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Approaches Over Time to the Biblical
Story of the Reconciliation of Jacob & Esau

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DIGEST

Interpretation of Torah has long been the focus of Jewish religious life. This thesis looks at Jewish dialogues with sacred texts, investigating how Jews of different eras have understood the biblical story of the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau.

Jacob's reconciliation with Esau, which is preceded by his encounter with a divine being, relates to the themes of struggle, deceit, blessings and promises, and repentance which repeat throughout his life. The reconciliation is part of, and results from, Jacob's efforts to overcome the negative consequences of his mistreatment of others.

Within the Bible, Jacob and Esau become the typological progenitors of the peoples Israel and Edom, respectively. The midrashic commentary extends this viewpoint, understanding the brother's relationship as the pattern for Jewish relations with gentile nations. Reading the story intertextually, the rabbis find evidence of Israel's continued possession of God's blessings, guaranteeing their future messianic redemption.

The Medieval Jewish philosophical commentary of Gersonides understands this text as a rational demonstration of prophecy and providence, both of which protect Jacob from

Esau because of Jacob's righteousness and intellectual development.

The Zohar's mystical commentary focuses on Jacob's wrestling match, rather than on his reconciliation with Esau, understanding that match as part of a continuing battle between the forces of good and evil.

Many modern Jewish commentators read this text as one about struggle and intimate encounter with self, God, or another individual. Some shift its rabbinic interpretation, understanding it as a metaphor for relations between Jews and various groups of non-Jews.

Commentators of each era bring their own questions and preconceptions to the text. Far from precluding honest interpretation, taking a point of view is a prerequisite for engagement with the text. The Torah is strong and open enough to admit a wide variety of readings that speak truthfully in their diversity.

This thesis is dedicated
with love and gratitude
to J. B. L.
my partner on the journey.

תפלת הדרך

יהי רצון-מלפניך, יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו ואמותינו, שתוליכנו לשלום ותצעידנו לשלום,
ותגיענו אל מחוז חפצנו לתים ולשמחה ולשלום. ותצילנו מכף כל אויב ואורב ואסון בדרך. ותשלח
ברכה במעשה ידינו, ותתננו לחן ולחסד ולרחמים בעיניך ובעיני כל רואינו. ותשמע קול תחנונינו,
כי אל שומע תפלה ותחנון אתה. ברוך אתה, יי, שומע תפלה.

ויעקב הלך לדרכו, ויפגעו בו מלאכי אלהים. ויאמר יעקב כאשר ראם, מתנה אלהים זה; ויקרא
שם המקום ההוא מחנים.

הנה אנכי שלח מלאך לפניך, לשמרך בדרך, ולהביאך אל המקום אשר הכנתי.
יברך יי וישמרך. יאר יי פניו אליך ויחנוך. ישא יי פניו אליך וישם לך שלום.

Prayer for the Journey

May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our
ancestors, to lead us in peace, to direct our steps in peace;
may You bring us to our desired destination in health and joy
and peace. Save us from every enemy and disaster on the way.
Bless the work of our hands, and may we find grace, loving
kindness, and compassion in Your sight and in the sight of
all who see us. Hear our supplication, for You listen to
prayer and supplication. Blessed are You, Adonai, who hears
prayer.

Jacob went on his way and encountered angels of God.
On seeing them, he said, "This is God's camp," and he called
the place Mahanaim.

I am sending an angel in front of you, to guard you as
you go and to guide you to the place I have prepared.

May Adonai bless you and keep you. May Adonai show you
favor and be gracious to you. May Adonai show you kindness
and grant you peace.¹

¹ Gen. 32:2-3; Ex. 23:20; Num. 6:24-26; as found in Daily Prayer Book, trans. and notes by Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1990), p. 732.

INTRODUCTION

Moses summoned all Israel, and said to them: . . . I make this covenant . . . not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us today before Adonai our God, and with those who are not here with us this day. . . . Surely this מצוה (mitsvah, commandment) which I enjoin upon you today is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you might say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may carry it out?" It is not beyond the sea . . . No, it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can carry it out. (Deut. 30:1, 13-14, 11-14)

In its own words, the Torah states that future generations are as much a part of the covenant which it records as are those Israelites who first entered the promised land. The Torah also assures its readers that its commandments are not mysterious; rather, they are accessible to all. Since the explanation of this teaching will not come from "the heavens," it is the people's responsibility in every generation to understand the Torah, in order, as it says, to "carry it out."

From the late Second Commonwealth period until modern times, the study and interpretation of Torah has in fact been the focus of Jewish religious life. The Oral Torah, as such interpretation came to be known, shares the authority of

revelation with the Written Torah, and includes a broad range of halakhic and aggadic materials. With the unfolding of multiple layers of textual interpretation, Judaism developed a distinctive religious attitude: that revelation includes within itself as sacred tradition the later commentary concerning its own meaning.¹ As each generation has interpreted an ever-growing body of sacred texts, their commentaries have become part of revelation, part of Torah.

Dialogues with sacred texts have thus been the means through which Jews have pursued truth. Each generation has approached Torah--the biblical text and the many extensions of and commentaries on it--with critical questions about human destiny and national history. Their readings have been shaped by the contexts in which they live. As each new body of readers has discerned and recorded new truths, Torah has diversified, requiring further interpretation. Those who have studied and interpreted the sacred texts have made those texts their own, carrying on intertextual conversations across the years and renewing the tradition for their own time.

This thesis looks at and participates in this Jewish dialogue with sacred texts. It investigates how one biblical narrative has been read by Jews at different times and in different places, and how the understanding of that text has been shaped both by its basic themes, and by the context and

¹ Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," in The Messianic Idea in Judaism (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 284-288.

concerns of its readers.

The narrative examined here is the story of the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. It reflects a number of significant biblical themes. Like many narratives in the Bible, it is both the story of an individual and his family, and of the nations the biblical authors understood to have descended from those individuals. Jacob is the most "human" of the patriarchs, and the only one whose life story is related in detail; yet, that story also describes the origins of the people Israel.

The Jacob-Esau cycle highlights tensions between likeness and difference, struggle and reconciliation. As twins, the brothers are almost as closely connected as human beings can be, yet their appearances, personalities, and destinies are markedly different. Their struggle for dominance, and their eventual reconciliation, are particularly intense because of their shared origins. God chooses Jacob to be the blessed son; thus, these themes of struggle and reconciliation are further complicated by questions of inclusion and exclusion: how does one who is "inside" relate to one who is "outside," or "other," particularly when that other is also one's "brother?"

In demonstrating the primacy of the younger sibling, the Jacob-Esau cycle reflects an important biblical motif. This reversal of traditional law and expectations is one way the Bible demonstrates a further theme present in this narrative: that God is the moving force in history, and will

shape individual destinies to suit God's purposes.

Finally, this story highlights the tension between the understanding of people as individuals who must live up to ethical standards and thus "earn" their status in the sight of God, and the understanding of individuals as "chosen" or not "chosen" by God, regardless of their personal merits. Jacob is the blessed son because God chose him; on the other hand, it appears that he must develop ethically before he is ready to be the progenitor of the people Israel.

This thesis looks first at this biblical narrative itself, offering in the first chapter a close reading from a literary-critical perspective. The second chapter delineates how, within the Bible itself, Jacob and Esau move from being primarily individual characters to serving as typological figures symbolizing the two peoples descended from them: the Israelites and the Edomites. The midrashic commentary on Jacob and Esau's reconciliation responds from within this framework, and the principal motifs of this commentary are analyzed in Chapter Two.

Two new genres of biblical exegesis developed during the Middle Ages that were, each in its own way, striking departures from rabbinic commentary. These two genres, medieval Jewish philosophical commentary, as exemplified here by Gersonides, and kabbalah, as exemplified here by the Zohar, are the topic of the third chapter.

The coming of modernity brought a significant shift in many Jews' understanding of Torah. The study of sacred texts

remained central to some, but others turned away from these texts, or saw them from a new scientific, historical, or literary point of view. Despite these enormous changes, many modern Jewish writers continue to look to traditional Jewish texts for inspiration. The fourth and final chapter of this thesis examines modern responses to the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation.

Ben Bag Bag says: Turn [the Torah] over and over, for everything is contained in it, and reflect upon it and spend yourself in its study, for you have no better lot than that. (Pirkey Avot 5:25)

CHAPTER I

THE BIBLICAL STORY

Jacob's reconciliation with his brother Esau is both the outgrowth of, and Jacob's response to, several significant patterns in his life. In order to understand the reconciliation itself, we must first look briefly at those patterns.

Patterns in Jacob's Life

Struggle

Struggle is part of Jacob's life even before his birth. He and his twin brother crush one another in their mother's womb. Esau is born first, but Jacob comes out grasping his brother's heel, as though making a last effort to supplant him.

The twins' father Isaac favors Esau, while their mother Rebecca favors Jacob. Although the text does not describe an ongoing struggle between Isaac and Rebecca over their sons, the parents' respective preferences and Rebecca's plan to deceive Isaac imply that there must have been many instances in which Jacob was aware of his parents' divided loyalties. Thus he grows up as a witness to, and object of, conflict between the two people in the world who are most important to him.

When Jacob marries he becomes part of a family conflict between another set of older and younger siblings, as his wives Leah and Rachel compete both for his affection and to bear sons to him. Though Jacob prefers the younger sister, Rachel, for many years God favors only Leah with sons, and Rachel is angry at Jacob over her sister's victory.

Deceit

Our first glimpse of the twins after their birth is of the transaction in which Jacob obtains Esau's birthright in return for a bowl of "red stuff" (Gen. 25:30). While Jacob does not directly lie to Esau, he does take advantage of his brother's hunger and impulsiveness. Jacob's conduct in obtaining the birthright is selfish and perhaps immoral, but not clearly dishonest, while Esau's behavior seems capricious and even foolish.

In our next look at Jacob we find him deceiving both his brother and his father, making Esau the innocent victim of a heartless plot. At Rebecca's urging Jacob obtains the blessing Isaac had intended for his oldest son. Jacob also accepts his mother's statement that she will take upon herself any curse Jacob's trickery could bring on him. Perhaps in fulfillment of Rebecca's words, after this incident she and Jacob never see each other again.

After Jacob's theft of his father's blessing he is forced to leave home to escape Esau's threatened revenge. He goes to live with his uncle, Laban, who deceives him in marriage, promising him Rachel, whom Jacob loves, but giving

him her older sister Leah instead. The text makes it clear that Laban's trickery is the means by which Jacob is punished for his deception of Esau: Jacob uses a form of the same word, נִדָּב, to complain about Laban's deception, that Isaac uses to refer to Jacob's theft of Esau's blessing (Gen. 27:35; 29:25). Laban drives this same point home by telling Jacob that "It is not done in our place to give the younger before the older" (29:26), implicitly criticizing Jacob's theft of his older brother's blessing.

When Rachel finally bears a son, Jacob asks Laban's permission to return home with the wives and children for whom he has served Laban. Laban urges him to remain, and Jacob agrees, but he tricks Laban into giving him the best portions of his flock. Jacob adds to his trickery by telling his wives that it is God's actions, rather than his own, that enable him to obtain Laban's livestock. Jacob then deceives Laban again by leaving in secret with his wives and children.

On this journey Rachel deceives Jacob and Laban by stealing and then hiding her father's gods. Not knowing of Rachel's actions, Jacob declares that the person who stole Laban's gods will not live; thus Rachel's trickery places him in a situation in which he unknowingly curses the woman he loves, and indeed she dies in childbirth before Jacob and his family return home.

Blessings and Promises

Long before Jacob and Esau were born, God blessed their grandfather Abraham, and his son Isaac after him. Jacob and Esau are Isaac's only sons, so the question of which of them will be the next to receive God's blessing underlies the twins' story from the beginning.¹ Before Rebecca's twins are born God tells her that they will become two nations, and that the older will serve the younger. Thus, though it is not stated explicitly, Rebecca and the reader know that even before birth it seems probable that God has designated the younger son as the heir of God's promises to Abraham and Isaac.

When Jacob buys Esau's birthright there is no indication that it will entitle Jacob to a larger share of his father's property, as might have been expected. Jacob goes on to acquire wealth on his own, while Esau grows prosperous in his home land. This supports the idea that the birthright Jacob purchases is the divine promise to Abraham, rather than the privileges and responsibilities a birthright would ordinarily confer. However, there is no indication in the text that Jacob and Esau are conscious of the consequences of their agreement about the birthright.²

As a young man Jacob steals the blessing his elderly father had intended for Esau. In that blessing Isaac asks

¹ Julian Morgenstern, The Book of Genesis, 2nd. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 209.

² Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary, revised ed., Old Testament Library Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 268.

for agricultural fertility, and states that nations and Jacob's own brothers will bow down to him. The last portion of the blessing is reminiscent of God's words to Abraham (Gen. 12:3); Isaac says that those who curse Jacob are cursed, and those who bless him are blessed (27:29), implying that Isaac may be transmitting the blessing of Abraham to Jacob.³ However, Isaac's blessing as a whole is strangely independent of the rather uniform patriarchal promises.⁴

When Jacob is about to leave home to avoid Esau's wrath, and to seek a wife from among his mother's kin, Isaac knowingly blesses his younger son. This time he refers explicitly to the blessing of Abraham, asking that his son, like Abraham, be granted offspring and land (Gen. 28:3-4; cf. Gen. 12:2; 26:4).

God's first direct communication to Jacob occurs when Jacob stops for the night and dreams of a ramp with messengers of God on it (Gen. 28:10ff). On this occasion, God's promises to Jacob are similar to the blessing Jacob received from his father. Again, Jacob is assured of having land, posterity, and blessing. God adds a special promise of protection in exile and safe return; these additions are necessary because Jacob has been forced to flee from his home.⁵

³ Morgenstern, Book of Genesis, p. 223.

⁴ von Rad, Genesis, p. 278.

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel, Melton Research Center Series in The Heritage of Biblical Israel, no. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, paperback edition, 1970), p. 191; von Rad, Genesis, p. 285.

Repentance

While he is still at home Jacob does not show remorse for selfishly purchasing his brother's birthright, or for tricking Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau. After Jacob flees and God speaks to him at Bet El, he says that he wants to return "בְּשָׁלוֹם" ("in peace," or "safely") to his father's house, perhaps indicating an incipient desire to make things right with his family (Gen. 28:21).

When Laban deceives Jacob in marriage, Jacob does not seek revenge on either Laban or Leah. Instead, he submits to the situation, accepting Leah as his wife and working seven more years for Rachel. However, once Rachel bears a son and Jacob is ready to return home, he takes revenge on Laban by tricking him out of his best livestock. This means that Jacob not only has to repent for his original deception of his brother and father, but also for his revenge on Laban.⁶ When Laban catches up with Jacob after he flees with his family, Jacob speaks angrily to him, but he does finally make a covenant with Laban, agreeing that they will not harm each other again.

Jacob's Reconciliation with Esau

Jacob's reconciliation with Esau is directly preceded by this change in his relationship with Laban. Though Jacob's and Laban's dealings with each other have involved deceit and anger on both sides, their covenant finally settles this troublesome relationship that has dominated

⁶ Morgenstern, Book of Genesis, pp. 238-239.

Jacob's life since he left home. Now, Jacob is ready for the more difficult confrontation with the brother he wronged, and from whom he fled 20 years before in fear of his life.

Prologue, 32:2-3

As Jacob completes his covenant with Laban and heads home, he encounters messengers of God. In response, he names the place "מַחֲנֶה", because, he says, it is "God's camp" (Gen. 32:3). This brief section introduces several of the themes that will be significant in Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. The term "פָּגַע" (32:2; "to encounter," or fall upon) conveys a sense of physical encounter, foreshadowing Jacob's struggle with the divine being and Esau's embrace of his brother.⁷ Meeting with messengers of God, as Jacob did at Bet El when he first received a promise from God, warns him that he is about to have another glimpse of his role in God's plan. Jacob's naming of the place draws attention to the importance of names; Jacob's own name will soon be changed as a sign of his change in status.

The word "מַחֲנֶה" or "two camps" is reminiscent of Jacob's and Esau's split into opposing camps years ago. It also foreshadows the two camps into which Jacob will soon divide his party out of fear of Esau. Finally, Jacob's use of the term "מַחֲנֶה" as synonymous with "God's camp" introduces the tension between two acting as one and one acting as two. In the events that follow Jacob will try to resolve that

⁷ Genesis, intro., trans., and notes by E. A. Speiser, Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), p. 254.

tension. As twins, Jacob and his brother might have shared a sense of being two and a sense of oneness. However, years ago, they separated completely. Now they must find a way to combine their need for separation and unity, and to handle the tension within their relationship.

Re-establishing the Problem: Tension
Between Jacob and Esau, 32:4-9

When Jacob first left his family he departed alone, in haste. No one followed after him, and no reconciliation ensued during the next 20 years. Jacob's first significant reconciliation, which he carried out with Laban, came about only after Jacob left in secret and Laban chased after him. In contrast, now Jacob sends messengers ahead to his brother Esau. This section establishes the nature of Jacob's approach to Esau: with gifts, with a desire to find favor, and with courtesy and humility, rather than in an attempt to deceive or take advantage of Esau. Jacob refers to himself as Esau's "servant," and to Esau as "my lord" (Gen. 32:5). Thus, he reverses the oracle about his birth, which predicted that the older brother would serve the younger (25:23), and Isaac's blessing, which said that Esau would serve his brother (27:40).

We see from the description of Jacob's party that he is a man of wealth. Esau, who has with him 400 men, also appears to be powerful. The twin brothers have both grown to be independent and successful; perhaps this will make it possible for them to meet as equals, rather than as

competitors.

The description of Esau's approach does not make his intentions clear, but Jacob's conscience suggests that his meeting with Esau will be dangerous.⁸ The fact that Jacob's messengers do not reveal Esau's answer to their words, but do reveal his strength, creates anxiety for Jacob and for the reader.

This section begins with a reference to the messengers Jacob sends to Esau, and ends with Jacob dividing his party into two camps; thus, it echoes key themes from the prologue. Here we see one of the meanings that is attached to the concept of two camps: dividing his party is a way for Jacob to protect himself from Esau, reminding us of the great fear Jacob has of his brother.

Reintroduction of a Theme: God's
Promises to Jacob, 32:10-13

Having made practical preparations for meeting his brother, Jacob prays to God for protection. He thanks God for past kindnesses, asks for deliverance from Esau, and reminds God of His earlier promises about Jacob's future. Jacob refers again to two camps; this time the words serve as a reminder of the great difference between his condition twenty years ago, when he crossed the Jordan alone, and his status now as a man with wealth and many children (Gen. 32:11). Jacob's reference to God's promises heightens the tension. God had said He would protect Jacob, and make his

⁸ von Rad, Genesis, p. 317.

offspring numerous. How will this be fulfilled, now that Jacob's family is under threat? Jacob's prayer can be understood as a move towards God and repentance,⁹ or as simply one more step in his attempt to "cover his bases" in protecting himself from Esau.

Attempt to Resolve Conflict: Jacob
Prepares his Gift, 32:14-22

The next section is set off from the text before and after it by references to Jacob spending the night where he is. The text describes Jacob's gift to Esau in detail, including how he wants it displayed to best advantage, and what words his servants are to use in presenting it. The thoroughness of this description emphasizes Jacob's fear of Esau and how hard he is working to impress and propitiate his brother.

The word *תָּמַח* ("gift") is introduced here (Gen. 32:14, 19, 21, 22), indicating a connection to the similar sounding term for Jacob's *מַחֲנֶה* (camp), part of which he has turned into a gift for Esau. The relationship between Jacob's gift and his camp is emphasized in verse 22, which states that Jacob stays in camp and sends his gift ahead; this is an attempt to assuage Esau's anger before they meet. Jacob's success in acquiring this camp, which occurred since he last saw Esau, is part of what enables him to rise above his earlier treatment of his brother, and to behave graciously rather than deceitfully.

⁹ Ibid., p. 318.

