aha: [For] nine years our father Jacob honored Esau with the very same gift- however, this [comes to show that he arrived] whole in his wealth. R. Yohanan said: Whole in his learning- but Joseph forgot, as it is written, *For God made me forget every trouble* (עמל) (Gen 41:51). But elsewhere it says, *The soul that toils, toils for itself* (Prov 16:26).

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58. Breishit Rabbah 79:2.

Jacob was "whole of body," because even though he arrived with a limp, his bones were still intact. He was also "whole in relationship to [all of] his children," "whole of his possessions," and "whole in learning." It would appear that if the midrash is going to such great lengths to show the myriad ways in which Jacob arrived "whole," he most likely arrived in the city of Shechem far from it. The midrash even goes so far as to say: yes, he had a limp, but this actually comes to show his physical well-being. In each case to follow, the biblical text is turned on its head and the midrash stretches to the point of breaking to make the weak argument that all of these things come to show the very opposite of their plain meaning. Ultimately, the reverse psychology of the midrash is not very convincing, as evidenced by the paucity and disassociation of the proof texts.

Pesikta Rabbati sojourns even farther into rabbinic fantasy in an effort to create a storybook ending to this particular episode.[59] Here is a poetic, if anachronistic, explanation of the meaning of the end of verse 18:

> But Jacob, our father, as Scripture says of him, was *shomeir Shabbat*, fixing [for himself] limits [in accordance] with Shabbat. As it is written, *He encamped before the city*, [which means] he arrived [at the city] at sunset [on a Sabbath evening] and set [for himself] the limits for Shabbat.

This version of the story molds Jacob's wholeness into the rabbinic ideal of a knowledgeable and observant Jew. As highly improbable as it sounds, it reflects the desires of those who wrote this midrash and others like it. We are no less apt to ascribe all manner of perfection to Jacob, so long as it fits our modern sensibilities. However, the more we challenge the stoic idealism of verse 18, the more we begin to see Jacob as a human being; certainly more mature than the deceitful youth, but far from perfect or even "whole."

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59. Pesikta Rabbati 23:9.

Finally, a stunning example of midrashic craft, executed at a very high level, is this synthesis of Jacob's experience and that of Job in Breishit Rabbah:[60]

> *And Jacob arrived whole* (Gen 33:18). *In six troubles you will be delivered, in seven no evil will touch you* (Job 5:19). [Jacob said to himself], "Whether there are six or whether there are seven, I will stand up to them." *In famine he will redeem you from death* (ib. 5:20). *For it has been two years that the famine has been in the land* (Gen 45:6). *And in war from the sword* (Job 5:20). *It is in my power to do you harm* (רע) (Gen 31:29). *You will be hidden from the scourge of the tongue* (Job 5:21)- R. Aha said: [So] difficult is slander [to bear] that the One who created it [also] made for it a place where it can be hidden. *And you will not fear violence when it comes* (ib.)- this [refers to] Esau and his chieftains. *At violence and hunger, you will laugh* (ib. 5:22)- this [refers to] Laban who hungered for his (Jacob's) wealth [and sought] to rob him. *For you will be in covenant with the stones of the field* (ib. 5:23). *And he took one of the stones of that place* (Gen 28:11). *You will know that your tent is in peace* (שלום) (Job 5:24)- [this refers to] what happened with Reuben and Bilhah and what happened between Judah and Tamar. *And when you visit your domicile, you will not sin* (ib.)- our father Jacob was eighty-four years old and had not known a nocturnal discharge in all his days. *And you will know that your seed shall be great* (ib. 5:25)- R. Judan said: Our father Jacob did not depart from this world until he had seen sixty myriads of his children's children. *You will come to the grave in ripe old age, as stacks of grain are taken up in their season* (ib. 5:26)- R. Isaac and the rabbis [disagree]. R. Isaac said: You will come to the grave with full vigor. But the rabbis said: You will come to the grave with everything, complete and not lacking in anything, as it is written, *And Jacob arrived whole.*

The midrash seamlessly weaves together the long suffering Job and the trials that Jacob endures. The six troubles are a bit hard to parse, but a possible catalog is: famine in the land of Canaan; Laban's intimidation; Esau and his four hundred men; Laban's covetous nature; the indiscretion of Reuven and Bilhah; and the episode between Judah and Tamar. After the stones verses that represent the covenant that both men have with God, the midrash subtly connects the promised peace (שלום) of Job's tent with Jacob arriving at peace (שלם) in Shechem. The artistry of the

60. Breishit Rabbah 79:1.

midrash is in the economy of the sequential verses from Job that find parallels in the Jacob narrative. Ultimately, Jacob's reward is, first and foremost, his prodigious offspring. The midrash goes so far as to say that Jacob had never known a nocturnal emission, but this comes to show the effectiveness of his seed. None of his seed is wasted which accounts for his myriad descendants. Most important, like Job, Jacob is rewarded in his old age with youthful vigor to the last. The consensual rabbinic opinion in the end does not limit Jacob's old age to extraordinary strength, but ties the entire midrash to verse 18, *Jacob arrived whole.* At the end of his days, Jacob died lacking nothing- he was, so the midrash claims, whole.