Another theme, signified by the word פנים (face), is introduced in this section. The face is the part of the body on which a person's emotions are most visible. Seeing another person's face is also a sign that one is close enough to fully experience that person's presence. Thus, the word implies potential for communication of feelings, and for physical and emotional closeness. In verse 21, in which forms of the word פנים are used four times, Jacob expresses his hope that with his מוחה he will be able לנפח (to cover over, pacify, or wipe clean) Esau's face before Jacob sees his face, and that this will result in Esau receiving him graciously.¹⁰ Jacob's wish foreshadows his later statements that he has seen אלהים (God, or, a divine being) face to face, and that seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of אלהים.¹¹ The repeated references to Jacob's and Esau's faces towards the end of this section provide a sense of the intimacy of the encounter Jacob both hopes for and fears.

Preparation for Resolution of Spiritual Conflict, 32:23-24

This section begins with words similar to those that began the preceding section: "לילה" ("in the night"), and "ויתקח" ("and [Jacob] took") (Gen. 32:23). On the previous night, Jacob waited until morning, and then took his gift to

¹⁰ "ואולי ישא פניו" (Gen. 32:22). The literal meaning is "perhaps he will lift my face;" the phrase also denotes granting pardon.

¹¹ John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, revised ed., International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments Series, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 407.

send ahead to Esau. Here it is during the night that he takes his family to send across the river towards the spot at which he will meet Esau. The similarity in wording and the difference between these two actions emphasize Jacob's fear, and his careful strategy: he wants Esau to see his gift, and be pacified by it, but he does not want Esau to see and possibly endanger his family.

The repetition of forms of the word יָבֹק (cross) four times in these two verses creates the expectation that Jacob will also cross the river along with his large party of wives, maidservants, children, and possessions. The drama is heightened when he does not do so. Is he remaining behind because he is considering running away?¹² Conversely, is he the last to cross because he is cautiously guarding his party?¹³ Or, perhaps he simply is not ready to "cross" this last barrier towards his brother. Whatever Jacob's motives, the stage is cleared in anticipation of the significant events that are about to occur. The name of the river--"יָבֹק" ("Yabok;" Gen. 32:23)--foreshadows those events in its similarity to the key words יָבֹק (wrestle) and יָבֹק (embrace).

Resolution of Spiritual Conflict, 32:25-32

Once Jacob's family and possessions have crossed the Yabok, the language becomes more abrupt, injecting a sense of tension and struggle. Jacob has been consumed with arrangements for his impending meeting with Esau. Now, he

¹² Morgenstern, Book of Genesis, p. 252

¹³ von Rad, Genesis, p. 320.

faces a different, more dangerous encounter, which he has not anticipated. In this confrontation he cannot prevail solely by organizing his camps and gifts, by devising conciliatory phrases with which to address Esau, or even by praying to God, though each of these actions have helped him prepare for this moment. The enormity of the meeting that is about to occur is expressed in a few terse words: "וַיּוֹתָר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוֹ" ("and Jacob was left alone"), implying that the outcome of this struggle is entirely up to him, and "וַיִּאָּבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹות הַשָּׁחַר" ("and a man wrestled with him until the break of day"), revealing that a lengthy wrestling match took place (Gen. 32:25). The two opponents must have been closely matched, and the outcome in doubt until the end.

Tension about the results of the struggle is increased by the wording of the verse following, in which it is not clear at first that the "man," rather than Jacob, is the subject of the words "לֹא יָכַל לָרֶגֶ" ("he could not prevail against him;" Gen. 32:26). By the end of this verse it is evident that Jacob has not lost the match, though he has been hurt. The detailed description of Jacob's injury and the reference to it again in verse 32 emphasize its significance; it can be seen as a metaphor for the hurt he must experience throughout his life in order to grow through his struggles with himself and others. Jacob's injury is also a physical sign of the new status which will be indicated by his change of name.

The word "man" described Jacob's perception of an

unknown antagonist closing in on him in the dark.¹⁴ Now, the man asks Jacob to let him go, since dawn is breaking. There are many traditions about spirits, gods, and demons who are only effective in the night and must vanish at dawn.¹⁵ Thus, Jacob's opponent's request reveals to him that he has not been wrestling with a human being. Jacob may also have realized the man's unusual nature when it became light enough to see with whom he had been wrestling.¹⁶

Jacob's struggle with an unknown opponent at night is reminiscent of Isaac's experience when he blessed his son. Rebecca and Jacob took advantage of the fact that Isaac's eyes were too dim to see, deceiving him into giving Jacob his blessing against his will. It also echoes Jacob's experience in marrying Leah, whom he believed to be Rachel, since he could not see her because she was brought to him at night. Here the roles are reversed. It is Jacob who must operate "in the dark," while the text says about the being: "וַיִּרְאֵהוּ" ("he saw;" Gen. 32:26). Jacob is forced to endure some of the disorientation and powerlessness his father experienced; it is only afterwards that he is able to seek a blessing explicitly intended for him.

Once Jacob understands that he is in the presence of a supernatural being, he demands a blessing. When Jacob sought his father's blessing, Isaac asked him "Which of my sons are

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 321; Skinner, Commentary on Genesis, p. 409.

¹⁶ Speiser, Genesis, p. 256.

you?" and Jacob answered "I am Esau" (Gen. 27:19).

Similarly, in response to Jacob's demand, the being asks for his name, but this time Jacob answers honestly. By disclosing his name, Jacob reveals his nature, which has been that of an unethical "supplanter" (the name Jacob, יַעֲקֹב, is similar to the verb לַעֲקֹב, to deceive or supplant; 25:26; 27:36);¹⁷ his truthfulness in this situation indicates that his nature may have changed.

The being then gives Jacob a new name, "יִשְׂרָאֵל" ("Israel"), saying it is because "שָׁרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אָנָשִׁים וַחֲוַלְתָּ" ("you persisted [or, strove] with divine beings [or, God] and human beings and prevailed;" Gen. 32:29). The name may be an acknowledgment of Jacob's efforts, since he left home, to repair the relationships he has damaged. His attempts to change his behavior towards others, and to overcome the negative consequences of his earlier actions, have not been continuous, but he has returned to these efforts again and again, and is about to take his greatest risk yet by meeting with Esau.

The being's use of the word אֱלֹהִים can be understood on a number of levels. It confirms that Jacob prevailed in the current wrestling match, and also refers to the larger implications of that match, which appears to be a test given by God, like the test Abraham underwent at Moriah.¹⁸ The match symbolizes the ways God has caused Jacob to "wrestle"

¹⁷ von Rad, Genesis, p. 321.

¹⁸ Speiser, Genesis, p. 256.

throughout his life, by putting him in positions in which he must make moral decisions.

The word אלהים is also a reminder of Jacob's direct encounters with God and with messengers of God at Bet El and at Mahanaim (Gen. 28:12ff; 32:2-3). In the first of these experiences, at Bet El, Jacob was frightened and lonely. God appeared and promised him land, posterity, and protection, and assured Jacob that God would be with him. The encounter at Mahanaim was a reminder that God was still with him. Between these two encounters, God appeared in Jacob's life to protect him from Laban, who was pursuing him in anger (31:24, 29). While the explanation of Jacob's new name is that he persisted with God, these incidents demonstrate that God persisted with Jacob. Just a day and a half before the wrestling match, Jacob acknowledged God's kindnesses to him (32:11). Thus, the words "שָׁרִיתָ עִמָּי אֱלֹהִים" ("you persisted with God;" 32:29) attest to the newly visible reciprocity in Jacob's relationship with God.

Jacob has also persisted in the face of the sufferings he brought on himself through his deceitful behavior. He has continued to strive: with his own negative qualities, with the troubled relationships within his family, and with his connection to God. This perseverance has earned Jacob the chance to repent, and the wrestling match, with its injury and name change, is Jacob's last step before he completes his repentance by reconciling with his brother.

A new name implies an impending change in status, as

with Avram and Sarai (Gen. 17:5, 15). God named each of the patriarchs, changing Avram's name to Abraham, and naming Isaac before his birth (17:19). Thus, Jacob's new name indicates his readiness for his role in the patriarchal line. Rashi connects the name change to Jacob's demands for blessing, here and from his father. Rashi understands Jacob's new name as a sign that he will no longer be seen as a person who acquired his blessings by supplanting.

Since the change of name comes after Jacob's demand for blessing, the name itself can be understood as a blessing.¹⁹ Alternatively, it can be seen as a necessary precursor to the blessing the being later gives Jacob after refusing to reveal his own name.²⁰

After receiving his new name, Jacob asks the being's name, indicating a desire to know the being's nature and intent.²¹ However, the being avoids answering him, thus adding to the mystery of the encounter. Then, "וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ שָׁם" ("[the being] blessed him there;" Gen. 32:30), which can also be interpreted as "[the being] bid him farewell there," in which case the change of name would be understood as the actual blessing.²²

At the close of his encounter, Jacob names the place "פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים" ("face of God"), since, he says, he saw אֱלֹהִים face to

¹⁹ Skinner, Commentary on Genesis, p. 409.

²⁰ von Rad, Genesis, p. 323.

²¹ Ibid., 322.

²² Speiser, Genesis, p. 255.

face and his life was saved (Gen. 32:31). The three references to פָּנָיו (face) in this verse echo Jacob's hope that his gift would cover over Esau's face before Jacob saw his face, so that Esau would receive him graciously (literally, lift Jacob's face; 32:21). Jacob's desire seemed to be for intimacy, as symbolized by the closeness of seeing another's face, and he tried to make this possible by propitiating Esau with gifts. Now, Jacob has experienced intimacy "פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים" ("face to face;" 32:31) in a different and unexpected encounter, with God or a divine being. He discovered that he was able to survive not through gifts, but through his strength, perseverance, and honesty. Before wrestling with the being, Jacob had already taken the significant step of sending offerings to his estranged brother. Now, he knows that his self is the most significant offering he has. This understanding will make possible a deeper reconciliation with Esau.

In Jacob's prayer, he asked God to save him from Esau (Gen. 32:12). Now he says that he has been saved, making it possible to see Jacob's encounter with the being as God's answer to his prayer.²³

Besides preparing Jacob for his meeting with Esau, seeing פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים face to face and living is a sign of extreme favor from God. Other biblical characters fear death after seeing a divine being or a messenger of God face to face (Judg. 6:22ff; 13:22). When the leaders of the Israelites

²³ von Rad, Genesis, p. 320.

behold God it is presented as significant that God does not raise a hand against them (Ex. 24:9-11). Finally, God tells Moses that no one can see God's face and live (Ex. 33:20). Thus, in addition to the new name and the blessing Jacob receives, he and the reader are aware that God has indicated approval of Jacob in a manner experienced by few human beings. Once Jacob understands and acknowledges his experience at Peniel, he is finally ready to cross towards his brother, as he had not been at the beginning of this night (TLL; Gen. 32:32; cf. 32:23-24).

The theme of naming, introduced in the prologue, is central in this section: Jacob's name is changed, he inquires about the being's name, and he names the place at which their struggle occurred. Names in the Bible often reveal a person's essence, history, and destiny, so the focus here indicates changes: within Jacob, in his relationship with God, and in his role as an instrument of God's will as revealed in the biblical narrative. The section ends with a reference to Jacob's injury, implying that he has also been physically changed by his experience at Peniel. These changes came about in response to Jacob's decision to attempt a reconciliation with his brother. Now, he must take this final step, which will address the one area of his life that was not addressed at Peniel: the moral dimension.

Narrator's "Footnote," 32:33

The narrator steps back from the story for a moment to give the etiology of the dietary taboo concerning the sciatic muscle. This is an aspect of kashrut not mentioned elsewhere in the Torah. Its inclusion here serves to emphasize the importance of Jacob's transformation, and its continued relevance for his descendants.

Resolution of Conflict Between Jacob and Esau, 33:1-4

Following the break for the narrator's "footnote," which ties this story to contemporary practices, the language changes. Tension dissipates somewhat as the starkness of Jacob's encounter with the being is replaced by the slower, more detailed description of his meeting with Esau. The story of Jacob's struggle at Peniel does not explicitly tie it to external events, so it seems that the incident could have occurred at other moments in Jacob's life. Therefore, it is all the more significant that Jacob wrestles with אלהים directly before he meets Esau; the events must be related.

The connection between these two occurrences is reinforced by the words with this section begins. The first news Jacob heard about Esau's approach was that he was bringing with him 400 men; in response, "וַיִּירָא עֵשָׂב מְאֹד" ("Jacob was greatly afraid;" Gen. 32:8). Now, "וַיִּשָּׂא עֵשָׂב עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא" ("Jacob lifted his eyes and saw;" 33:1) Esau and the 400 men. The similarity in sound between נָרָא and נִרְא is reinforced by the context. In the first instance, even without seeing Esau and

his men, Jacob is fearful, and in response וַיִּדְּלֵם ("he divided;" 32:8) his party into two camps. In contrast, now Jacob actively lifts his eyes, actually sees Esau and his men, and even so there is no statement that he is afraid, although he is still cautious enough that again וַיִּדְּלֵם ("he divided;" 33:1) his children among his wives and handmaids.

The implied comparison between Jacob before and Jacob after his encounter at Peniel is evident elsewhere in the text. Previously Jacob arranged his gift for Esau and then placed himself behind it (Gen. 32:19ff). Now he arranges his family members for the meeting with Esau and again crosses towards Esau, this time by placing himself in front of his family (32:32; 33:3).

Jacob bows seven times as he approaches his brother. The blessing Jacob stole from Esau 20 years ago included Isaac's statement that Jacob's brothers would bow down to him (Gen. 27:29). There is no evidence that Esau has actually done so, and here Jacob definitively reverses that blessing. One bow in greeting is usually enough to indicate respect. For example, Abraham bows once before the men who visit him immediately after God appears (18:1-2), and Lot, portrayed as the ideal host, bows once before the messengers who visit him in Sodom (19:1). Thus, Jacob's seven bows demonstrate great humility towards Esau. His bows also recall his hope that, in response to his gifts, יִשְׂכַּל עָלַי ("perhaps [Esau] will receive me graciously," literally, "will lift up my face;" 32:21) from such a position of prostration.

Jacob bows until "נִנְחַם" ("he comes close to") his brother (Gen. 33:3). The word is reminiscent of scenes from Jacob's earlier life. When he stole the blessing intended for Esau, his father asked him to come close so Isaac could feel him and know which of his sons he was about to bless. After Isaac blessed him, Jacob again came close, this time to feed and then kiss his father, who blessed him again (27:21ff). When Jacob first saw Rachel, he came close to the well at which they met so he could roll the stone away from it for her (29:10). For Jacob, coming close has occurred in significant relationships and been a defining moment in those relationships; that is true again now.

Esau responds dramatically to Jacob's approach, running towards him, embracing him, falling on his neck, and kissing him (Gen. 33:4). It is not clear to what extent Esau's actions are due to Jacob's humble behavior, and to what extent he would have greeted Jacob in such a positive manner anyway. In either case, such a greeting must be more than Jacob could have dared to hope for. The statement that "וַיִּחְבְּקֵהוּ" ("[Esau] embraced him;" 33:4) completes the series of similar words that began with the river "יַבֹּק" ("Yabok;" 32:23), then moved to "וַיִּמְצָק" and "וַיִּמְצָקוּ" ("he wrestled;" 32:25, 26). Jacob's ability to elicit and accept Esau's embrace is the culmination of the process that started with him alone by the river, then continued with his wrestling match with אֱלֹהִים.

The signs of affection Esau displays end with the statement that "וַיִּבְכּוּ" ("they wept;" Gen. 33:4). The series of

actions--running towards another, embracing, falling on his neck, kissing, and weeping--calls to mind other emotional moments in Jacob's life. Isaac kissed Jacob when he gave him the stolen blessing (27:26, 27), and Esau wept after he discovered Jacob's theft (27:38). Jacob kissed Rachel when he first met her, and then he wept (29:11). Laban ran towards Jacob, embraced him, and kissed him when they first met (29:13). The reconciliation with Esau includes elements of all those earlier events, tying them together in what for Jacob is a turning point in his relationships with others.

The description of Esau falling on Jacob's neck also recalls the blessing Isaac gave Esau, in which he said that Esau would tear his brother's yoke from his neck (Gen. 27:40). There is no evidence that Esau was ever literally enslaved by Jacob. However, Jacob's "yoke" was around Esau's neck as long as Esau's life was controlled by his anger at and jealousy towards his brother. The text does not tell us how Esau freed himself from these spiritual and psychological shackles, but it is clear he has done so. By falling on Jacob's neck in affection Esau demonstrates that he no longer needs to battle his brother, nor does he desire that Jacob serve him. In turn, Jacob receives Esau's "yoke" on his neck by welcoming Esau's embrace, signifying that their bond is now one of good will, rather than of servant and master as the birth oracle and Isaac had predicted.

Before his struggle at Peniel, Jacob had already changed significantly since his childhood: instead of

fleeing from or seeking to deceive his brother, he sought him out with gifts and humility. The wrestling match, change of name, and experience of seeing עֵשָׂו face to face and living, confirmed and heightened his transformation, enabling him to move beyond fear and calculation, and to approach his brother in wholehearted repentance.

This section ends with the brothers' reconciliation, weeping in each others' arms. It contains no dialogue. The implication is that Jacob and Esau are able to reconcile without words, perhaps because of the experiences in each of their lives that have led up to this moment. We know something of those years in Jacob's life, but the text is silent about how Esau came to his change of heart. We do know that he has done well enough to have with him 400 men, and presumably time and success provided him with the raw materials which he chose to use to open himself to this reconciliation with his brother.

Solution to/Reversal of the
Brothers' History, 33:5-11

The beginning of a new section is indicated by the repetition of the phrase which began the previous section: here, "וַיִּשָּׂא עֵשָׂו אֵת עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא" ("[Esau] lifted his eyes and saw;" Gen. 33:5). Before his reconciliation with Esau, Jacob lifted his eyes and saw his brother coming with 400 men, potentially a sign of hostile intent (33:1). In contrast, now Esau looks up and sees Jacob's family, indicating the new closeness and sense of security between the brothers.

The start of the current section is also indicated by the change of mood. The previous section began slowly, with descriptions of Jacob's arrangement of his family, and built up to the brothers' dramatic reconciliation. These events took place in silence, except, finally, for the sound of weeping. Now, the scene descends from these emotional heights and Jacob and Esau begin to speak with each other. Not a word is said about the past, at least explicitly; Jacob's humble approach, Esau's embrace, and the brothers' tears expressed apology and forgiveness clearly enough.

Before the brothers' reconciliation, Jacob's family was set aside as the narrative focused on the twins. Now Jacob's family members enter the story again, coming close to Esau and bowing before him as Jacob did (Gen. 33:6-7).

The description of Jacob's preparations for meeting Esau included many references to מחנה (camp), מן (to show favor or be gracious), and מנחה (gift). The words are related by their similarity in sound; in addition, they refer to Jacob's property and his desire both to protect it and to use it to obtain Esau's favor. These terms were noticeably absent from the description of Jacob's struggle at Peniel, and of his reconciliation with Esau, making it clear that the positive outcomes of these two events were not based on Jacob's wealth. Instead, key terms used to relate Jacob's encounter at Peniel include wrestle, blessing, name, אלהים, and face; these words indicate the importance of relationship, God, and identity in this encounter. Key terms

used to describe Jacob and Esau's reconciliation include cross, come close, bow, and then the string of actions: run, embrace, kiss, and weep; these words emphasize intimacy. Only following the reconciliation is property again discussed, in order to confirm that it is no longer an important issue between the brothers.

In contrast to their relationship before they left home, Jacob no longer "lords it over" his brother, nor does Esau want what Jacob has. As the brothers talk with each other Jacob continues to refer to himself as Esau's servant (Gen. 33:5) and to Esau as his lord (33:8). He downplays his status as a man of property, describing his wealth as a favor from God and as a gift for Esau. For example, when Esau asks about Jacob's family, Jacob says that his children have come through God's favor, and he modestly refrains from referring to his wives and maids (33:5). He describes his camp as a means to find favor in Esau's eyes (33:8).