Conclusion

What can we conclude from our text analysis and the commentary on the cantillation of the biblical text with respect to the thoughts and opinions expressed in some of the classical midrashim? First and foremost, we can see conclusively from this study that the cantillation markings do appear to be functioning as a layer of commentary. The meaning behind the tropes may be at once obvious by means of word painting, i.e., Jacob lifted his eyes on a rising tropal motif (in verse 1), or the meaning may be more nuanced but no less intentional, i.e., tropal patterns that underscore patterns of human behavior (verses 6 and 7 and the pattern presented as the women approach Esau, only to be broken by Joseph and Rachel). Whether obvious or concealed, the tropes and their meaning are constantly working above or below the text to give inflection and nuance to its meaning. Midrash also serves to provide a more nuanced understanding of the text, but its approach could not be more different from that of the tropes. The tropes tend to stay very close to the text because the tropes are, literally, attached to the biblical text itself. They have much to offer, but they operate within a somewhat limited purview. Midrash is not content to simply stay within the text itself. It thrives on textual irregularities and is all too willing to supply its own text to fill a void. Unfettered by the rule of grammar and logic, it is limited only by the rabbinic imagination itself.

In our textual analysis, we have seen certain tendencies emerge that are wholly in keeping with the two different approaches described. It may be useful to think of the biblical text as a motorboat. The text itself is the vehicle and the tropes, in effect, pilot the boat. They are in the boat and guide the boat. The midrashim are rather like a nimble waterskier. They are attached to the boat by a cord and are, by necessity, pulled along by the boat. But the nimble skier may follow along in its wake, or she may choose to flit in and out of the wake, forging new paths that relate to, but not necessarily the same as that of the boat. During long straightaways, the skier

will fall into line, but at times, there may even be jumps that allow the skier to transcend familiar waters altogether.

Many such midrashic, transcendent moments occur in relation to the Jacob and Esau narrative. These are the moments in which the intersection of the trope and the Midrash are tenuous and rather incidental. They occur most frequently when the rabbis seem to have a preconceived notion of a character or situation. A pattern evident in our study is the tendency of the classical midrashim to put a positive spin on any action undertaken by Jacob and to show a negative bias toward any endeavor of Esau. Looking over the selected midrashim related to our passage, one is reminded of the adage, "When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail." In the rabbis' myopic estimation, Esau is the individual who can do no right. This is not particularly surprising as this opinion begins to be formulated based upon what happens in Rebecca's womb. In utero, Esau is discredited by the rabbis with all manner of sordid motivations, while Jacob is implanted with erudition and learning, a Torah scholar from the start. This undercurrent of hostility toward the elder brother can, at times, obfuscate the picture of an Esau who has let bygones be bygones and may be interested in a new chapter in the brothers' relationship. In the hope of resolving some of the inherent tension between the rabbis' rather overt agenda and what may be the Masoretic intention in a given verse, let us try to evaluate those moments of intersection between the two with an eye towards commonality as well as their differences.

As early as verse 1, we can see the lines being drawn. The tropes create an air of desperation as time itself is conflated; Esau is upon them, and Jacob, almost without thinking, divides the women and children. Midrash Tanḥuma Ha-Nidpas[61] comes to assert Jacob's

61. Midrash Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas, *Vayeishev*, 6.

righteousness and to cement his place among the Patriarchs, by linking the raising of Jacob's eyes to important moments when Abraham and Isaac raised their eyes as well. Breishit Rabbah is more in line with the tropes,[62] showing, by way of the parable of the angry lion and the forgetful fox, that Jacob's actions were anything but courageous. In verse 2, the tropes help to create lines of defense among the women and children and the midrashim support this interpretation. Pesikta Rabbati assigns special significance to Joseph's placement at the back,[63] giving textual support for Joseph as avenger should the encounter turn bloody. Verse 3, in which Jacob passes before the women and the children, finds the trope and midrash in lock step, as both pick up Jacob's newfound chivalry and humility. But verse 4 reflects a great divide between the plain meaning of the text and rabbinic fantasy. Midrash after midrash comes to read malice into Esau's kiss. The diacritical markings are seen by the rabbis as a red flag to indicate that all is not as it seems. Esau is likened to the dastardly Laban, he is accused of biting his brother and even of being a bloodsucker. Even with the mountain of midrash stacked against the cantillation commentary, it still seems to this author that the dots above וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ come to warn against precisely the misread that the rabbis favor. This seems all the more likely when one considers that from an early stage, the public recitation was accompanied by translation. The dots do not come to show that something is amiss, but rather serve as a warning to the translator to translate the plain meaning of the word, "he kissed him," and not be seduced by the word's homophone, "he bit him." Furthermore, there are simply too many other instances where this exact formula (embrace, fall on neck, kiss) is employed in the service of greeting for this kiss to arouse suspicion. This verse shows just how far apart the Masoretic cues can occasionally be from the classical midrashim,