Esau appears satisfied with what he has acquired on his own. There is no mention of his having accepted the gift which Jacob sent ahead to him; thus, the reconciliation was not a result of Esau acquiring property from Jacob. Now, after the brothers have been reunited, Jacob personally presses Esau to accept his gift. Esau responds that he has plenty, telling Jacob to keep what is his. Significantly, in his answer Esau calls Jacob "my brother;" this is the only place in the Bible in which either of the twins refers to the other in this manner (Gen. 33:9). Rashi understands Esau's

statement to indicate his acceptance of Jacob's right to the birthright and the blessing.

Following Esau's refusal of his gift, Jacob pleads with his brother to accept it from his hand, giving two reasons: that seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of אלהים, and that Esau has received him favorably (Gen. 33:10). The references to face and אלהים recall two significant incidents which preceded this moment, and connect those incidents to each other. When Jacob prepared his gift for Esau, he hoped to propitiate him (literally, to cover over his face), so that by the time Jacob saw Esau's face Esau would receive him graciously (literally, would lift Jacob's face; 32:21). Following Jacob's wrestling match, he said he had seen אלהים face to face and been saved, and in acknowledgment he named the location of that struggle "פניאל" ("face of God;" 32:31). Jacob's original plan had been to reconcile with Esau by offering him gifts; however, in his struggle with אלהים he discovered that his own perseverance, and God's favor, might be more important than the wealth he could offer Esau. Now he has come face to face with Esau, and found this to be true.

Esau is no longer a hated competitor for Jacob to deceive, nor an adversary for him to fear. Instead, like the אלהים with whom Jacob wrestled, his brother is a being Jacob can meet honestly, face to face, with whom he can negotiate or struggle on the basis of his own merits, knowing that he may be frightened, even injured, but he will survive.

Jacob's statement that Esau accepted him demonstrates his understanding that Esau's rejection of his gift is an acceptance of Jacob himself. The term "וַיִּחַרְצֵנִי" ("and he accepted me graciously;" Gen. 33:10) refers back to the similar word with which the twins' relationship began, when "וַיִּחַרְצֻּם" ("they crushed one another;" 25:22) in the womb. The word also recalls Jacob's anxiety when he first heard of Esau's approach "וַיִּצְרַן" ("and he was distressed," or cramped; 32:8). In both these situations the brothers threatened each other physically and emotionally. Now, in their newfound self-confidence and generosity, they have discovered that there is room for each to flourish without crowding the other.

Jacob continues to beg his brother to accept his gift, referring to it now not as "מִנְחָתִי" ("my gift;" Gen. 33:10), but instead as "בְּרִכְתִּי" ("my blessing;" 33:11), a term that is similar to בְּרִיתָהּ (birthright; 25:31-33). Rashi argued that when Esau told Jacob to keep what was his, he accepted Jacob's right to the birthright and the blessing (33:9). Jacob is addressing the same issue, but from a different angle. Rather than being concerned with the legitimacy of his title to the birthright and the blessing, Jacob implores his brother to accept his blessing; thus, he attempts to reverse the effects of his theft of the blessing, and of his selfish purchase of Esau's birthright. At Jacob's urging, Esau finally agrees, indicating his acceptance of his brother's repentance. The reconciliation, and the reversal

of the brothers' previous conflict, is now complete. There is no description of Jacob giving Esau flocks or other property; this confirms that the discussion of Jacob's gift has, ironically, established that repentance, not wealth, was the issue the brothers needed to settle.

Epilogue, 33:12-17

The twins' dialogue continues, but shifts now to a discussion of how they will move on now that they have made peace with one another. The change in their relationship is emphasized by their extreme politeness, which seems to indicate both their care for one another and their lack of ease with their new relationship. Esau offers to travel at Jacob's pace (Gen. 33:12), while Jacob continues to refer to Esau as his lord and to himself as Esau's servant (33:13-15).

Jacob graciously refuses Esau's offer to accompany him, and his offer to assign Jacob some of the men from his party. Jacob's response may attest to his lack of faith in Esau's good will, or it may indicate his understanding that, even though the brothers' relationship has been repaired, they must go their separate ways. Their negotiations about traveling together are not resolved, implying that neither wants to acknowledge that they are, in reality, parting company. Esau continues on his way to Se'ir, while Jacob travels to Sukot, where he builds a house and sheds for his livestock (Gen. 33:16-17). The brothers have completed this chapter in their lives, and each is ready for new challenges.

The closing words of this story return us to its

beginning. The prologue opened with the statement that Jacob went וַיֵּלֶךְ ("on his way;" Gen. 32:2); here it is Esau who returns וַיָּשָׁב (33:16). The prologue also described Jacob's naming of a place, Maḥanaim; here again Jacob is the source of a place name, Sukot. Jacob gave the name סוכוֹת ("Maḥanaim," literally, "two camps;" 32:3) because, he said, he was at God's camp; thus he equated one camp with two. As this story began Jacob and Esau traveled as two separate camps, alienated from each other. They came together, briefly, as one; now they return again to their separateness, but with a newfound sense of oneness. Having completed this circle, the final lines of this text move outward. The etiology for the name Sukot connects the story of Jacob and Esau to a contemporary matter, strengthening the link between this tale of individuals and family, and the history of the people Israel that is soon to follow.

CHAPTER II

THE MIDRASHIM

The Biblical Background: Jacob and Esau as Israel and Edom

For the modern reader, the biblical story of Jacob's life is a fascinating one. Jacob is portrayed as an individual, with good and bad qualities, who faces problems with his family and his livelihood, who struggles, changes, and grows. However, despite the personal and psychological orientation with which most modern readers approach this text, and the riches to be found in such a reading, the text contains another narrative which was at least as important to the biblical authors. That is the story of the nations of Israel and Edom, their origins, natures, and relationship to each another. The Jacob-Esau cycle which we may read as being about the relationship of two individual brothers is also about national and ethnic issues between the kingdoms of Israel (and later Judah) and Edom in the tenth century B.C.E. In turn, it is likely that the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis influenced the biblical texts that explicitly address the relationship between the nations of Israel and Edom in world affairs.¹

The biblical authors introduce national issues into the

¹ John S. Kselman, "Genesis," in Harper's Bible Commentary, eds. James L. May et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 109.

Jacob-Esau cycle from its very beginning. In an oracle before the birth of the twins, Rebecca is told that "two nations are in your womb . . . and the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). We know from the patriarchal context that one of those nations will be Israel, and the description of the firstborn Esau soon reveals the identity of the other. Esau is "red" (יְהוּדִי) and "hairy" (שָׁמֶשׁ); the references are to Edom and Se'ir (25:25).² Thus, this story of brotherhood and struggle, which begins in Rebecca's womb, and continues through Jacob and Esau's reconciliation, also prefigures the struggle between the two nations which will descend from these brothers.

The role of the brothers as progenitors becomes most explicit as the story of their personal relationship draws to a close. When Jacob prepares to reconcile with his brother, he sends messengers to Esau "in the land of Se'ir, the country of Edom" (Gen. 32:4). Soon afterwards, a mysterious being changes Jacob's name to Israel (32:29). Following the brothers' reconciliation and separation, God confirms this change of name and promises Jacob what God had promised to Abraham: land and offspring (35:10-12; cf. 17:4-8). Added to that promise is the injunction to "be fruitful and increase" (35:11), and in fact Abraham's seed has already branched out for the first time in Jacob's children.³ This signals the end of the single patriarchal line and the

² Speiser, Genesis, p. 196.

³ von Rad, Genesis, p. 339.

beginning of the tribal lines, which are prefigured here by a listing of Jacob's sons (35:23-26). The narrative then moves quickly to Isaac's death, which is followed by a genealogy of Esau's descendants. That list begins "this is the line of Esau--that is, Edom" (36:1), and the equivalence of Esau with Edom and Se'ir is repeated throughout (36:8, 9, 19, 43). Thus, the Jacob-Esau cycle concludes by focusing first on the progenitors of the tribes of Israel, and then on the nation of Edom, while the individual brothers fade into the background.

Not only are Jacob and Esau the progenitors of Israel and Edom, but, according to the biblical authors, Edom remains Israel's brother, just as Esau was Jacob's brother. During the Israelites' wanderings in the desert, when they approach the land of Edom, Moses sends messengers to the king, asking that the king's "brother Israel" be allowed to cross Edom's territory. Edom refuses, and the Israelites avoid a conflict by taking a detour around Edom (Num. 20:14-21; 21:4). Moses again portrays Israel and Edom as brothers when he reviews these events. He says that he had been commanded by God to announce to the Israelites that they would pass through the territory of their "kinsmen, the sons of Esau." Moses had then warned the people that God had given the hill country of Se'ir to Esau's descendants, and that the Israelites must be careful to pay for any food or water they took from that land (Deut. 2:4-6). Later, in a list of civil and criminal laws, the Israelites are

instructed "not to abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman" (Deut. 23:7).

Though the Torah emphasizes Israel's brotherhood with Edom, it also confirms Israel's eventual ascendancy over Edom, which is predicted in an oracle, just as Jacob's ascendancy over Esau had been. The prophet Bil'am foresees that "in days to come" which "will not be soon," "Edom becomes a possession . . . but Israel is triumphant, a victor issues from Jacob" (Num. 24:14, 17-19).

The Bible's prophetic writings include numerous references equating the nation of Israel with Jacob and the nation of Edom with Esau. As part of Hosea's description of the people Israel's treachery, he reaches back to Jacob's behavior, seeming both to criticize Jacob's treatment of Esau and to acknowledge his later victory in a divine struggle: "In the womb he tried to supplant his brother; grown to manhood, he strove with a divine being; he strove with an angel and prevailed--the other had to weep and implore him" (12:4-5).

Most of the prophets who refer to Edom condemn the deeds of that nation.⁴ Despite the Edomites' status as neighbors and kindred of Israel, they fail to act as Israel's allies at the time of the Babylonian destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. Instead, they take advantage of this opportunity to plunder the land (Lam. 4:21-22; Ps. 137:7);

⁴ See, for example: Is. 34:5-6; 63:1-6; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35; Joel 4:19.

thus they come to represent the epitome of evil. The painful contrast between the two nations' similarities and their enmity is apparent in the oracle of Amos, who criticizes Edom for pursuing "his brother with the sword" (1:11), and in Malachi's comparison between God's acceptance of Jacob (Israel) and rejection of Esau (Edom), even though Esau is "Jacob's brother" (1:2-3).

Obadiah epitomizes the biblical prophets' dominant message about Esau and Edom. In Edom's false confidence, Obadiah says, the nation betrays their "brother Jacob" on Jacob's "day of disaster" (1:10, 13). As punishment, God causes Edom to know from their former allies the same kind of treachery Israel knew from Edom, and in the future "no survivor shall be left of the House of Esau" (1:18). Edom's fate provides the paradigm for that which awaits all the nations. In contrast, Israel's subjugation and exile will be reversed: they will dispossess those who dispossessed them, regain their territory, and return to Zion, and at that time "dominion will be YHWH's" (1:21).

This description of world events and future salvation may appear distant from the Bible's intimate portrait of the individuals, Jacob and Esau. However, the story in Genesis prefigures many of the themes present in the relationship between the two nations. As with Israel and Edom, the twins' relationship is dominated by struggle and deceit, and the fact that they are brothers adds pain and poignancy to their conflict. Much of the strife between Jacob and Esau revolves

around the question of which of them will receive the divine and familial blessings and promises, as the two nations' conflicts focus on which one God will raise to ascendancy. However, the personal narrative ends differently from the national one. The brothers' story concludes with reconciliation: though they must separate, Jacob repents his earlier, unethical treatment of Esau, Esau forgives him, and their relationship is repaired. In contrast, Bil'am and the biblical prophets foresee Edom's subjugation or annihilation in punishment for their mistreatment of Israel. The biblical authors envision mutual reconciliation on the personal level, but, on the stage of world events, they imagine that Israel's redemption will require the subjugation of the nations, with Edom foremost among them.

The Midrash

History Prefigured

Implicit in the Bible is the assumption that history is prefigured within its prophetic oracles. The rabbis who composed and redacted the midrash intensified this view of the relationship between the text and history. They understood the entire Bible as oracular. They assumed that history follows God-given patterns laid down at the beginning of time, and that the biblical texts form a connected narrative that reflects this pattern, recording past history, guiding present behavior, and pointing towards Israel's salvation. They sought to understand these patterns by examining God's actions and the lives of biblical characters

in the past. It was particularly important for them to understand the lives of the patriarchs, since the rabbis believed that the patriarchs' experiences prefigured the lives of their descendants, the people Israel.

The biblical presentation of history as patterned and prefigured, and the rabbis' extension of this view, can be seen in many midrashim. For example, the rabbis take this perspective in their commentary on Jacob's demand for a blessing from the mysterious being with whom he struggles by the Yabok River.⁵ They understand the being to be an angel, and they expand on the brief interchange between him and Jacob. They describe the angel as pleading with Jacob to let him go, since it is time to sing God's praises. In response, Jacob strengthens his demand for a blessing by referring to the beings who visited Abraham and "blessed" him by announcing that he and Sarah would have a son (Gen. 18:1ff). This event occurred immediately after God had changed Abraham's and Sarah's names, indicating corresponding changes in their destinies. Thus, besides providing Jacob with an argument in favor of his receiving a blessing, the rabbis introduce an additional parallel between Jacob and his ancestors: like them, he will take on a new role along with the new name he has just received. Thus, the midrash portrays Jacob as correctly understanding that his destiny is prefigured by that of Abraham and Sarah.

The rabbis extend this view of history into their own

⁵ Bereshit Rabbah 73:2 on Gen. 32:27.

time. Commenting on the biblical description of Jacob as "limping on his thigh" following his wrestling match at Peniel (Gen. 32:33), the midrash depicts R. Yehoshua b. Levi as having a similar impairment when he returns from visiting Rome. R. Hanina responds by quoting the Bible's description of Jacob's injury, telling R. Yehoshua, "you resemble your ancestor."⁶ The implication is twofold: first, the being with whom Jacob wrestled must have symbolized Esau, as demonstrated in many midrashim, and second, R. Yehoshua therefore suffered a fate like Jacob's when he encountered Esau's descendant, Rome.

Given their view of the Bible as a record of Israel's sacred history, a repository of patterns to be lived out in the present and future, and a source of God's revealed truth about the world as a whole, it makes sense that the rabbis approached their sacred texts seeking guidance about their deepest concerns. These concerns were based on the circumstances in which they lived, their understanding of Judaism, and their fears and hopes about their people's future.

Rome as a Step Towards Redemption

The rabbis faced great obstacles in fitting history as they experienced it into the paradigm of God's covenantal relationship with Israel. The destruction of the second temple in the year 70 and the suppression of the Bar Kokhba

⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 78:5.

revolt in 135 could be seen as signs that this covenant was shattered. Jerusalem had fallen, the people Israel had been humiliated in the sight of the nations, and, without the temple, atonement as the people Israel had practiced it was no longer possible.⁷ The rabbis believed they were living in a post-prophetic period, so they had to find a way to use the sacred texts they already had to discover God's will, and to re-establish faith in God's continuing covenant with, and love for, the people Israel. Through correct interpretation of those texts, they could reveal the hidden truths God had implanted in the Torah. Thus they could pose their pressing questions to the text, and receive God's guidance in placing Israel's current suffering in the context of the covenant, and in understanding the role this suffering played in the people's eventual redemption.⁸

The rabbis met this challenge, and recorded their discoveries, in the aggadic midrashim. Bereshit Rabbah, believed to be one of the earliest such midrashim, was probably compiled between 400 and 500 C.E.⁹ In it the rabbis read Genesis in light of the contemporary threats to the people Israel and their place in history. They look to every word and story for messages about what it means to be Israel

⁷ Alan Mintz, Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 49-50.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hermann L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1991), p. 304.

in this tenuous situation, and for signals about Israel's future. They go beyond specific narrative contexts to relate the stories to the broader biblical context, and to the context in which they lived. This web of connections shaped their perceptions as readers.

As part of this overall understanding of the Bible, the rabbis shared the biblical authors' assumption that the individual characters of Jacob and Esau prefigured the nations of Israel and Edom. It was natural for them to extend this view of Esau, seeing him as prefiguring not only Edom, but also the gentile nations, who eventually came to be epitomized in their eyes by Rome.¹⁰ Both Israel and Rome saw themselves as divinely chosen and destined for a unique history. Each was convinced that heaven had chosen them to rule the world. These mutually exclusive claims made it especially appropriate for the rabbis to understand these two nations as the descendants of Jacob and Esau, who had struggled over the one patriarchal blessing.¹¹ In addition,

¹⁰ Louis Ginzberg writes that the use of the terms Edom, Esau, and Se'ir to refer to Rome was probably coined at the time of Herod (37-4 B.C.E.), whose designation "the Idumean" was applied to his masters, the Romans. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, 7 vols., trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1925), 5:272-273. However, Gerson Cohen states that the earliest known source believed to have identified Rome with Edom is a passage in the Apocalypse of Ezra dating from the latter part of the first or early part of the second century, although the reference in this text is not explicit. The first rabbi known to have clearly identified Rome with Esau and Edom was R. Avika in Bereshit Rabbah 65:21; by the middle of the second century such identification was common and explicit. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), pp. 244-245.

¹¹ Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," pp. 247-248.

this identification kept alive the biblical view that the people Israel, like the patriarch Jacob, were the sole bearers of the birthright, blessing, Torah, and thus of eventual salvation. Through this reading of the Bible the rabbis discovered and asserted their own view of history: rather than seeing Israel as having been succeeded by Rome, and eventually by Christianity,¹² they incorporated the Roman empire into their own sacred narrative. This understanding enabled them to read not only past but also current events as continuing to point towards Israel's promised redemption.

Themes in the Midrash

In reading the text through the lens of their own time and beliefs, the rabbis burst open the themes which dominate the Jacob-Esau cycle in Genesis, transforming some, and discarding and introducing others.

The biblical story of the twins is structured around struggle, deceit, and finally repentance and reconciliation. At times these issues are related to blessings and promises;

¹² Jacob Neusner believes that the conversion of the Roman empire to Christianity was the definitive event of the rabbis' time, and that, as such, it was a significant force behind their identification of Rome with Esau. This identification enabled them to acknowledge that Christian Rome had descended from the patriarchs, and that its history was linked with Israel's, yet at the same time they could demonstrate that it was Israel who had the right to the blessings. Neusner, Genesis and Judaism: the Perspective of Genesis Rabbah, An Analytical Anthology, Brown Judaic Studies Series, no. 108 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 12, pp. 189-190. However, Cohen believes that the establishment of the Christian church as the religion of the empire made no significant difference for the Jews of the fourth century. This new alignment meant merely the succession of one emperor by another, one idolatry by another. The rabbis simply extended their understanding of Edom as Rome to include Christendom. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," p. 249.

at other times, they are associated with personal familial relationships, and with livelihood. Because of their focus on national issues, the midrashic rabbis' reading moves the issue of blessings and promises to the foreground of the story, while struggle and deceit, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, become less important. They understand the climax of the narrative to be not repentance and reconciliation, which happen within the text and as part of ordinary life experience, but the messianic time, which is the fulfillment of history and towards which the text can only point.

In addition to shifting the overall emphasis and themes of the story, the rabbis' understanding of Jacob and Esau as progenitors of nations, rather than as individual characters, led them to perceive the brothers' personalities and actions differently than had the biblical authors. In Genesis, while Jacob is the bearer of the Israelite line, and Esau the founder of Edom, both ancestors are portrayed as having good and bad qualities. Jacob makes many mistakes, and struggles throughout his life to become a more righteous person. Esau's nature is different from that of Jacob, and at times he appears foolish and uncouth, but in general he is depicted sympathetically. His destiny seems to be one that is separate from that of the patriarchs, but not necessarily evil. This portrayal is shaded within the Bible itself, as Edom becomes Israel's enemy, and the rabbis extend and intensify this change, transforming the brothers into almost

entirely typological characters. The rabbis understand Esau as symbolic of the nations in general, and Rome in particular, which oppressed Israel and rejected their God and mode of life. They see Jacob as a model for the rabbinic values which, for them, defined Israel's existence and meaning.

Blessings and Promises

Rome, and later, Christianity, claimed to be, and even appeared to have succeeded the people Israel as, bearers of God's blessings and promises as recorded in the Bible. In the face of this potential humiliation, the rabbis looked to the story of Jacob and Esau to discover whether these blessings and promises had in fact been transferred to Edom or Rome.

In a midrash commenting on Jacob's demand for a blessing from the being with whom he struggles at the Yabok River, the rabbis quote Jacob addressing that being as *שׂוֹרְשׁוֹ* ("Esau's guardian angel"). Jacob says to him:

"I will not loose you until you yield to me the blessing with which-my father blessed me." [The being] said to him, "And who is murmuring against you?" [Jacob] said to him, "Esau said to me 'Is that why he was named Jacob [literally, supplanter]? That he might supplant me these two times? He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing!'" (Gen. 27:36).¹³

The midrash expresses Jacob's distress that Esau is protesting his right to Isaac's blessing; thus, the rabbis also voice the people Israel's concern that Rome sees them as

¹³ Midrash Agadah on Gen. 32:27. Midrash Agadah is believed to be an eleventh or twelfth century compilation of texts from a variety of rabbinic writings; Strack, *Introduction to Talmud*, p. 338, pp. 388-389.

"supplanters" and claims to have succeeded them as carrier of God's blessings.

While this midrashic text does not directly answer Esau's or Rome's "murmuring," the two biblical passages on which it draws give a definitive response. In its biblical context the exegetical verse is followed by the mysterious being changing Jacob's name from יַעֲקֹב (Jacob, or, literally, supplanter) to יִשְׂרָאֵל (Israel), making clear that he is not a supplanter. The being tells Jacob that he has prevailed, and then blesses him (Gen. 32:29-30). The midrashic reading thus portrays Esau's or Rome's guardian angel as confirming Jacob's right to the patriarchal blessing.

Esau's words which Jacob quotes in the midrashic intertext are, in their biblical context, from earlier in the Jacob-Esau cycle. There they are followed by Isaac's answer, "Here, I have made [Jacob] master over you, and I have given him all his brothers for servants. . . what then can I do for you, my son?" (Gen. 27:37). In the biblical contexts of both the exegetical verse and the intertext the rabbis find a clear answer to their concerns: the blessing is theirs, and both Rome's guardian angel and the patriarch through whom that blessing was passed have confirmed Israel's right to it.

The people Israel and the nations could see Israel's subjugation, Rome's expansion, and Christian claims of succession as signs that God had forsaken the Israelites. The rabbis looked to the Bible to discover the meaning of

Rome's ascendancy and Israel's apparent losses on the world stage. They saw their situation prefigured in Jacob's many experiences of adversity, particularly his struggles with Esau, who symbolized their own adversary. By understanding Jacob's struggles, they might understand their own. Were Jacob's difficulties evidence that he was no longer protected by God's promises? What role did God play when Esau appeared to threaten Jacob?

The rabbis see references to the first of these questions in Jacob's words to Esau as the brothers negotiate their traveling plans following their reconciliation. Jacob excuses himself from traveling with his twin, saying "My lord knows that the children are frail" (Gen. 33:13). The rabbis read the "children" as referring to the Israelites, who in fact were "frail" in that they were vulnerable to oppression by Rome. Based on this understanding, the rabbis expand on Jacob's words to Esau:

"I see that in the future your descendants will cause my descendants to suffer. However, enjoy your authority, and use your crown, until the messiah arises from my loins and takes your sovereignty from you, as it is said, *Pray let my lord pass before his servant . . . until I will come to my lord at Se'ir*" (Gen. 33:14).¹⁴

There is no description in the Bible of Jacob meeting Esau at Se'ir, so the rabbis assume this will occur during or

¹⁴ Midrash Abkir on Gen. 33:13. Midrash Abkir is no longer extant. It is known from excerpts in the Yalkut and in other writings, which place it in the thirteenth century or earlier. Strack, Introduction to Talmud, p. 341, p. 384.

after the messianic time.¹⁵ Thus Jacob's request that Esau pass before him becomes his invitation to Esau to enjoy his preordained rule over the Israelites until the messiah comes. Given this reading, Rome's ascendancy and Israel's sufferings were decreed from the time of the patriarchs, so these events confirm that history is continuing on towards the people's final redemption.

In addition to finding that their sufferings had been ordained in the biblical text, the rabbis see evidence that God helps Jacob throughout his struggles with Esau, even when this is not explicitly mentioned in the biblical narrative. Sometimes God's assistance takes the form of direct, visible intervention, as in the following example. When Jacob prays for help as he prepares to meet Esau, he recalls that he passed over the Jordan when he fled his home out of fear of his brother (Gen. 32:11). In the midrash, R. Levi comments that at that time Esau had:

locked him up within, but the Holy One dug an opening for him from another place, as it is written, *When you pass through water I will be with you, through streams, they will not overwhelm you, when you walk through fire you shall not be scorched, through flame, it shall not burn you* (Is. 43:2).¹⁶

¹⁵ See, for example, Bereshit Rabbah 78:14 on Genesis 33:14, which is discussed below on pp. 56-58.

¹⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 76:5. The exact wording of the midrash is difficult in regard to the location at which Esau locked Jacob up, and the circumstances under which this occurred. This is discussed in Julius Theodor and Hanokh Albeck, notes and comm., סדרש בראשית רבא [Bereshit Rabbah], 2nd. rev. ed., 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 2:901-902, notes. However, the part of the midrash translated above is clear, as is the incident's overall connection with the Jordan River.

R. Levi might easily read Jacob's prayer as that of the Israelites of his own day. Jacob pleads:

God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, YHWH, who said to me, "Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you" . . . Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him, lest he come and strike me, mothers and children alike. Yet You have said, "I will deal bountifully with you, and I will make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too many to count." (Gen. 32:10-13).

Jacob himself finds assurance by recalling the promises God made to him at Bet El (Gen. 28:13-15), and R. Levi discovers additional evidence that God will answer Jacob's, and thus the Israelites', prayer. He cites an intertext from Isaiah which, in its biblical context, follows God's statement that God has "kept still and restrained Myself" but now "will turn darkness before them to light" (Is. 42:14, 16). God could be speaking to the people of R. Levi's time, assuring them that though they have been "plundered and despoiled, all of them trapped in holes" (42:22), their suffering has not been the result of chance or of the might of their enemies. Instead, it is God who "gave Jacob over to despoilment" because of their sins (42:24). Now God is ready to act, to "bring your folk from the East . . . gather you out of the West," proving to the nations that God "alone foretold the triumph and . . . brought it to pass" (43:5, 12).

R. Levi sees from Isaiah that, though Jacob is frightened and in danger, God has not deserted him. God's promises are still in force, and God will soon end Jacob's

sufferings and bring about the final triumph. Jacob's pleas for help will be answered, whether the danger is water, fire, or fear that his tribulations are meaningless or unending. R. Levi's intertext offers specific evidence of how God helped Jacob on his flight from Esau: "when you pass through water" (Is. 43:2). The intertext also offers comfort to the Israelites of R. Levi's time, speaking to them both through the overall message of hope that surrounds it in its biblical context, and through the verse that directly precedes it: "Who created you, Jacob? Who formed you, Israel? Do not fear, for I will redeem you. I have called you by name; you are Mine" (43:1). Despite the claims, attacks, and victories of Esau, Edom, or the nations, Jacob and the people Israel have been God's from the beginning of time, and will remain so until their final and assured salvation.

In addition to God's direct intervention, the rabbis find biblical evidence that God protects Jacob from Esau through less visible but equally remarkable means. An example is seen in one of the most well-known midrashim about Jacob and Esau, which demonstrates how Jacob mysteriously repels Esau's attack. In the biblical text, the climax of the brothers' reconciliation occurs when Esau embraces Jacob, falls on his neck, kisses him, and the two brothers weep (Gen. 33:4). Given the rabbis' understanding of Esau, R. Yanay sees a covert assault beneath Esau's apparently friendly intent, and this influences his reading of Jacob's response.

In the Torah text the word "וַיִּשָּׁק" ("and [Esau] kissed him;" Gen. 33:4) has dots above it. According to R. Yanay, this teaches that "וַיִּשָּׁק" should be read as the similar-sounding "וַיִּשְׁך" (and [Esau] bit him). Thus, rather than kissing Jacob:

[Esau] wished to bite him, and they wept (Gen. 33:4): one wept because of his neck and the other wept because of his teeth.¹⁷

According to this interpretation, the brothers cry because of pain or frustration rather than joy. Jacob's discomfort is easy to understand if Esau has bitten his neck, but Esau's distress is more mysterious. R. Yanay's reading might imply that Jacob's neck, a particularly vulnerable area of the body, was so hard that Esau was injured when he bit it. Another interpretation would be that Esau's teeth were mysteriously broken or bent when he attempted to bite Jacob.

R. Yanay offers no reason for this seemingly miraculous incident, though there are various elucidations in other midrashim. He leaves open to interpretation whether this was the result of Israel's nature, or merit, or an instance of direct but invisible intervention by God. Whatever the explanation, the rabbis learn from this reading that the people Israel are less vulnerable than they appear. Even when God's actions are not apparent, God is still present, shielding the people from injury.

The rabbis approached the biblical text with pressing questions about God's blessings and promises. They found

¹⁷ Bereshit Rabbah 78:9.

abundant evidence that these blessings still belonged to Israel, that the victories of the nations and the ascendancy of Rome were part of God's plan, and that God was with them, protecting them from the full force of their enemies' attacks, and assuring them of final redemption.

Survival and Redemption

In the Genesis story, Jacob and Esau eventually repent their mistreatment of each other and are able to reconcile. Although Jacob remains the exclusive bearer of the patriarchal blessing, he and Esau join together to bury their father, and the two appear to exist amicably though separately for the rest of their lives.

The rabbis, however, faced very different circumstances in contemplating the future of their relationship with the Esau of their day. It made little sense to imagine reconciliation with the Roman oppressor. Instead, the rabbis asked: what will enable the people Israel survive these persecutions? Can the people bring them to an end, and if so, how?

The rabbis knew that their oppression must end at the time of the messianic age, and, as discussed above, they found abundant evidence that God's promises regarding their redemption still held true. However, their memories of the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt were very much alive. While they looked hopefully towards future salvation, they also feared the explosive potential of active messianism, and attempted to restrain its appeal. As they read the biblical

text for messages about survival and redemption, they walked a fine line between endorsing submission to the oppressor and encouraging doomed attempts at rebellion.

One of the many midrashim that address these issues comments on Jacob's words to Esau as they plan their respective futures following their reconciliation. In the biblical text, Jacob says to his brother, "Pray let my lord pass over before his servant" (Gen. 33:14). The rabbis read this portion of the verse as Jacob's, and thus the people Israel's, acceptance of Esau's or the nations' dominance in this world. In the midrash, Esau responds by proposing that he share in Jacob's world, which presumably refers to the messianic time, or the future time which will follow it. The implication is that if Jacob agrees, he will share in Esau's world, that of the contemporary gentile rulers. Thus the rabbis define Israel's choice as they see it: they can remain God's people, who will surely be redeemed, or they can struggle for power in this world; they cannot do both. Jacob rejects Esau's offer, implying that Israel will not contest the nations' ascendancy in material wealth and military strength; in return, Israel will retain the promise of future redemption. Surprised, Esau asks:

"Are you not afraid of my generals, my lieutenants, and my commanders?" [Jacob] said to him, "*And I will journey on gently ('DN')*" (Gen. 33:14), [that is] at my own pace, I will walk at my own pace, as it is said, *The waters of Shiloah flow gently ('DN')* (Is. 8:6). With face wrapped I will walk, as it says, *Here, it is wrapped ('DN')* in a cloth (I Sam. 21:10).¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid. 78:14.

The two intertexts use words with spellings similar to that of the word 'DN' (gently) to clarify Jacob's response to Esau: he is not afraid of the nations' armies, and at the same time he has no need to battle them. He will continue at his own pace, threatening no one, wrapping his face as a sign of humility and of separation from the worldly matters with which Esau is concerned. Thus the rabbis find answers to their questions: the people Israel need not fear the nations, yet they also should not rebel or act in an incautious manner. Instead, they must behave humbly, and focus on survival and on remaining true to their own God and way of life.

However, concealed within these texts which urge humility is the other side of this message, reminding the people that acting in an unassuming manner and remaining faithful to their mode of life will assure their eventual ascendancy. In their biblical contexts, both intertexts used in this midrash contain images of future victory for the people Israel. The verse from Isaiah describes how the gentle waters which Shiloah brings into Jerusalem will be threatened by "the mighty, massive waters of the Euphrates, the king of Assyria and all his multitude" (Is. 8:7). This attack will be dangerous, but, in the verses following, the prophet assures the people Israel that in the end the nations will be broken, "for with us is God" (8:10). The intertext from I Samuel describes Goliath's sword which Ahimelek gives to David. The sword is concealed in a cloth, symbolizing

David's strength which will be revealed in the future. Each act of apparent humility, the rabbis seem to say, bears within it the seeds of Israel's ultimate victory.

As this midrash continues, R. Abahu takes up the second half of the exegetical verse, in which Jacob tells Esau that he will come to him at Se'ir (Gen. 33:14). R. Abahu says that there is no description in the Bible of this occurring, so Jacob's words must refer to the "future time" (לְעֵת לְבָרָא). R. Abahu finds evidence of this in Obadiah's prophecy that "Saviors will go up on Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau [Se'ir], and dominion shall be YHWH's" (1:21). In context, this intertext follows a lengthy oracle about Edom's impending doom, in which Obadiah states that God will reverse the order of the nations, and the House of Jacob will repossess Mount Zion, ruling Edom and the other nations that had oppressed Israel (1:15ff). Given such a vision of redemption, the potentially humiliating aspects of the conservative behavior that the rabbis endorse is a small price to pay.

The rabbis believed that the messiah, rather than active political rebellion, would bring the people's persecution to an end. They wondered how they might hasten the coming of that glorious time, and they found evidence in the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation that following the Torah as they understood it might help to bring the messiah.

One example of this view is found in a comment on

Jacob's statement to Esau that he had stayed with Laban "and tarried until now" (Gen. 32:5). The rabbis seem to ask why Jacob, or the people Israel, would tarry with a harsh employer in a foreign land. They also wonder what enabled Jacob, and thus might enable Israel, to leave that situation. They connect the word "now" in Jacob's statement with its use elsewhere in the Bible:

And tarried until now (וְאָחַז עַד עַתָּה), that is to say, the exile will be delayed (וְאָחַזְרָה) until they repent, as it is said, And now (עַתָּה), Israel, what does YHWH demand of you? Only to fear YHWH your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, and to worship YHWH your God with all your heart and being . . . (Deut. 10:12).¹⁹

The message from Deuteronomy continues: "keeping YHWH's commandments and laws, about which I command you this day, for your good" (Deut. 10:13). This text clarifies Jacob's experience: he was delayed with Laban until he had demonstrated his fear and love of God by keeping all of God's commandments.²⁰

¹⁹ Yalkut Temeni on Gen. 32:5. Yalkut Temeni is by R. Jacob Mansor Albiḥani of 15th century Yemen, as described by Menahem Me'ndel Kasher, ed. חומש תורה שלמה: התורה שבכתב עם באור חזקוני [The Complete Torah: the Written Torah with the Commentary of the "Oral Torah"], 42 vols. (Jerusalem: Ezer Publishers for Va'ad l-Hotset Entsiklopediah Hūmash Torah Shlemah, 1936), 5:[iv].

²⁰ This aspect of Jacob's experience is detailed in other midrashim. See, for example, Leḳaḥ Tov on Genesis 32:5:

I stayed (וָאָחַז) with Laban: Our father Jacob said, "I had fulfilled the entire Torah except for honoring father and mother and being fruitful and multiplying. With Laban I completed the 613 commandments." The numerical value of וָאָחַז (I stayed) is 613. And so we read, Israel served for a wife, and by means of the wife kept (Hos. 12:13) all the commandments.

Leḳaḥ Tov was probably written in 1097 in Bulgaria by Tobiah ben Eliezer. It draws on the Babylonian Talmud, many midrashim, and mystical literature. Strack, Introduction to Talmud, pp. 389-390.

Read in light of each other, the exegetical text and the intertext in the midrash from the Yalkut Temeni carry a clear message for the people Israel: when you repent, and follow God's ways, your exile and oppression will end. The occurrence of the word "now" adds force to this mandate: besides Jacob's experience prefiguring that of the people Israel, this text says explicitly that if his descendants "now" follow the pattern he established, they will be rewarded as he was.

Jacob as a Model Jew

Not only do the stories of their progenitors serve as paradigms for Israel's later history, but the actions of the patriarchs also define proper conduct for individual Israelites. The rabbis believed that the Torah had existed since before time,²¹ so there could be no doubt that the founders followed its commandments. Thus the rabbis looked to the lives of the patriarchs to tell them how they were to behave as human beings and as Jews.

Contemporary Christians maintained that salvation did not depend on keeping the laws of the Torah. They pointed to Abraham as one who was righteous and worthy of salvation, yet had not lived by the Torah's commandments. In addition to the rabbis' desire for guidance from the lives of their ancestors, this debate with Christianity may have further motivated them to uncover evidence that Abraham, Isaac, and

²¹ See, for example, Bereshit Rabbah 1:1 on Genesis 1:1.

Jacob had kept the entire Torah, including the commandments that were not instituted until rabbinic times.²²

Jacob's character as described in Genesis is far from perfect. However, because the rabbis viewed him as a model for their own behavior, they found evidence in the text that almost all of his actions were for good. Among the midrashim on Jacob's and Esau's reconciliation there are a few that criticize Jacob, but the majority describe him as humble, compassionate, and dedicated to the Torah and its commandments.

An example of the rabbis' portrayal of Jacob as one who kept every commandment can be found in *Lekah Tov*, as cited above in note 20. A midrash from *Bereshit Rabbah* uncovers evidence of Jacob's unusually righteous and God-like nature.²³ It addresses the verse that sets the stage for Jacob's wrestling match with a mysterious opponent at the Yabok River: "and Jacob was left alone" (Gen. 32:25). The rabbis understand the word "alone" to point to the uniqueness of God. However, they claim, there are some who are like God, and they support this statement with a proof-text from Moses' final blessing of the people: "אין כאלו" which can be read as "there is none like God [except] Yeshurun" (Deut. 33:26). Yeshurun, one of many biblical names for the people Israel, is similar to the word "שׁו" (upright), leading the rabbis to read "אין כאלו" here as "the pleasing and praiseworthy among you."

²² Neusner, *Genesis and Judaism*, p. 11.

²³ *Bereshit Rabbah* 77:1.

Thus God and the most praiseworthy among the Israelites share unique qualities.

The rabbis go on to give examples of how the upright acts which God will carry out in the "future time" ("לְעֵתָא דְּבֵינָא") are paralleled and even preceded by those of the righteous, such as the prophets Elijah and Elisha. These acts include raising the dead, holding back the rain, and turning bitter to sweet.

R. Berekhiah then cites an additional interpretation of the intertext, in the name of R. Simon:

There is none like God, Yeshurun. But who is like God? Yeshurun: that is Israel the patriarch. As it is written about the Holy One: and YHWH alone shall be exalted (Is. 2:11), so too about Jacob: and Jacob was left alone (Gen. 32:25).²⁴

Here R. Berekhiah understands Yeshurun in its usual sense, as a name for Israel. However, he shifts its meaning slightly, indicating that in this instance it refers not to the people, but to their progenitor, Israel. Thus Jacob shares in God's uniqueness, and the intertext implies that he, like God, shall be raised high.

The words from Isaiah are part of an oracle about the day of judgment, when God will humble the arrogant and put an end to idolatry. The message the latter portion of this midrash uncovers is thus twofold: Jacob was God-like in his nature, and, his descendants may currently be "alone," outcast and powerless, but when God comes to judge the earth their uniqueness will be the reason that they, like God, will

²⁴ Ibid. 77:1.

be exalted.