62. Breishit Rabbah 78:7.
63. Pesikta Rabbati 13:4.

which take the interpretation in a different direction altogether.

Verse 5 is more open to interpretation. The tropes seem to suggest genuine inquisitiveness on Esau's part, but Breishit Rabbati sees his reaction as one of incredulity.[64] Both pick up their cues from Esau's surprise as he looks up and sees Jacob's family for the first time. Verses 6 and 7 reveal a subtle order change from verse 2 regarding the positioning of Rachel and Jacob, and both the tropes and the midrashim detect the switch. In verse 2, Rachel, the mother, comes before Joseph, the son, but in verses 6 and 7, Joseph approaches before Rachel. The tropes seem to show deference to Rachel, while the midrashim seize the opportunity to aggrandize Joseph. In addition to casting Esau as the lecher, the midrashim succeed in contrasting Joseph as willing to give his life for his mother, with Esau, who would have taken his mother's life. Here, again, the trope and midrash are on different wavelengths.

The tropes in verse 8 give the impression that Esau is trying to get his brother to give him a straight answer about the true meaning of Jacob's gesture and the approach of the wives and children. The conversation in verses 5 and 8 read like an Abbott and Costello routine and Esau isn't getting the punchline. The four זקף-קטונים in both verses support the parroting back and forth that takes place. The midrashim are not so interested in the brotherly dynamic as they are fixated on the words כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה ([this] whole camp), choosing to insert a military reference where there is none. In verse 9, the trope and plain sense of the verse could not be clearer. The words, "My brother," are treated to the most colorful sign in the verse (זקף-גדול) to emphasize their relationship, as Esau explains what is truly important in this world. The most sincere moment in the whole encounter is eagerly interpreted by the midrashim as having a loaded meaning. Esau's statement, "Let what is yours [remain] yours," comes to legitimize Jacob's

64. Breishit Rabbati 150-151.

claim to the birthright and Isaac's blessing. This, according to Breishit Rabbah,[65] is Esau's tacit acceptance of his younger brother's elder sibling status. Even Tanhuma Buber,[66] which takes Esau's feelings into account and accuses Jacob of re-gifting his blessings, still fails to acknowledge the generosity and affection with which Esau treated his brother.

Verse 10 is another verse in which the tropal interpretation of the text and the midrashic explanation are at odds. Jacob is practically falling all over himself to get his brother to accept his gift. The many musical leaps of the first part of the verse reveal a harried insistence and the repetitious נא (please) is yet another attempt to ingratiate himself to Esau. And yet the midrashim focus on the second part of the verse, when Jacob likens his brother's visage to that of God, to suggest that Jacob is actually name-dropping and, in effect, boasting of his close, personal relationship with God. The hubris of the midrash does not square with the subservience of the verse. Similarly, in verse 11, the tropes bring out the magic word, בִּרְכָתִי (my blessing), which is the key to Esau's acceptance of the gift, while Breishit Rabbah focuses on the verb form הֻבָאת (is brought).[67] The tropes actually suggest that Jacob owned up to the deceitful actions of his youth, but the midrashim portray a resentful Jacob that hands over his hard earned wealth to his brother as if on a silver platter.

The tropes in verse 12 are simple and straightforward, but the final word of the verse, לְנֶגְדֶּךָ (opposite/against/beside you), is polyvalent and ambiguous. The plain meaning of the verse suggests a state of harmony at this point, but לְנֶגְדֶּךָ leaves room for doubt. The midrashim reflect this ambivalence by pointing out Esau's rightful inheritance, but they highlight Jacob's

65. Breishit Rabbah 78:11.
66. Tanhuma Buber, *Vayishlach*, 11.
67. Breishit Rabbah 78:12.

favored status and his superceding claim to the double portion. Verses 13 and 14 paint a picture of a Jacob who is grasping at straws to come up with a reason why he could not set out with his brother at that very moment. The tropal clause מונח זקף-קטון accompanies both the weak children and the nursing cattle excuses. The musical waver suggests that neither reason is particularly satisfying, but the midrashim attempt to read all manner of historical allegory into his excuses. When faced with the very real textual problem of Jacob's apparent falsehood and his stated intention of meeting up with his brother in Seir, Breishit Rabbah simply vouches for Jacob's truthful nature and delays the reunion at Seir until the world to come.[68] But the obvious rabbincal maneuvering only highlights this unresolved difficulty.