The Israelites know they must follow the Torah's commandments, as Jacob did, but here they learn additional guidelines from his life: they are to strive to be God-like, and they are to see their uniqueness as Jews as cause not for distress, but for pride and hope.

Esau as the Embodiment of Rome

Because the rabbis saw Esau as the typological representation of the nations in general and the Roman empire in particular, they perceived threats, deceit, greed, and evil in almost all his actions. In the Genesis narrative, Esau seems to welcome Jacob's moves towards reconciliation, and there is no indication that he wants the many gifts Jacob offers him. However, there are numerous midrashim that present the evidence the rabbis found throughout the biblical text that, in fact, Esau rejected Jacob's friendly approaches, plotted to kill him, and sought to obtain as much of his property as possible, including the women who were part of his camp.

The rabbis' understanding of Esau could have been challenged by the apparent meaning of Jacob's statement that seeing his brother's face "is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10). Yet, given their understanding of the identities of Jacob and Esau, the rabbis would not think it possible for Jacob to draw a parallel between the Roman empire and God!

Addressing this verse, the rabbis read the words "the

face of God (פני אלהים)" as referring to judgment. There are two probable sources for this association. First, in rabbinic thought God is understood as having two complementary aspects, revealed by the two most common biblical names for God. When God is referred to as אלהים, this indicates that God is acting out of מידת הרין, God's aspect of judgment, while the word YHWH names God when God is acting out of the aspect of mercy, מידת הרחמים. Second, the word אלהים can refer to human judges. Thus the rabbis understand Jacob to say that seeing Esau's face is not like seeing God, but like facing judgment.²⁵

In the Genesis narrative, Esau's judgment of Jacob seems to be a positive and forgiving one. However, the rabbis find that this was possible only because Jacob sent gifts to Esau. They cite a prooftext from the laws about the Festival of Unleavened Bread that states that none shall appear before God empty-handed (Ex. 23:15). In context, the verse implies that the Israelites are to bring gifts to God in appreciation for God having freed them from Egypt. The midrash portrays Jacob as wisely applying the same policy to his encounter with Esau, though he does so as a means of appeasement rather than as an expression of gratitude. In addition to explaining the underside of what had appeared to be Esau's kindness towards Jacob, and praising Jacob's cunning, the prooftext thus introduces echoes of the exodus from Egypt, reminding the Israelites of God's ongoing

²⁵ Ibid. 78:12.

relationship to them as their Redeemer.

In the subsequent exegetical verse Jacob continues urging Esau to accept his gift, saying that God has favored him and he has everything (Gen. 33:11). Mindful of their situation under the Roman empire, which demanded tribute from the Jews, the rabbis focus on the unusual wording of the exegetical verse, interjecting the other side of Jacob's situation:

"How much trouble, how much toil did I expend before it came to my hand, yet to you it comes of itself." For it is not written "that I brought" but rather "that is brought" (Gen. 33:11).²⁶

In other words, Rome forces the Israelites to work and pay taxes to the rulers, who live a life of ease; here Esau's lazy and selfish behavior prefigures this situation.

As the midrash continues to explicate the same verse, R. Yehudah employs puns to denounce Esau's greed, and by extension, that of Rome:

and [Jacob] urged him, and he took (Gen. 33:11). [Esau] pretended to draw back, but his hands were stretched out. R. Yehudah b. Rabbi said, *submitting himself* (סתר) with pieces (צד) of silver (Ps. 68:31)--he opened his hand (סח'ר) (סח'ר), and he was appeased (סחרצה) with silver.²⁷

In its biblical context the intertext describes the nations bringing tribute to God, a situation that is the opposite of that portrayed in the midrash. Thus, in addition to changing the reading of the Genesis story to indicate criticism of Esau and Rome, the intertext serves as a reminder of the

²⁶ Ibid. 78:12.

²⁷ Ibid. 78:12.

reversal that will occur between Israel on the one hand and Rome and the other gentile nations on the other hand at the time of redemption.

In a few instances the rabbis endorse those parts of the biblical narrative which appear to present Esau as praiseworthy. For example, unlike his colleagues, R. Simon believes that the dots above the word "וַיִּשָּׁקֶה" ("and [Esau] kissed [Jacob];" Gen. 33:4) indicate that Esau did so wholeheartedly.²⁸ However, in the overwhelming majority of their reading, the rabbis transform the positive or even neutral descriptions of Esau, reshaping him, as they did Jacob, in accordance with his role as a typological rather than an individual figure. Having done so, though, the rabbis' attention soon moves on from the difficulties and suffering of their own time to point towards the future, a source of hope and comfort because of the assurance of messianic redemption.

²⁸ Ibid. 78:9. Cf. the discussion of this text above on pp. 53-54.

CHAPTER III

TWO MEDIEVAL COMMENTATORS

The intellectual history of medieval Jewry is dominated by Moses ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, both because of the quality of his thought and the influence he exerted for centuries afterwards. His book on religious philosophy, The Guide of the Perplexed, completed in about 1200, was an attempt to synthesize Jewish faith and Aristotelian philosophy. It addressed the conflicts faced by educated Jews in the Islamic world who were actively involved with non-Jewish culture and aware of contemporary philosophy, and also committed to Judaism. Jews in this situation were disturbed by the elements of the Torah and of rabbinic Judaism that seemed counter to reason. Maimonides believed that Judaism is intellectually and logically consistent, and in his Guide he sought to clarify how the Torah, mitsvot, and religious faith could in fact be strengthened by being understood from a rational perspective.

This chapter discusses the biblical commentary of two thinkers who studied Maimonides' Guide and lived among Jews who were deeply affected by its point of view. Each of the two, however, responded quite differently to the Jewish philosophic tradition which Maimonides played such an important part in shaping. Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344),

known as Gersonides, a resident of Provence, continued and extended that philosophic tradition, and is considered by many to be the most original Jewish philosopher in the Aristotelian mode after Maimonides. At the other end of the spectrum from the work of Gersonides is the Zohar, a collection of midrashim based on the kabbalah, a system of Jewish thought in which mysticism is central. Most of the Zohar is believed to have been written by Moses de Leon (circa 1240-1305), a resident of Spain. Kabbalah, like philosophy, and unlike rabbinic tradition, is highly intellectual, and is based on an understanding of metaphysical doctrine as central to Judaism. However, while the philosophers sought to reconcile Judaism with science and Aristotelian principles, the kabalists were not concerned with such contradictions. They drew on many elements of Jewish tradition, including talmudic, midrashic, and philosophic thought, and on their own imagination and mystical practices, to try to uncover the hidden nature of divinity.

Though philosophy and kabbalah appear to take almost opposite stances, both are rooted in rabbinic Judaism. Within the rabbinic tradition, God is the transcendent Creator, radically separated from God's creation, and not subject to the laws of nature or to any limits at all. At the same time, God is near to humanity, hears prayer, and protects both individuals and the people Israel as a whole. Maimonides placed great emphasis on the otherness and

uniqueness of God, though he did not deny the rabbinic conviction that God is providentially concerned with the world. Gersonides understood God as even more distant from the events of the world and from human individuals than did Maimonides. In this and other ways, Gersonides' views were farther from Jewish tradition and closer to Aristotelian principles than were those of Maimonides. Even so, Gersonides, like Maimonides, lived as a devout rabbinic Jew, was known as a talmudic scholar, and believed his conclusions were completely in harmony with biblical teachings.

Gersonides worked in an environment in which there was a substantial Jewish middle class and relaxed relations between Jews and non-Jews. Many Jews in Provence were familiar with Maimonides' Guide, and its doctrine was accepted by a large number of them from the thirteenth into the fifteenth centuries.¹

Moses de Leon also lived in an area in which Jewish rationalism was widely accepted, particularly among upper class Spanish Jews. He himself studied philosophy, rabbinic literature, and various kabalistic documents.² However, de

¹ Colette Sirat, A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 212; Robert M. Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), p. 408.

² These are believed to include the Bahir, a work which had appeared in Provence around 1200; the teachings of the Gerona circle of kabalists; and those of the Castilian school; as described in Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala, cited by Daniel Matt, Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 5, note 6.

Leon believed that philosophy had become one way for Jews to justify their lack of religious faith and their neglect of Jewish tradition and commandments. He was also dissatisfied with what he understood as the focus within rabbinic tradition on halakhic knowledge to the exclusion of attempts at "searching for His glorious Reality."³ In de Leon's Zohar, a mystical commentary on the Torah, he interprets and extends the aspects of Jewish tradition which understand God, and the divine realm, as complex and knowable, in contrast with the distance and simplicity of God as envisioned by the philosophers. Thus, de Leon's Zohar reads the Torah's narrative as a mystical novel about the inner life of God and about human participation in the divine drama. The Zohar's evocative narrative style made it far more popular than the many other kabalistic works which were available, and within a century after its appearance the Zohar was acknowledged as the authoritative document on kabbalah.

These two trends in Jewish thought, the philosophic and the kabalistic, joined with rabbinic tradition to become the major wellsprings of Jewish biblical interpretation from medieval times until the modern period.

Gersonides

Approach to the Text

Like other medieval Jewish philosophers, Gersonides approached the Torah believing that it contained the truth,

³ Or Zarua, Kovets al Yad, n.s. 9 (1980):249, cited by Matt, Book of Enlightenment, p. 6, note 8.

that this truth could also be discovered through the study of philosophy, and that, given a correct understanding, there was no conflict between the truth as revealed in the Torah and as revealed by philosophy. Therefore, in his Torah commentary, Gersonides seeks to understand how the Torah demonstrates the truths he was also aware of from his study of philosophy. His approach to the text continues a process whose foundations had been laid by Maimonides in The Guide of the Perplexed. In the Guide, Maimonides states that a major reason that there appear to be conflicts between the Torah and philosophy is that educated Jews do not know which parts of the Torah to interpret literally, and how to understand those that should not be taken literally. Maimonides devoted much of the Guide to explaining this, and medieval Jewish philosophers continued in this tradition.

In addition to addressing philosophical truths in his Torah commentary, Gersonides looks to the characters in the narrative as models of good and bad behavior, and draws from their actions ethical lessons about how individuals should behave. Finally, while Gersonides accepts the validity of rabbinic law as expressed in the traditional sources, he also endeavors to derive it from the Torah using interpretive methods based on logic, rather than the traditional rabbinic methods of exegesis.

Clearly, Gersonides' perception of and interest in the Torah was different from that of the midrashic rabbis, and the structure of his Torah commentary reflects this

difference. Until this time, all Jewish commentators on the Torah, including those whose point of view was not midrashic, had followed the structural pattern of the midrashim, providing a running commentary on the text. Gersonides developed a topical style, dividing the text of the Torah into units of a chapter or two. For each unit he begins by clarifying the meaning of difficult words and idioms, then gives an interpretive paraphrase of the passage, and finally lists the lessons that emerge from the passage in terms of ethics, philosophical truths, and commandments.

For Gersonides, salvation comes through knowledge, understanding, and the perfection of the intellect. The Torah, when studied correctly, is an important key to such knowledge, and this perspective shapes his reading of the biblical narrative. Unlike the biblical authors, he is not concerned with the narrative in terms of the personal, family, and national stories it tells, so in this particular text, for example, he does not focus on the resolution that occurs as Jacob and Esau move towards repentance and reconciliation.

Gersonides also does not share a midrashic understanding of the text. For the rabbis of that tradition, the typological figures of Jacob and Esau, and the multiple meanings encoded within the text of the entire Bible, provide evidence that the Jews' current subjugation was prefigured and merely one step towards eventual salvation. Instead, Gersonides reads the Torah as a source of the philosophical

knowledge that will itself lead towards the true understanding that is salvation.

Much of the Jacob-Esau cycle focuses on the patriarchal blessings and promises, and the actions of Jacob and his family in relation to these promises. These blessings and promises are important to the midrashic rabbis, who seek signs that they are still in force for the Israelites. For Gersonides, the struggle between Jacob and Esau, whether as individuals or as progenitors of nations, is not a significant issue. Instead, he sees the blessings as part of the Torah's teachings about the nature of providence and prophecy. Like other medieval philosophers, he seeks to understand the nature of God, of human beings, and of the relationship between the two. Providence and prophecy, which occur at the intersection between God and humanity, are thus key issues in Gersonides' philosophical system, and in his interpretation of the biblical text.

Although the personal and national struggles between Jacob and Esau are not a focus, Gersonides is interested in Jacob as a model of ethical behavior. Esau seems to have almost no significance for him; Gersonides does not see him as the ambiguous individual of the biblical narrative, nor as the wily and evil Edom of the midrash. Since he is neither an ethical model nor the focus for philosophic or halakhic teachings, he appears, in Gersonides' presentation, to serve mainly as a foil for the more significant aspects of the text.

In addition to the lessons he draws from the Torah, Gersonides also explains elements within it that might appear contrary to reason. Since he believes that Judaism is totally consonant with reason, and he believes the Torah to be true, it is important for him, like Maimonides, to determine which parts of the Torah are literal, and how to understand those that are not.

Below there is a brief discussion of Gersonides' overall understanding of providence and prophecy, two key issues he sees as addressed by the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation. Then the chapter turns to his biblical commentary itself, looking at what he learns from the text about providence, prophecy, and ethical behavior in dangerous situations. Finally, there is an examination of his explanations of aspects of the text which could be understood as contrary to reason.

Gersonides' Understanding of Providence and Prophecy

At Bet El, God had promised Jacob to be with him and protect him wherever he went, and to ensure that he would have land and numerous descendants (Gen. 28:13-15). Despite these promises, the biblical text states that Jacob was very frightened when he heard that Esau was approaching him with 400 men (32:8). Given Gersonides' understanding of Jacob as a moral exemplar, Jacob's fear leads Gersonides to ask, as the midrashic rabbis did, why is Jacob frightened, in spite of God's promises to him? In addition, Gersonides' desire to

understand God's relationship to human events prompts him to investigate how God's promises to Jacob actually function. Does God protect Jacob? If so, how? Analysis of these issues enables Gersonides to draw conclusions about how divine promises, or providence, function, and about how people should behave in order to seek protection from providence.

In addressing these issues, Gersonides necessarily responds to the two major belief systems within which he operates: that of Aristotelian principles and that of rabbinic Judaism. According to the Aristotelian position, the only functions of providence are to govern the heavenly spheres and to assure the permanence of the species in the sublunar world, meaning the world that exists below the heavenly bodies. This position denies the existence of providence in the lives of individuals. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the position held by those Gersonides calls "the multitude of adherents to our Torah," who believe that providence extends to all individuals.⁴

Gersonides cannot agree with the Aristotelian denial of providence because he sees it as conflicting with the reality of prophecy. According to Gersonides, prophecy is only possible if God has at least some knowledge of future events, meaning that providence must operate in some way in the lives of at least some individuals. It is clear from the Bible

⁴ J. David Bleich, Providence in the Philosophy of Gersonides, Studies in Judaica Series, no. 4 (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1973), p. 31, p. 35.

that God makes known to prophets what will happen before it occurs, and that the Torah itself was given through an act of prophecy. Thus, without prophecy, the entire basis of the Bible would be called into question, so prophecy and therefore providence must be realities.

At the same time, Gersonides finds that the traditional rabbinic notion that God rewards and punishes individuals conflicts with his understanding of the nature of God and of humanity. For God to function in this manner would require divine knowledge of the particulars of each person's life. Gersonides believes that God has knowledge of the essence and nature of each human being, but not of all the particulars of each individual. If God had such knowledge, this would mean that God would know all future events, which would deny the validity of human choice. Such foreknowledge would also call into question the purpose of the Torah, which is first and foremost a book of divine commands, since it would make no sense for God to command human beings to do anything if everything is predetermined. Finally, if God punishes evildoers for their sins, this attributes evil directly to God, and Gersonides believes that God, who is perfect, can be the source only of benefit and protection, while evil comes solely from matter.

This leads Gersonides to conclude that the only logical possibility is that providence extends to individuals in varying degrees. Gersonides shares the Aristotelian belief that God produces the natural order through the

Intelligences, the lowest of which, the Active Intellect, operates on the sublunar world. Human perfection consists in coming as close as possible to the Active Intellect by developing one's intellectual and spiritual potential. Those individuals who do not do so receive the providence God provides for all members of the species, such as physical characteristics and instincts that help safeguard the survival of the species. Those who do draw close to the Active Intellect come to know some of what God knows. This knowledge is providence in action since it gives them greater understanding of potential future benefits and misfortunes so that they may direct their actions accordingly.

The knowledge of the future that individuals may gain is limited to some portion of the knowledge God has; thus, it does not include absolute predictions of every future event, since only some aspects of the future are predetermined.⁵ Depending on the closeness of an individual's attachment to

⁵ The knowledge which God has can be understood as a heightened awareness of general principles. For example, a well-informed sailor knows what weather conditions may lead to a storm, and thus can decide whether or not it is safe to take a sea voyage. The Active Intellect can inform prophets of contingencies they could not learn about through human knowledge alone. As Norbert Samuelson describes it, for example, "from the Active Intellect Jeremiah knows that when certain conditions prevail if a nation of *F* description goes to war against a nation of *G* description, then that first nation will be destroyed. Then through the use of his faculty of imagination and his senses Jeremiah is able to instantiate this general proposition in order to know that Judah had *F* description, Babylonia has *G* description, and the requisite conditions prevail. In this way Jeremiah prophesies to King Zedekiah that if Judah goes to war against Babylonia at this time, Judah will be destroyed." Levi ben Gershon [Levi ben Gershom], Gersonides' The Wars of the Lord Treatise Three: On God's Knowledge, trans. and comm. by Norbert M. Samuelson, Mediaeval Sources in Translation Series (Wetteren, Belgium: Universa Press for the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1977), p. 236, note 352.

the Active Intellect, that person will receive knowledge from the Active Intellect through intuition, dreams, divination, or, at the highest level, through prophecy.

Providence: in the Text Itself

In his commentary Gersonides looks at why Jacob was "greatly frightened and troubled" (Gen. 32:8) when he heard that Esau was approaching him with 400 men, in spite of the fact that God had promised to protect Jacob. Gersonides states that Jacob responded fearfully because he knew that God's promises often include conditions. As proof, Gersonides refers to the blessings written in the Torah, which often include contingencies, and he also cites the text from Jeremiah in which God warns that if a nation changes its behavior, "then I change My mind about the good which I said I would bring upon it" (18:10). Gersonides claims that such conditions may be part of a promise even if they are not mentioned when God makes the promise. In fact, he states that an assurance of ongoing good fortune, such as was part of God's promise to Jacob (Gen. 28:15), cannot possibly be fulfilled unless "the recipient [will] conduct himself in such a way that divine providence will attach itself to him."⁶ Jacob feared that his behavior might not have been good enough for this part of God's promise to remain in

⁶ Levi ben Gershon, פירוש הרמב"ם [Commentary on the Torah], intro. and notes by Jacob L. Levi (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1992), p. 201. For translation of Gersonides' commentary on the biblical story of the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, see appendix to this thesis.

force.

According to Gersonides, Jacob was also afraid because God's more specific promise to him had been of land and descendants (Gen. 28:14), and Jacob knew that he might have more children even if Esau killed all those who were with him. Thus Jacob understood that he could lose his family and property without God necessarily breaking the more specific portion of God's promises to him.

Gersonides thus explains how a moral exemplar like Jacob could be fearful in spite of God's promises. Just as importantly, Gersonides' reading of this text casts light on a crucial religious issue: that of God's control over events and individuals. The words from Jeremiah which Gersonides quotes are part of a passage frequently echoed in Jewish liturgy, in which God is described as a potter and the nations as clay in God's hands. This image is often extended to individuals, describing them as "clay" that is totally known and controlled by God. This position is consonant with rabbinic tradition, but it conflicts with most of the philosophical views of which educated Jews of Gersonides' time would be aware.

However, Gersonides' reading of Jacob's story reverses the potentially disturbing meaning of God's words, "Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My hands" (Jer. 18:6). Rather than understanding this as a declaration of God's absolute knowledge of, and control over, human affairs, Gersonides reads these words as part of God's

statement that God created a world in which individuals can behave in such a way that they will come closer to the Active Intellect, so that divine providence will protect them more than it otherwise would.

Following his general discussion of the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation, Gersonides lists ten practical applications he draws from this text, three of which he describes as philosophical. One of these, the fifth practical application, consists mainly of a summary of his textual analysis discussed above, thus indicating that he believes that this narrative sheds significant light on the issue of providence.

Despite Jacob's fear, Gersonides understands the text to demonstrate that Jacob is close enough to the Active Intellect that providence does protect him. This protection does not come through God's control over events, as might be expected within rabbinic tradition, but through knowledge Jacob receives which enables him to approach his meeting with Esau with greater confidence. Gersonides clarifies this in his eighth practical application, in which he states that Jacob was shown a prophetic vision of himself prevailing over the angel in order to "ease his mind."⁷ Once he had "experienced" victory over an angel, he would feel that he could certainly prevail over a human being. This was confirmed for Jacob by the angel's words, which are usually understood to mean that he had "striven (שָׁרַף) with . . .

⁷ Ibid., p. 207.

human beings and prevailed" (Gen. 32:29), but which Gersonides seems to understand as informing Jacob that he had become a prince (נר) among men, and therefore would not be defeated by Esau.⁶ Thus Gersonides completes his discussion of providence as revealed in this text by demonstrating that the manner in which it protects individuals does not restrict their freedom of choice, but instead gives them information that enhances their ability to make beneficial choices.

Prophecy: in the Text Itself

The biblical narrative describes Jacob's wrestling match with an unnamed opponent during his night-time stay by the Yabok River. While the incident seems mysterious, there is no indication in the Bible that it is not an actual occurrence, and in fact its reality is emphasized by the statement that "the socket of [Jacob's] hip was strained as he wrestled with him" so that when the struggle ended, Jacob walked away "limping on his hip" (Gen. 32:26, 32). Most midrashim and other Jewish commentaries on this passage hold that the being with whom Jacob wrestles is an angel, and Gersonides agrees with this interpretation. However, he differs from most commentators in that he understands Jacob's encounter with the angel to be a prophetic dream, rather than an actual wrestling match.

⁶ Gersonides explains that "כִּי שָׂרִיחַ עִם אֱלֹהִים" (Gen. 32:29) means "It is considered that he became a prince (נר) among the angels." By analogy, Gersonides' statement that the angel told Jacob he would be נר שֶׁ עִם אֱלֹהִים וְלֹא יוֹצֵחַ presumably means that the angel told Jacob he would be a prince among human beings and would not be defeated. Ibid., p. 200, p. 203.

Gersonides does not offer much evidence for this reading, since Maimonides had already explained in The Guide of the Perplexed that when the Bible describes angels who are seen or have spoken, this must be in a vision of prophecy or in a dream, even if this is not specified. Maimonides even refers specifically to the being with whom Jacob wrestles, stating that this occurred in a prophetic revelation.⁹ In addition to citing Maimonides' discussion of this issue, Gersonides adds one additional argument of his own. He states that it is not possible that an angel of God would appear to a human being when the human being is in full command of his faculties. In other words, an angel, a form who transmits knowledge from the Active Intellect to the human intellect, is not the type of form with which a person could actually wrestle.

Having established that Jacob's wrestling match took place in a prophetic dream, Gersonides addresses the question of how Jacob came to receive this prophecy. He discovers three causes for this incident: the first is the closeness of Jacob's bond with the angel, which is due to the perfection of Jacob's intellect; the second is his worry about how to defend himself against Esau; and the third is the pain in his hip which he felt while he slept.

Gersonides has two criteria for the ability of an

⁹ See Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, 2 vols., trans., intro., and notes by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2:388-390. Also see Part 2, ch. 6 and ch. 41 for further discussion of the role of angels and of the types of prophetic speech that comes from angels.

individual to receive clear revelation. In his theoretical discussions of prophecy in The Wars of the Lord, Gersonides states that prophetic knowledge comes to those who have a high rank in terms of perfection of the intellect, and who are also prepared for revelation by concentration on a given subject.¹⁰ Gersonides' several references to the strength of Jacob's attachment to the angel and Jacob's closeness to him in rank correlate with the first criterion for receiving clear revelation. Gersonides does not explain how Jacob came to perfect his intellect, a process which he understands to take place through conscious acts of study and concentration. It is clear that he considers Jacob to be an accomplished philosopher, since otherwise Jacob would not have been able to receive revelation as he did. This is consonant with Gersonides' overall understanding of Judaism as a system of correct belief in which the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets are all great philosophers, and the Torah is a key source of philosophical knowledge.

Gersonides' description of Jacob's fear of Esau, and of his careful preparations for his meeting with his brother, demonstrate that Jacob's mind and actions are focused on his upcoming encounter. Thus it is clear that he has fulfilled the second of Gersonides' criteria for receiving clear revelation.

Gersonides devotes a significant portion of his commentary to the third factor he sees as leading to Jacob's

¹⁰ Sirat, History of Jewish Philosophy, pp. 291-293.

prophetic dream, that being the pain in his hip. A reader of the biblical text might easily understand Jacob's injury not as a cause of his wrestling match, but as a result of it, and as evidence that the match actually took place. Some commentators specifically make use of this argument.¹¹ Gersonides counters that there are two possible causes for Jacob's injury. The first is that he might have seen the injury happening in his dream and then moved in his sleep in such a way that the socket of his hip was dislocated. The second is that Jacob might have injured himself while bringing his property across the river, then felt the pain from the injury in his sleep and thus dreamed that he was being injured in the part of his body which hurt. Gersonides prefers the second explanation, presumably because it has the added benefit of offering a rationale for the nature of the dream, in addition to Gersonides' explanation of the dream as providential reassurance, as discussed above.

The biblical text explains that the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle on the socket of the hip because that is

¹¹ See, for example, Nachmanides' commentary on Gen. 18:1, in which he argues against Maimonides' statement in his Guide that Jacob did not really wrestle with a man or an angel, but that instead this experience was a prophetic vision. Nachmanides responds that if this is the case, he doesn't know why Jacob limped on his thigh when he awoke! Nachmanides says his view is supported by Jacob's comment in Genesis 32:31 that he had seen פנים אל פנים face to face and his life had been preserved, since, according to Nachmanides, the prophets did not fear that they might die on account of visions. In fact, Jacob had already had much greater visions, such as the one in which he saw God (Gen. 28:13). Therefore the wrestling match must have been a real one. Nachmanides says that Maimonides' words about such events being prophetic visions contradict Scripture, and it is forbidden to listen to them, all the more to believe in them!

where Jacob was injured (Gen. 33:33). Gersonides understands this injunction to refer to the importance of believing in prophecy. In other words, the purpose of this command is to make known the nature of this prophetic incident, and thus to emphasize the existence of prophecy, about which Gersonides says in his tenth practical application that it "is a fundamental principle of the Torah; if one does not believe in prophecy, the Torah in its entirety falls."¹² Thus Gersonides concludes his discussion of this text not with an emphasis on its rational nature, but with an affirmation of the religious faith which he understands to be strengthened by the rigorous pursuit of truth.

Ethical Lessons: How to Deal with Danger

In addition to reading the biblical text as a source of philosophical truth, Gersonides draws ethical lessons from the actions of its characters. He finds six such lessons in Jacob's behavior in this story, and explains them in his section on practical applications. The lessons are that:

1. A person who has an enemy should inform his enemy of the details of his business. Since one would only expect such information from a friend, this will convince the enemy that the individual loves him, and the enemy will have a change of heart.
2. A person should always expect the worst, since this will train him to give careful consideration to potential danger,

¹² Levi ben Gershom, פירוש החזקוני, p. 208.

and thus he will be more likely to avoid or minimize such danger.

3. If evil is inevitably going to befall a person, he should consider which is the lesser evil, and choose this, rather than claiming that it is never right to choose any evil.

4. A person should pray to God for mercy when he is in danger, even if it seems that escape is impossible.

5. A person who wishes to make peace with an enemy should give him the best gift possible, not for the sake of his enemy, but for his own protection.

6. If a person must cross a place that may be dangerous, he should first test it to find out how dangerous it is.

These lessons are similar to some of the lessons the midrashic commentators draw from Jacob's behavior, but there are also significant differences. Gersonides sees Jacob's meeting with Esau as the model for an individual's encounter with an enemy; unlike the midrashic rabbis, he does not draw lessons from this text about how Jews, or the Jewish people, should protect themselves either from non-Jewish rulers or individuals. Commentators with a more traditional rabbinic orientation usually focus on Jacob as the progenitor of God's chosen people, and thus as someone far superior to Esau in moral and religious terms. At the same time, they see Esau as superior in power within the contemporary, temporal world. These underlying meanings add a sense of drama and significance to such commentators' reading of the biblical narrative, imbuing Jacob's apparently conciliatory actions

with salvific meaning. In comparison, Gersonides writes about Jacob's behavior as that of an intelligent individual who demonstrates practical steps anyone might emulate in order to improve their own intellect and to live more wisely.

Gersonides also understands Jacob's actions in a "realistic" way. For example, he sees Jacob's careful arrangement of the animals he gives to Esau as an example of how one should choose and display the best possible gift when one seeks to make peace with an enemy. He does not see in the animals and their arrangement any symbolic meaning, as do the midrashic rabbis and many other Jewish commentators.

Truth is not Contrary to Reason

Just as he understands Jacob's actions in an ordinary, rather than a midrashic sense, Gersonides reads all aspects of the biblical text as consonant with logic and reason. For example, the Bible states regarding Jacob that "the sun rose 17 (on him, or, for him)" (Gen. 33:32) as he left the place where he had wrestled with the angel. Rabbinic tradition understands this sentence to mean that the sun rose especially for Jacob, a reading which appears implausible to Gersonides. Following ibn Ezra, he explains that the sun had already risen elsewhere, and now it rose in the place where Jacob was, since the sun does not rise in every location at the same moment, as "is clear to anyone who has devoted any

attention to the science of astronomy."¹³

In addition to explaining that Jacob's wrestling match with the angel was part of a prophetic dream, rather than a real incident, Gersonides clarifies various aspects of that encounter. For example, he explains that the reason the struggle lasted until the break of dawn was not that the angel was a demonic being who had to leave at daybreak, but that dawn was the time that Jacob was in the habit of awakening. He also explains that Jacob asked the angel his name not for any mystical reason, but in order to learn about and comprehend the angel's essence. The angel's refusal to answer is also clarified; Gersonides states in his ninth practical application that the angel was informing Jacob, and the reader, that it is not possible for a human being to comprehend the essence of the Active Intellect.

As a final example, in the eighth practical application Gersonides draws upon the biblical text to clarify the reasons behind a traditional practice that might appear irrational. The practice is that of changing an individual's name to protect that person from an impending danger, such as illness, as is recommended in the Talmud.¹⁴ Gersonides recalls that God changed Abraham's and Sarah's names when God altered their destinies by promising Abraham that Sarah would bear a child. Through the strength of God's providence Jacob also receives a prophecy and a name change which "ease his

¹³ Ibid., p. 200.

¹⁴ See Babylonian Talmud, Rosh ha-Shanah 16b and Ta'anit 15a.

mind" and prepare him for his encounter with Esau.¹⁵ "It is as if He said that even if it was fitting that Jacob would be defeated, Israel would not be defeated."¹⁶ Jacob's change of name is repeated, and he receives an additional prophecy, when God later speaks to him at Bet El and promises that a nation and an assembly of nations will descend from him (Gen. 35:10-11). Again, it is "as if He said that even if Jacob does not beget again, Israel will beget."¹⁷

In each of these instances, a change of name comes with a prophecy of good fortune. Since Gersonides believes that some events are fixed, while others can be affected by human choice and intellect, it is not clear to what extent these prophecies enabled their recipients to affect the future. However, even if some of this foreknowledge was of predetermined events, Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob presumably were better prepared for their destinies once they had new names that they understood as connected to their future good fortune.

Though some events cannot be changed, those that can be are affected by providence and prophecy, which are cultivated through the development of the intellect and the ability to concentrate on a given subject. Thus, Gersonides' implication is that a change of name does not work in a magical way, controlling a person's fate, but instead may

¹⁵ Levi ben Geršom, פירוש' החמדה, p. 207.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

function as part of an overall effort to perfect one's intellect and concentration, thus inviting providence and prophecy to help cancel "the (evil) decree against a human being."¹⁸

The Zohar

Background and Format

The Zohar is based on kabalistic teachings which developed within Judaism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The kabalists adapted ancient patterns of belief that conceive of the Deity as embodying ten dimensions or sefirot. Each represents a component of the divine personality, which is understood as a complex and dynamic structure. When the sefirot interact harmoniously, they integrate the Godhead so that God's creative goodness overflows into the terrestrial realm. Individuals who conform to the divine will, such as by carrying out commandments, praying with intensity, and directing their souls towards God, effect the appropriate connections in the divine, sefirotic realm. Thus there is a direct correspondence between proper or improper behavior on earth, integration or alienation of the sefirot, and the divine promotion of human spiritual welfare.

Although the kabalistic conception of God and of humanity's relation to God departs strikingly from that of rabbinic Judaism, kabalists saw themselves as bringing to

¹⁸ Ibid.

light ancient learning which the Jews had temporarily forgotten. The structure of the Zohar reflects this notion. Like the midrash, the Zohar interprets selected verses of the Torah, and is arranged according to the weekly portions into which the Torah is traditionally divided. Thus, unlike medieval Jewish philosophical treatises, it is written in a form familiar to Jews, and is an appealing and at times dramatic narrative full of vivid imagery. De Leon increased the authority of his work through the traditional device of ascribing it to an ancient author; he composed the Zohar in Aramaic, and attributed it to a talmudic figure, R. Shim'on bar Yoḥay, placing it in the Galilee during the second century.

Just as the author of the Zohar hid his identity, so secrets, hints, and multiple layers of symbolism are key to the Zohar. Although much of its content is based on the sefirotic system, it avoids the term sefirot and instead speaks of the sefirot through a variety of images for each. It is up to the reader to interpret the symbolism and identify the corresponding sefirot.

The Centrality of Jacob

Jacob plays a unique role within the sefirotic system. In order to understand his significance, it is necessary to briefly review the system itself. The sefirot are usually divided into groups of three. Keter or Crown, Hokhmah or Wisdom, and Binah or Understanding form the upper triad, considered to be the intellectual level within the divine

organism.

The second triad consists of Hesed, Din, and Tif'eret. The fourth sefirah, Hesed or Mercy, symbolizes that aspect of the Divine that is wholly filled with God's abundance and light; from it God's love, blessings, and goodness flow down to the lower regions. Hesed is counterbalanced by the fifth sefirah, Din or Judgment, which keeps the light of Hesed from becoming so overwhelming that human beings could not receive it. Thus, when properly balanced with Hesed, Din is the divine quality of limitation. Din is also the root of evil within the sefirotic structure; the kabalists do not hesitate to assert that evil is a part of God. Din is capable of becoming full-fledged evil when it is aggravated by human sinfulness. The sixth sefirah, Tif'eret or Beauty, forms the trunk of the divine structure, below and between Hesed and Din. It is the central sefirah, the harmonizing principle which balances Hesed and Din, and it is also the male partner of Shekhinah.

Netsah, Hod, and Yesod, or Endurance, Majesty, and Foundation, form the next level of the sefirot. Netsah and Hod serve as the source of prophecy, while Yesod channels the flow of emanation to the tenth and lowest of the sefirot, Shekhinah or Malkhut (Kingdom). This final sefirah, which is understood to be female, possesses no light of its own; it depends on the upper sefirot for divine abundance. Shekhinah and Tif'eret are lovers, with a complex relationship that is consummated through the agency of Yesod. Under the proper

conditions the two are in perfect union, while at other times their relationship is rent asunder.

The sefirot are part of a variety of other symbol systems. In the Torah, Abraham symbolizes Hesed, Isaac Din, and Jacob Tif'eret. The sefirot are also understood to be parts of human anatomy. Hesed and Din are the right and left arms, respectively, Tif'eret is the torso, and Netsah and Hod are the legs or feet. Tif'eret is also symbolized by the sun, by heaven, and by light.

Jacob, as Tif'eret, is thus significant for several reasons. He is the third and decisive patriarch, who balances the polar qualities of Hesed and Din. He is the focus of all the lower sefirot, and it is even said about him "here dwells YHWH."¹⁹ As such, it is especially fitting that he becomes Israel, the progenitor of the Jewish people who are destined to realize God's plan on earth. Tif'eret is also called Voice; the En Sof, or Infinite, manifests through him, and he mediates the ineffable essence of the Divine into voice, though the Shekhinah is required to turn this raw voice into speech and words. Thus Tif'eret, or Jacob, represents the Written Torah, while Shekhinah represents the Oral Torah.²⁰

One of the major themes in the Zohar is that of the struggle between the two sides of existence, the holy and the

¹⁹ Zohar 1:147b.

²⁰ See Matt, Book of Enlightenment, pp. 225-227 for notes on the various symbols connected to Jacob as Tif'eret.

demonic, which are represented by polar opposites of all sorts, such as good and evil, light and dark. These conflicts are understood to occur within each individual, within the world as a whole, and within the Godhead, and the results of each battle affect every other part of the system. Thus, according to the Zohar, many characters in the Torah, from Adam onwards, wrestle with various forms of evil. Jacob is not unique in this respect, but, as the central and unifying sefirah, the lover of Shekhinah, and the progenitor of the people Israel, his struggles take on special significance; his wrestling match at the Yabok and his encounter with Esau must be understood in this light.

Jacob Strives and Prevails

The Zohar sees Jacob's wrestling match at the Yabok as far more important than his encounter with Esau. This is because the mysterious figure with whom Jacob wrestles is understood as the demonic embodied, while Esau is merely an individual with little symbolic importance. Thus Jacob's wrestling match is between Torah and YHWH on the one hand, and a representative of Sitra Ahra, the Other Side, or the demonic, on the other, giving it great cosmic significance.

The Zohar reads Jacob's opponent as a variety of figures from Sitra Ahra. They include the serpent from the garden of Eden; the masculine aspect of the demonic, Samael; and the feminine aspect, Lilith. At times Lilith attacks Jacob openly, but in this incident she is present as an aspect of

the snake upon whom her consort Samael rides into battle.²¹ Jacob had to battle each of these aspects in different ways, demanding great merit on his part:

When Jacob was stirred up against Samael, who was the guardian of Esau, and he seized Jacob, Jacob conquered him in several ways. He conquered the serpent with wisdom, with cunning, and especially with the he-goat. And even though they are all one, he conquered Samael with another strength: he conquered him, as it is written, and a man wrestled with him until the break of day. And he saw that he had not prevailed against him (Gen. 32:25-26). (1:146a)

Thus Jacob defeats Samael in an actual wrestling match, while also fighting the serpent through other means. The he-goat, his most important means of victory over the serpent, can be understood as part of two related systems. First, it corresponds to one of the goats Aaron offers during the Yom Kippur ritual of atonement (Lev. 16:7-10). By casting lots, Aaron designates one goat as a sin-offering to God, while the other is for the demonic being Azazel. Aaron sends that goat off to the wilderness to carry away the sins of Israel. In several passages the Zohar suggests that this offering to Azazel transforms the demonic powers into advocates of Israel.²²

The he-goat also corresponds to one of the two goats Jacob brought to Isaac, when Jacob and Rebecca served him food as part of their plan to deceive him into giving his blessing to his younger son (Gen. 27:9). The first of these

²¹ משנת הזוהר [The Wisdom of the Zohar], trans. and notes by Yeshi'yah Tishbi (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1975), 1:171a, notes.

²² For discussion of this symbolic meaning of the he-goat see משנת הזוהר 2:206-10 and Matt, Book of Enlightenment, p. 232.

goats was to humble Esau, who is described in the Bible as *עֲשָׂו* ("hairy;" 25:25), forming a word-play with the *עֵשָׂו* ("goat;" Zohar 1:146a). The second goat was for the guardian on whom Esau depends. Presumably this guardian is a representative of the demonic powers, making this offering analogous to the offering to Azazel.²³ Thus, on the priestly level and within his own family Jacob makes atonement, subduing Sitra Ahra's evil power over him and over the forces he symbolizes.