In verse 15, the rabbis ignore a very real and present textual tie in the root יצג (set/place), which connects this verse to Gen 30:38, a verse that demonstrates Jacob's cunning. Given the apparent falsehood in the previous verse, Breishit Rabbah is less interested in emphasizing Jacob's cunning than in admonishing the reader against the evils of foreign influences.[69] The tropes in verses 16 and 17 underscore the divisiveness of the brothers' parting; Esau goes low while Jacob's tropes move him higher. But the midrashim focus instead on the amount of time Jacob spent in Succot, making sure to point out that Jacob's reparations were not a one time shot, but continued for a period of years, intimating that the brothers remained in contact. And finally, in verse 18, the tropes and the midrashim are once again in alignment as the tropes demonstrate Jacob's wholeness upon arrival in Shechem. קדמא ואזלא above יַעֲקֹב שָׁלֵם (Jacob [arrived] whole) reflect a musical wholeness. Similarly, the midrashim go to great lengths to explain Jacob's arrival as whole in every way. Breishit Rabbah engages in a kind of legalistic

68. Breishit Rabbah 78:14.
69. *Ibid.* 78:15.

hairsplitting by citing Ps 34:21: *Keeping all his bones [whole], not one of them broken.*[70] The reader knows that Jacob's hip has been wrested from its socket, but the midrash, in a very literal sense, says, effectively, maybe Jacob was stretched a bit, but his *bones* were intact. Both the tropal interpretation and the midrashic spin accord with the plain meaning of the verse, but the whole verse is too quick to offer "happily ever after," when we consider what lies in store for Jacob in Shechem.

The following chart may prove useful in discerning patterns and drawing conclusions from verses in which the tropes seem to agree with the midrashic interpretation and from those in disagreement. Note verses 1, 5, and 12 below, in which the tropes and midrashim agree as well as disagree. In these instances, one midrash comes to support the inference of the trope, while another refutes it:

Verse Number	Agree	Disagree
1	X	X
2	X	
3	X	
4		X
5	X	X
6 and 7		X
8		X
9		X
10		X
11		X
12	X	X
13 and 14		X
15		X
16 and 17		X
18	X	

70. Breishit Rabbah 79:5.

These findings show a general midrashic tendency to support the inferences of the tropes until the preconceived notions of the character of Esau and Jacob force the hand of the writers of the midrashim (verses 4 and following). If Esau makes a selfless gesture (i.e., verse 9), the midrash must combat the plain meaning by infusing the gesture with a subtext of nefarious motivations. When Jacob appears deceitful (i.e., verse 14), the midrashim exonerate him with a full complement of divine interventions, contractual loopholes and promises that will be fulfilled in the world to come. Clearly the midrashim are playing with a stacked deck.

Further investigation will be necessary to state categorically whether or not these trends are present throughout the Torah. Other narratives and their attendant tropes must be examined vis a vis the classical midrashim as well as Medieval midrashic anthologies and commentaries, but this initial inquiry into the intersection of trope and midrash seems to yield a general rule of thumb: The two modes of expression will accord with one another, unless the tropal inference threatens to undermine the prevailing midrashic interpretation. By and large, the trope serve to highlight and extend the *p'shat* meaning of the text and the discord between trope and midrash seems to occur when the midrashim take the text in a direction that is a radical departure from the *p'shat* meaning. In this case, the midrashim inevitably trump the trope, as midrash can speak for itself, while the tropes require a fair amount of unpacking. Unfortunately, in synagogue programs that neglect cantillation in favor of recitation, the tropes and their meaning are silenced altogether.

Epilogue

וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו יֶשׁ־לִי רָב אָחִי יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ׃

Esau said, "I have plenty. My brother, let what is yours be yours."

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. Now as it happened, one of the brothers lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family. One day, the single brother thought to himself, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed." So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to see that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?" So every night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night the brothers met each other halfway between their two houses, suddenly realized what had been happening, and embraced each other in love. The story is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, "This is a holy place- a place of love- and here it is that my Temple shall be built." And so it was. The holy place, where God is made known, is the place where human beings discover each other in love.[71]

71. Belden Lane, "Rabbinical Stories: A Primer on Theological Method," in *Christian Century* (December 16, 1981), pp. 1307-1308.

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