Jacob's centrality in the sefirotic system plays an important role in his victory by the Yabok, described again here as being over the serpent and Samael. When he was attacked:

Jacob was strong on all sides, on the side of Isaac, and on the side of Abraham, for they were the strength of Jacob. He (Samael) came on the right and saw Abraham, strong with the strength of day, being on the side of the right, which is Hesed. He came on the left and saw Isaac strong with strict judgment (din). He came against the torso and saw Jacob, strong from both these sides that surrounded him, one on this side, and one on the other, *thus when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched his hip at its socket (Gen. 32:26), a place that is outside the torso . . . (1:146a)*

Jacob's position as the patriarch who balances the contradictions between the two who preceded him enables him to draw on their strengths. Thus he deflects his attacker, who is only able to injure him in a less important part of his body. Jacob also plays the role of unifier in that his wrestling match ends at the moment when night ends and day begins. The being with whom he struggles tells him his name

²³ Zohar 1:145b offers this understanding of the two goats.

will be changed to Israel, and explains why:

Because you have striven with אלהים (God, or, divine beings) (Gen. 32:29), what does this mean, with אלהים? You might think that he was speaking of himself, but rather, [the being] said to [Jacob] "you have striven," to associate yourself and be joined "with אלהים (God)," through the association and the joining of the sun and the moon, and therefore it is not written אלהים (over God) but rather אלהים עם (with God), through association and joining as one. (1:144b)

Such unification with God can be achieved only by great figures, such as Moses and the patriarchs. However, human beings can approach God as closely as possible by cleaving to the lowest sefirah, Shekhinah, who is the opening to the Divine, and then attempting to move up the path of the sefirot by such means as fulfilling divine commandments and praying and meditating with correct intention.

Once Jacob has accomplished the significant victory, that over the demonic powers, Esau's acceptance of and forgiveness towards him have been determined. This is true because:

All the matters of this world depend on the upper world, and what is agreed upon in the upper world beforehand is agreed upon below. And thus there is no rulership below until it is granted by the rulership of the upper world, and thus everything in one (world) depends on the other. (1:172a)²⁴

With Jacob's defeat of Samael and the serpent in the guise of Esau's guardian, Jacob's centrality is confirmed:

²⁴ The sefirotic structure comprises the upper world. The lower world constitutes a mirror image of the sefirotic realm. The processes in the upper and lower worlds are actually aspects of the same process, so that each of the processes in the world below has a counterpart in the world above, thus revealing the divine life that takes place on the level of the sefirot.

Now he was saved from all, and completely perfected, raised to the degree of perfection, and called Israel. He rose to the highest rung, and was totally perfected. He became the central pillar, of whom it is written: *The center bar in the middle of the planks shall run from end to end* (Ex. 26:28). (1:148b)

The citation is from the description of the tabernacle the Israelites build in the desert, another structure which symbolizes the configuration of the sefirot. Having defeated Sitra Ahra and become Israel, it is fitting that Jacob should now be central not only within the sefirotic system, but also within God's dwelling place among the people. The tabernacle is Shekhinah, thus, Jacob's part in its establishment connects the holy couple, Tif'eret and Shekhinah, as well as bringing God into the midst of the people. Jacob, as unifier, is strong enough to defeat the demonic, and to balance right and left, Hesed and Din, joining the upper to the lower sefirot, and God to the people Israel.

Israel's Blessings

The Zohar, like the rabbinic midrashim, finds abundant textual evidence of Jacob's right to the patriarchal blessings. In one instance de Leon understands God as forcing the demonic powers to confirm Jacob's blessings as a result of Jacob's victory in his internal struggle with evil. Discussing the wrestling match by the Yabok, R. Shim'on interjects a verse from Proverbs: "When YHWH is pleased with a man's paths, He will cause even his enemy to make peace with him" (16:7). He interprets the verse as emphasizing the importance of directing oneself towards God by fulfilling the

commandments of the Torah. One's decisions about such behavior set other processes in motion:

Two angels from the upper world are sent to be joined with a person, one on the right and one on the left, and they are witnesses to all the person's acts, and are found there, and they are called good urge (טוב צר) and evil urge (רע צר). Should a person come to be purified and win favor by fulfilling the commandments of the Torah, the good urge that is joined to him is strengthened against the evil urge and rewarded by it, and the evil urge will be changed into his servant. When the person comes to be made unclean, the evil urge is strengthened and gathers courage against the good urge, as we have established. When this person comes to be purified, the person's protector is greatly strengthened, and when the good urge gathers courage then *He (God) will cause his enemy to make peace with him* (Prov. 16:7), for the evil urge is overturned in the face of the good urge. (1:144b)

Thus, at every moment each person participates in a battle between good and evil. When a person lives according to the Torah, that person gains two allies in this battle: the good urge, which is strengthened against the evil urge, and God, who will cause that person's enemy, the evil urge, to make peace with the person and with the good urge. This process has even greater implications:

For the sake of Jacob, who trusted in the Holy One, and all of whose paths were for God's sake, therefore *He (God) will cause his enemy to make peace with him* (Prov. 16:7). (1:144b)

That enemy is Esau's guardian, Samael, and God causes him to consent to the blessings, thereby causing Esau to do so as well. Thus Jacob's faith and proper behavior set in motion a process by which his angels and God cause the demonic powers to cede the patriarchal blessings to Jacob. This is consonant with the Zohar's overall understanding of the impact of human action. Just as the lower world is

affected by the upper world, so actions in the human realm, particularly studying Torah and carrying out divine commandments, affect the inner dynamics of the Deity, which in turn affect the human realm.²⁵

Above we saw an example of Jacob battling Sitra Ahra, whose defeat "above" leads to Esau's defeat "below." Here we see the struggle from another point of view: because of Jacob's correct beliefs and actions "below," God "above" causes Esau to make peace with Jacob. Because Jacob is both an individual patriarch and a sefirah, he, even more than ordinary individuals, plays a part in the dynamics of both the upper and the lower worlds.

It is clear that the Zohar understands Jacob as a symbolic character whose significance goes far beyond his status as an individual. His many roles in the cosmic drama, such as that of Tif'eret, unifier, and Torah, often appear to be as, or even more, important than his role as the personification of the people Israel. This is especially true in comparison to the midrashim, in which Jacob serves mainly as the typological representative of the people Israel, with each of his actions signifying a part of their

²⁵ The Zohar understands the human soul as having three aspects, each of which is related to a particular sefirah. The lowest level, nefesh, is present in every individual. The two more elevated levels, ruah and neshamah, are present only in those who have become spiritually awakened through prayer, Torah study, and observance of the commandments. Thus, each human being represents a more or less realized microcosm of the sefirot. Since the fall of Adam there has been disharmony among the sefirot, and the task of each individual is to act in pure and holy ways, thus developing one's own soul and helping to restore the balance among the sefirot through the process of cosmic repair (tikun).

future history. The Zohar sees a distinction between Jacob and the people, as well as a connection, as is evident in Jacob's decision about how to use his blessings:

With how many blessings was Jacob blessed! One by his father, through trickery, which extended all these blessings.²⁶ And one by the Shekhinah when the Holy One blessed him when he came from Laban, as is written, and God blessed Jacob.²⁷ And one with which the angel, the deputy of Esau, blessed him. And one, another blessing with which his father blessed him when he went to Padan Aram, as it is written, and may El Shaddai bless you (Gen. 28:3). At this time, when Jacob saw himself with all these blessings, he said, "Which of these blessings shall I use now?" He said, "I will use the weakest of them now." And which is that? It is the last one, with which his father blessed him. And even though it is strong, he said, "It is not as strong as the preceding blessings in rulership of this world." Jacob said, "Now I will take this (blessing) and use it, and I will save all these others for the time when I and my descendants after me need them. When? At the time that all the nations gather to obliterate my descendants from the world." (1:146a)

Jacob expresses concern about his descendants, is aware of the future danger they face, and plans his use of his blessings accordingly. However, in the Zohar's reading the blessings are his, to save for the people as he chooses. The Zohar continues to discuss how the four blessings will be

²⁶ The description of the first blessing as "extending" (Aramaic: נמת) all the others is probably a reference to the Zohar's commentary on that first blessing. R. Yosi discusses the words from that blessing, "May God give you" (Gen. 27:28), which are part of Isaac's words to Jacob which he believed he was offering to Esau. R. Yosi says that Isaac wanted to give this blessing to Esau, but that, as these words indicate, God intervened and gave it to Jacob, since it was part of Jacob's portion. Thus this first blessing is seen as being directed to Jacob by God, making possible all the blessings that follow. 1:143a-143b.

²⁷ There is no wording in the Torah exactly like this. Presumably this is a reference to God's blessing of Jacob at Bet El when God changed his name to Israel. The citation there is: "God appeared to Jacob again on his arrival from Padan Aram, and He blessed him" (Gen. 35:9).

used: Jacob employs the weakest blessing for his encounter with Esau, for which it is sufficient. When Jacob's descendants need the others:

These blessings will be stirred up from every side, and the world will be established on the proper foundation, and from that day onward this kingdom (malkhut) will arise over all the remaining kingdoms, as is established, as it is written, *It shall crush and wipe out all these kingdoms, but it shall stand forever* (Dan. 2:44). And this is the same stone that is the stone that was cut out of the mountain without hands (Dan. 2:45), as you say, *From there, the Shepherd, the stone of Israel* (Gen. 49:24). What is this stone? It is the Community of Israel, as is said, *And this stone, which I have set up for a pillar* (Gen. 28:22).

When Jacob's remaining blessings become operative, the eternal kingdom of God will be established. De Leon uses intertexts from Daniel's analysis of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel reveals that the dream is an allegory of world history, in which a statue symbolizes four kingdoms that will arise, and a stone symbolizes God's eternal kingdom that will be established after them, at which time the other kingdoms will be destroyed.

De Leon then turns elsewhere to discover the identity of this stone, and finds an explanation in Jacob's last testament to his sons. There Jacob warns Joseph that he will be attacked, yet, he will be strengthened by God, described as "the Mighty One of Jacob, from there, the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel" (Gen. 49:24). The relevance of this intertext is reinforced by its connection to the blessings with which this discourse began. Jacob's words to Joseph continue, assuring him that he has many blessings, including blessings from God, as well as blessings from Jacob that

surpass those of Jacob's ancestors (49:25-26). In context, Jacob's reference to $\square N$ (stone) is an allusion to God, but de Leon finds evidence in another text that the stone can be read as a reference to the people Israel. His intertext is from the closing moments of Jacob's first encounter with God at Bet El: "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be the house of God" (28:22). Jacob is the progenitor of the people Israel; this stone is an allusion to the people he is to "set up," who will provide a "house" for God.

Thus, according to de Leon's interpretation, God's kingdom will definitely be established, and this will be accomplished only with the participation of the people Israel. This intertextual reading, which provides evidence of future redemption and encourages the people to believe in their own significance, is similar to many midrashim. However, the Zohar's interpretation can be read on an additional level. As discussed above, in the sefirotic system Jacob is Tif'eret, the mate of Shekhinah or Malkhut. Creating harmony between this divine couple is one of the most important means of ending alienation among the sefirot. The couple's union is consummated through Yesod, symbolized in the Torah by Joseph, and also understood as the cosmic pillar within the sefirotic structure.²⁸ Thus, Jacob's final testament to Joseph can be read as a statement that the blessings Jacob has saved and passed on to Joseph will help

²⁸ For this description of Yesod see Matt, Book of Enlightenment, p. 36.

to arouse Yesod (Joseph), enabling him to channel the power of the upper sefirot from Tif'eret to Shekhinah or Malkhut. This reading is strengthened by the intertext about Jacob having set up a pillar, since this is an additional reference to Yesod. Thus, the Zohar demonstrates that Jacob has established the means so that, in the future, the abundance of the higher sefirot will flow from him as Tif'eret to his partner Malkhut, a process that will help to establish God's eternal malkhut (kingdom) within the human realm.

Jacob's blessings will initiate important processes within the sefirotic sphere, but the channel they establish above will not function properly without the correct behavior of the people Israel below. The union of the divine couple is effected from the human realm by righteous action, and destroyed by sin. This brings another dimension to the Zohar's understanding that God and Israel are necessary to bring about God's kingdom.

The connection between the people's actions and the processes within the Godhead is emphasized by de Leon's reference to the stone not as the people Israel, but as the "Community of Israel" (Keneset Yisra'el), which is a name both for the Israelites and for the Shekhinah. The people Israel are understood in rabbinic Judaism, especially in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, to be God's female lover. The kabalistic system extends this notion, seeing Israel as possessing God's feminine half, the Shekhinah, who dwells among the people even when they are in exile. Here that connection is further

emphasized in Jacob's reference to the "house of God," which can also be understood as Shekhinah, and which is also the "stone" (Gen. 28:22), and thus the people or Community of Israel. Thus, when the people Israel seek union with God, they join with God in bringing about God's kingdom on earth. In doing so, they mirror the union above between Tif'eret and Malkhut which is also necessary to effect God's sovereignty on earth. Again, through this discourse that began with a look at Jacob's many blessings, the people are reminded both of Jacob's role in the cosmic system, and of their own significance in bringing God's blessings to fruition.

Overcoming Exile

As in the midrash, exile is a significant theme in the Zohar's reading of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. For the midrashic rabbis this is primarily because Esau represents the nations. In the Zohar, however, the important issues are that Jacob's struggle at the Yabok is with the demonic, which, like exile, is part of Sitra Ahra, and also that this struggle occurs at night and ends at dawn. The Zohar understands the people Israel to be physically exiled from sovereignty in the land, and spiritually exiled from unity with God. These forms of exile are equated with night, the time that Sitra Ahra is strongest, while redemption is equated with the dawning of a light that goes beyond ordinary sunlight.

The potential both for exile and for redemption was built into the world at creation. One type of diminished

light is the result of the hiding of the primordial sun. As

R. Hiya explains:

In the future the Holy One will cause to shine on Israel the sun which the Holy One hid from the day the world was created, because of the wicked of the world. (1:203b)

Though redemption has not yet arrived, on occasion God causes this sun to shine on those who have great merit:

When Jacob came and was joined with Esau's deputy prince, who struck him in his thigh, and he was limping, as it is written, *the sun rose on him* (Gen. 32:32). What sun? The sun that was hidden. (1:203b)

In addition to the hidden, primordial sun, R. Hiya explains how a particularly dangerous type of darkness was created:

When the Holy One created the world, He did on each and every day the work fit for that day, as is established. As it is said, on the fourth day He created the lights, and then the moon without light was created, for its light diminished itself. This is because the word לְאוֹר (lights; Gen. 1:14) does not have the letter vav, and this provides space for the rule of all the evil spirits, demons, and hurricanes, and all the unclean spirits.²⁹ (1:169a-169b)

It is dangerous for a person to be out on a night when the moon is "diminished,"³⁰ and it is particularly hazardous for a person to be out alone at that time. Thus Jacob is in great jeopardy during his night by the Yabok River:

²⁹ When written with no vav, as לְאוֹר rather than וְלְאוֹר , the word is similar to the word לְאוֹר , which means curses or evils. Thus God's words on the fourth day of creation, "let there be light," can be read as "let there be curses, or evils" (Gen. 1:14).

³⁰ This can be understood as that night during the moon's monthly cycle when it is completely hidden, or as the fourth day of the week, since God created the diminished moon on the fourth day.

For that night was the night on which the moon was created, and Jacob was left alone, and he had no one with him, and we have been taught a person should not go out alone at night, and how much the more so on the night on which the lights were created, because then the moon is diminished. (1:146a)

Jacob's wrestling match occurs at the darkest time, and ends with the rising of the hidden sun. His experience encapsulates Israel's present and future, which is of darkness that will be followed by light, exile that will be followed by redemption. De Leon sees this future history in the description of Jacob's lengthy battle:

Until the break of dawn (Gen. 32:25), when his (the being with whom Jacob wrestled) rule passed away and disappeared, and thus it will be in the time to come, for the exile of the present time³¹ is like the night, and that dust³² rules over Israel, and they lie down before the dust, until the light will rise and day will break, and then Israel will rule and will be given the kingdom, for they are the holy ones of the Most High, as it is written: The kingship and rulership and grandeur of all the kingdoms under heaven will be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High. Their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them (Dan. 7:27). (1:170a)

The intertext is from Daniel's account of a vision of the near future, in which the nations will be judged and destroyed, and a new and holy kingdom will arise. De Leon connects these expectations with the arrival of light, and R. Yehudah further explicates the time to come in terms of

³¹ The Aramaic word used here, *השחית*, is explained in *מסנת הזוהר* 1:180a, notes, as referring to the time when Sitra Ahra exists and has great strength.

³² The use of the word *אבק* ("dust") is a play on *וַיִּאָבֵק*, "and he wrestled" (Gen. 32:25). In the preceding passage, the Zohar interprets *וַיִּאָבֵק* as referring to the dust raised by the wrestling match, and offers various interpretations of the nature and destination of that dust. 1:170a.

light:

And [the being] said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking," and he [Jacob] said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Gen. 32:27) R. Yehudah opened with the verse, Who is she that shines through like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun, awesome as bannered hosts? (Song 6:10) . . . Who is she that shines? These are Israel, at the time when the Holy One will raise them and bring them out of exile. Then He will open for them a minute opening of light, and afterwards another opening a little larger than it, until the Holy One will open for them the upper gates which face on the four directions of the world. (1:170a)

The end of exile, R. Yehudah explains, will come not in one moment, but gradually, like the dawn, changing night into day. R. Yehudah equates this dawning light not only with the end of exile, but, through his intertext, with the people Israel itself. Thus, he creates a double image: God gradually opens the gates between the upper and lower worlds, allowing more of the light from above to flow downwards. At the same time, the people themselves "shine," so their light flows upwards as God slowly expands the opening. Again, the Zohar emphasizes the people's role in bringing redemption, and the mutuality of the processes above and below.

This image reflects the Zohar's understanding that God, too, is in exile. Because of human sin, the channels between the upper and lower worlds are disturbed, Malkhut or Shekhinah is separated from the other sefirot, and God's unity with creation is damaged. Just as the people yearn for dawn, so God yearns for the people to "shine," causing harmony to be restored within the Godhead. Just as the people long for the end of their physical and political exile, so they long for the end of their spiritual exile,

which will occur when the light flows freely within and between the upper and lower worlds. Though it appears dark now, the people can never be sure whether dawn has already begun, so they must radiate their light towards God, remaining ever alert for the first signs of redemption. The Zohar communicates this message explicitly in another discussion of the light that ends Jacob's wrestling match:

At the time that the light arises . . . the Community of Israel converses with the Holy One . . . [and] each time that He is found with her and she arouses His good will towards her first, and draws Him towards her with great love and desire, she will be filled from the side of the right and many multitudes from the side of the right are found in all worlds. But if the Holy One arouses love and good will first, and she only rouses herself afterwards, and not at the time that He was roused, then all is found on the side of the female, and the left is roused, and many multitudes arise and are roused on the side of the left in all worlds. . . . And in all things a person should join his will with the upper world and the Holy One, so his will is found (first) in the world. (2:45a-45b)

As discussed above, the Community of Israel is also the Shekhinah, so when the people act to arouse God, they cause the Shekhinah to seek union with the remaining sefirot, promoting love and harmony above. The left or female side is the source of strict judgment and limitation. These attributes are necessary, but when they are not balanced by the right or male side, which symbolizes free-flowing love and light, they call forth Sitra Ahra. The message here goes even further than R. Yehudah's description of God slowly expanding the gates: not only must the people watch for the slightest sign of dawn, but, to bring love and redemption, to escape strict judgment, to end exile of every sort, the

people must seek God, rather than waiting for God to approach them.

Supporting the Torah

Jacob symbolizes the Written Torah; thus, his wrestling match at the Yabok and his encounter with Esau have an impact on the Torah itself. The Zohar discusses this issue in its discourse on the verse: "the Israelites to this day do not eat the thigh muscle on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle" (Gen. 33:33). In his philosophically oriented Torah commentary Gersonides writes that this commandment is intended to make known the nature of prophecy. Once people understand Jacob's prophetic dream, they will see that prophecy does not conflict with reason, giving them faith in the existence of prophecy. This, Gersonides believes, is crucial, since without "prophecy the Torah in its entirety falls."³³ Interestingly, de Leon addresses the same two issues, prophecy and the Torah, in his discourse on the same verse, presenting imagery and conclusions quite different from those of Gersonides.

In the sefirotic "body," Jacob, who is Tif'eret and Torah, forms the torso, supported by Netsah and Hod, which serve as the feet or legs, and are also the sources of prophecy. Thus, when Jacob's opponent injures Jacob's thigh, prophecy itself is damaged. Though R. Shim'on does not refer openly to the sefirot, this symbolism underlies his

³³ Levi ben Gershom, פירוש' התורה, p. 208.

commentary on Jacob's injury and the resulting prohibition:

There has not arisen again in Israel a prophet like Moses (Deut. 34:10) . . . Moses looked through a mirror that shines, while the rest of the prophets looked through a mirror that does not shine. . . . And all those prophets were not able to confirm that which the Holy One will do to Esau in the future, with the exception of the prophet Obadiah, since he was a proselyte who came from the side of Esau,³⁴ so his strength was not weakened. (1:170b-171a)

According to the Zohar, Moses, unlike any other prophet or patriarch, knows YHWH in the form of Tif'eret, is united with the Shekhinah, and is invested with all ten sefirot. Tif'eret is the "mirror that shines" with the full splendor of the sefirot; Tif'eret is visible to Moses, while the other prophets are dependent for their prophecy on the lower sefirot, which were injured in Jacob's wrestling match.³⁵ R. Shim'on's image of a prophet is based on the intimacy that individual attains with the sefirotic system. In contrast, Gersonides understands prophets to be philosophers who perfect their intelligence and concentrate on the issue in question, enabling them to receive information from the Active Intellect.

Besides elucidating the nature of prophets and prophecy, R. Shim'on validates Obadiah's oracle as the correct understanding of Esau's destiny. In that oracle Obadiah points to Esau's descendants, the nation of Edom, as the

³⁴ The Other Side, Sitra Ahra, which is the source of the strength of the gentile nations. See מנחת חינוך 1:171a, notes.

³⁵ R. Shim'on's statement about Moses' ability to see what the other prophets could not see is based on a similar talmudic statement; see Yevamot 49b. For the Zohar's understanding of Moses as prophet, see the notes on this topic in Matt, Book of Enlightenment, pp. 238-244.

paradigm of the gentile nations, which will be subordinated to God's sovereignty on the day of judgment, while Israel will return in triumph to Mount Zion. Obadiah refers to Israel as Jacob, and Edom as Esau, associating the fate of these nations with the struggles between their progenitors. He condemns Edom for taking advantage of their "brother" Israel when Israel was attacked (1:10, 12). By referring to Obadiah's prophecy, R. Shim'on recalls that even though Esau's guardian injures Jacob, thereby damaging Israelite prophecy, Esau will eventually be humbled as a punishment for his evil treatment of his brother.

As discussed above, when Netsah and Hod are injured, the legs or feet upon which Tif'eret rests are impaired; in addition to affecting prophecy, this weakens the supports on which the Torah (Jacob) rests. This weakening may also begin in the lower world, through the actions of Jews who could support students of Torah, yet fail to do so:

If a person studies Torah and has no one to support him, and no one is found who will fill his purse in order to strengthen him, because of this the Torah is forgotten in each and every generation, and the strength of the Torah is weakened each and every day, for those who study Torah have nothing to support them, and the evil kingdom³⁶ is strengthened each and every day. Come and see how vast is the result of this sin, and because there is no one to support the Torah properly, the supports are weakened, resulting in the strengthening of the one who has no legs or feet on which to stand. (1:171a)

Whether the process begins in the sefirotic realm or the human realm, when the supports of the Torah are weakened,

³⁶ Sitra Ahra, and the gentile nations, whose strength comes from Sitra Ahra. See משנת הוהר 1:171a, notes.

Sitra Ahra is strengthened: "support" is transferred from the Torah to the serpent, the "one" who lost its own legs as a punishment for encouraging Adam and Eve to sin (Gen. 3:14).

In its reading of the demonic attack against Jacob as an attempt to defeat the Torah, the Zohar discovers an additional source of strength for the people Israel. Samael finds that, besides Jacob's or Tif'eret's support on both sides from Abraham and Isaac, Hesed and Din:

[Samael] saw the power of the Torah, that was strengthened throughout, then [the being] saw that he could not prevail against [Jacob] (Gen. 32:26). What did he do? Immediately he used his shrewdness about the matter, and touched the hollow of his thigh (32:26). He said, "When the supports of the Torah are broken, immediately the Torah loses its strength, and then the words of the father (Isaac) will be fulfilled, The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau, (27:22) and when you (Esau) grow restive, you shall break [Jacob's] yoke from your neck." (27:40) (1:171a)

Samael strikes Jacob's thigh, attempting to impair the supports of the Torah in both realms: Netsah and Hod, the sources of prophecy; and Jews who make it financially possible for students to study Torah. Knowing that the "voice of Jacob" is the voice of the Torah itself and of those who study it, he hopes to strengthen the "hands of Esau," the gentile nations who rule over the people Israel. If he accomplishes this, these nations will be able to break the "yoke" of Jacob's blessings, which until now have ensured Israel's eventual redemption.

On one level, the outcome of this struggle is assured. Jacob, or Israel, does prevail, and the Zohar, like the midrash, discovers ample evidence that the blessings remain

his and exile will end. At the same time, the fate of the people Israel remains in question, depending on the people's efforts to seek greater union with God, through study, prayer, and living by the Torah. Jacob's power within the sefirotic system is awesome: he is Torah, YHWH, unifier, the center bar of the tabernacle, the Voice of the En Sof. Yet, every member of the people Israel holds great power as well; each human action affects the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Each person is a paradigm of the upper world, and a part of the potential unity for which God yearns. Thus, each individual must choose whether and how to arouse the Deity, shaping reality for that individual, for the people Israel, and for God.

CHAPTER IV

MODERN JEWISH RESPONSES

There is a range of Jewish responses to the Bible today, including scholarship, translations, literary criticism, literature, liturgy, theology, and Humashim with commentary of various kinds. This chapter focuses on responses that seem based in distinctly modern sensibilities, and in a personal rather than a scholarly understanding of the text.

Most modern responses to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation concentrate on Jacob's wrestling match at the Yabok, and not on his meeting with Esau. One reason for this choice is the ambiguous and mythological tone of Jacob's struggle with the mysterious being, which allows for a particularly rich and varied range of readings. In comparison, the story of the actual reconciliation between the brothers may appear straightforward, even prosaic, and thus less open to interpretation. In addition, the wrestling match can easily be understood as an internal struggle, or as a struggle with God, two readings that provide opportunities for reflection on psychological and religious issues in the lives of individuals; these are topics of particular concern to many contemporary Western writers.

Many readers are aware of the typological understanding

of Jacob and Esau within Jewish tradition, with Jacob representing the people Israel, and Esau representing gentiles, particularly Christianity. Many Jews today are uninterested in, or ambivalent or even uncomfortable about Jewish-Christian relations, leading to a lack of writing about Esau as a symbol of Christianity. In addition, since 1948 most Jews' greatest concerns about relations with non-Jews have centered on the conflicts in the Middle East. Jews and Muslims understand Ishmael as the typological representative of Islam, and often of Arabs in general. Thus the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael has come to dominate the genre of homilies that address Jewish relationships with non-Jews through the biblical lens of relations with the "other brother."

Though Jacob's struggle at the Yabok is the main focus for modern responses to this narrative, there are also responses to Jacob and Esau's actual meeting, as well as those which address or even combine both events.

This chapter discusses four perspectives among modern Jewish responses to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation.¹ These four approaches read the story as, respectively: 1) inner struggle; 2) struggle with God; 3) struggle with another individual; and 4) a metaphor for relations between Jews and non-Jews. For each type of response, one example is discussed in some depth, and one or

¹ Though the emphasis in this chapter is on Jewish responses, material is included by two non-Jewish writers, Emily Dickinson and Sharon Olds, each of whom highlights particular aspects of a modern and personal response to the biblical text.

more additional examples are touched on to highlight differences in approach within each of the four categories.

"And Jacob was left alone:" Inner Struggle²

The concept of inner struggle is a particularly modern one, both in its orientation towards the psychological, and in its focus on the individual rather than the group.

Jacob's wrestling match at the Yabok is the portion of this biblical text most often read in terms of internal struggle, though some writers also discern this theme in Jacob's meeting with Esau. Responses that focus on inner struggle provide a new understanding of this text. In the biblical narrative itself, Jacob faces moral challenges, and develops in response to them. It is clear that he changes and grows through internal and external struggle, but the Bible makes few explicit references to his inner state. The midrashic and philosophic readings discussed in this paper also say little about Jacob's internal struggles.

The Zohar does address a related issue through its discussion of Jacob's *mal'achim* and *mal'achim*, the two angels who are joined to each individual and strengthened or weakened depending on that person's behavior. Still, these angels, and the person whose choices affect them, are not confined to that person's life, but are part of a cosmic struggle between good and evil that encompasses all being, including God. Thus, the Zohar's image acknowledges Jacob's potentially conflicting motivations, but is less internally focused and

² Quote is from Gen. 32:25.

less atomized than the modern concept of an individual within whom various forces strive for dominance and reconciliation.

"Jacob at the River"

Joel Rosenberg's "Jacob at the River"³ is a midrashic and kabalistic retelling of Jacob's two encounters--with the mysterious being at the Yabok River, and with Esau. Rosenberg combines these events into one, indicating that he sees them as deeply connected. Like traditional Jewish commentaries, his short story makes use of Jewish sources and concepts from outside the Jacob-Esau narrative itself, and it relates the text to contemporary issues. Here those issues are particularly modern ones about identity and meaning.

The story opens with Jacob alone at the river, facing his version of the dilemma Rosenberg addresses: what are we, as individuals, besides our property, achievements, and family? Without these possessions, Jacob discovers that he is "self-stripped," and cannot even find his reflection in the water. The opening of the story also introduces the first of many Jewish concepts it includes, referring to the "Sabbath of years" that Jacob worked for Laban, thus making it clear that these events take place within a Jewish frame of reference. In addition, the beginning of the story foreshadows Jacob's upcoming encounter with Esau, by describing the river's name as "twinlike," equating the Yabok

³ Gates to the New City: A Treasury of Modern Jewish Tales, ed. Howard Schwartz (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), pp. 155-156. Also see appendix to this thesis.

both with Jacob and with his twin brother.

Standing in the river, Jacob launches into a monologue, finally battling with the water itself. He acknowledges aloud the part of himself that steals, and tricks others, and he cries out in distress about his lack of a home and a clear identity. He compares himself to the "Tohu" and "Bohu" that existed at the beginning of biblical creation (Gen. 1:2), and the "Empty Space of God" found in the kabalistic creation narrative. While again placing the story within a Jewish framework, these metaphors point out that Jacob's emptiness may be painful, but it also provides the opportunity for creation, hopefully of a more real self. Jacob continues to emphasize his lack of self-definition by identifying with the ever-changing river, calling himself "Yabbok." His history as a supplanter is also underlined by the description of him as "Yaakob."

In Rosenberg's story, Jacob demands a blessing from the river, rather than from the mysterious being. Since Rosenberg's Jacob identifies with the river, in a sense he is asking himself for a blessing. The description of the Yabok as Jacob's opponent also implies a comparison between the river and the אֱלֹהִים with whom Jacob struggled. This comparison, and Jacob's demand for a blessing from a natural force, blur the boundaries between self, God, divine beings, and nature, presenting a picture that is quite different from rabbinic or philosophic Judaism, and that echoes aspects of Jewish mysticism. Jacob's struggle itself, as described by

Rosenberg, is similar to the Jewish mystical practice of hitbodedut, the discipline of being alone, discovering one's unique soul, and communicating with God from this posture; like Jacob in the river, mystics are known to cry out and scream as part of their expression during hitbodedut.⁴

In addition to a blessing, this Jacob also demands a name from the river, while in the biblical narrative the change of name is initiated by his opponent. Rosenberg's modern Jacob needs a blessing, but, unlike his ancestor, he also explicitly seeks a new self that goes beyond his reactions to the people and forces around him.

In the middle of Jacob's wrestling match, Rosenberg introduces an element quite removed from the biblical story, portraying nearby villagers talking about the struggle as they perceive it. They wonder if Jacob is a "berserk soothsayer," and worry that he'll "wake up the animals," introducing a note of humor into this tense and dramatic tale. The villagers decide to call Esau for help, describing him as "a match for this one." Seeing Esau through his neighbors' eyes, we find that he is not only the other brother of the biblical story, who did not receive the patriarchal blessing; or the Roman empire of the midrash; or the demonic figure of the Zohar. He is also a strong and sensible person, who knows what to do in a difficult situation.

Jacob continues to wrestle with the river, and

⁴ As described by David Wolpe in "Loneliness," *Sh'ma*, September 17, 1993, p. 2.

Rosenberg describes him as trying to "shape the flowing stream into a text and into commentaries, but in vain." Jacob wants to struggle with Torah itself, as Rosenberg's colleague in the Jewish Renewal Movement, Arthur Waskow, describes (see discussion of Godwrestling below), but Jacob cannot yet do so, and in fact he injures himself, stumbling on a rock. Unlike Jacob's injury in the biblical story, Rosenberg portrays this wound as both self-inflicted and naturalistic, offering the psychological interpretation that people are hurt by themselves and their experiences throughout their lives. This understanding is also reminiscent of Gersonides' explanation of Jacob's injury as an ordinary rather than supernatural event.

Esau then arrives through a transformation of the river into a man who smells "of hides," like Esau, but also looks to Jacob like "his [own] beard and face." Jacob experiences his brother as "a long yearned counterweight," implying that Esau expresses aspects of Jacob's self, such as stability and earthiness, that Jacob had put aside and projected onto his brother. Earlier Jacob identified with the river, and now that same river has become his brother; thus the process of reconciliation has begun. It continues as the twins wrestle together and reach "what seems an everlasting impasse."

At this point the story shifts, and for the first time it follows the biblical narrative closely, even reproducing its ambiguous use of pronouns for the two opponents. However, in the Bible Jacob struggles with a mysterious

being, while in Rosenberg's story he wrestles with an opponent who is at least partially his brother, though Esau's name is never explicitly mentioned. This reading recalls the midrashic and kabalistic understanding of Jacob's opponent as Esau's representative. It also draws on a connection in the biblical story itself, in which Jacob says he has "seen אלהים (divine beings, or, God) face to face" in his wrestling match (Gen. 32:31), and that seeing his brother is also "like seeing the face of אלהים" (33:10).

As in the Bible, the wrestling match ends with Jacob receiving the name Israel, and a blessing, in this case from a figure who symbolizes his brother and also the parts of himself he had projected onto his brother. Jacob, now Israel, thus integrates into himself his "Esau-ness," and his new wholeness, along with the self-exposure and the emotional and physical catharsis it requires, lead him to a more stable sense of self.

As the story closes, Jacob is "no longer prisoner of a double." Instead, he is "landed, asymmetrical and aged," and is finally headed for home. Rosenberg has brought together the two events of the biblical narrative, offering the lesson he sees in both: to become one's self, each individual must face the aspects of self that have been pushed aside, even hated. By confronting these internal conflicts each person can win a blessing, and a name, that go beyond the possessions and the expectations of others that may otherwise define our identities. Rosenberg's psychological, mystical,

and at times almost pantheistic approach responds to connections present in the biblical text and its traditional interpretations, and depicts self and meaning in a manner that might appeal to many who seek common ground among Judaism, psychology, mysticism, and modernity.

"And Jacob Fought the Angel"⁵

Elie Wiesel's portrait of Jacob also understands him as struggling with aspects of himself through his match with the mysterious being. Wiesel, like the midrash, refers to that being as an angel. Unlike most Jewish commentators, however, Wiesel sees Jacob's life up until this moment in a strikingly negative light, describing him as an "introverted, frustrated man, . . . leading a marginal life. A weakling, manipulated by others."⁶ Jacob's inadequacy is especially evident because "Isaac was an outstanding personality. . . . he discouraged confidences and yet from beyond his silence one sensed the mystery of his youth."⁷ From Wiesel's point of view, God had singled out Isaac and demanded him in sacrifice, making him the first Jewish Holocaust survivor. His past is so significant, his grief and memories so intimidating, that Jacob grows up jealous of his father. Therefore, he seeks suffering and struggle in order to "justify his place in history. Only thus could he surpass

⁵ Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 103-135.

⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

himself and become Israel."⁸

Jacob's strategy proves successful, for he confronts and challenges God at Peniel, and by defeating the angel, he defeats the "sentimental and disoriented" side of himself, becoming "tough and resolute."⁹ Through his struggle, Jacob also comes to understand that God is in everything, even in suffering and evil. However, Jacob carries this insight too far: because he is now able to recognize God in Esau, he humbles himself before his brother, and one must not "humble oneself before an enemy."¹⁰

Wiesel concludes that, though Jacob becomes Israel, he continues to carry his old self inside him, never entirely erasing his past. On the one hand, Wiesel implies, Jacob's challenge of and resulting closeness to God became part of the beautiful heritage of the community of Israel. At the same time, however, Jacob remained a "shaken, shattered man,"¹¹ and this too was to shape his descendants and become part of their history of suffering.

Wiesel approaches this biblical text and the midrashim about it with questions shaped by his experience as a Holocaust survivor, and as one who writes in response to that experience. Like Rosenberg, he is concerned with Jacob's personality, his fears and weaknesses, but rather than

⁸ Ibid., p. 130.

⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

¹¹ Ibid.

focusing on Jacob as a model of individual growth, he sees Jacob's divided self reflected in his descendants' history. Like the rabbis, Wiesel understands the patriarchs as prefiguring the history of the people Israel. Through this lens he weighs some of the contradictory aspects of Jewish experience, such as the "serenity" and "peace of mind" one may learn as a "survivor," like Isaac, and the "heartbreak" and "melancholy" one may find by being able to see God in every being, everywhere, as Jacob could.¹² Wiesel's portrait of Jacob brings together the traditional understanding of him as progenitor of the people Israel, with post-Holocaust concerns about the value and the danger of Jewish suffering, and Jewish understanding of the suffering of others.

"I have seen אלהים face to face:" Struggle with God¹³

In the biblical text, Jacob describes his wrestling match as one in which he sees אלהים face to face; soon afterwards he tells Esau that seeing his face is like seeing the face of אלהים (Gen. 32:31; 33:10). Whether אלהים is understood as a reference to God or to divine beings, these are remarkable images: Jacob struggles, physically, with God or a divine being, and he sees God or a divine being in the face of the brother he has disdained and feared for many years. Jacob's words invite readings of this text as a portrait of struggle with God.

¹² Ibid., pp. 112-113, pp. 132-135.

¹³ Quote is from Gen. 32:31.

The midrash and the Zohar understand Esau as a negative figure, and the mysterious being as his angel or guardian; thus, for the rabbis and for de Leon, the being cannot represent God. For Gersonides, the being is merely a figure in Jacob's prophetic dream. However, the contemporary lack of concern with Esau as a symbol of evil, and interest in experiencing God as immanent as well as transcendent, and in envisioning a modern yet personal God, lead many writers to envision Jacob as struggling with God.

Godwrestling¹⁴

In his book Godwrestling Arthur Waskow understands Jacob's struggle as being with God, Esau, and himself. Waskow bases his concept of "Godwrestling" on the story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation; by Godwrestling he means intimate involvement with God and Jewish tradition, and in this book he applies this concept to various Jewish texts, beliefs, holidays, and contemporary social and political issues.

Waskow began to understand Godwrestling by studying the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, and realizing that he could apply this text to his relationship with his own brother. He recognized that, rather than feeling trapped by the differences and anger between himself and his brother, he could accept these realities, and at the same time seek to bring new understanding, love, and freedom into their relationship. He also discovered that, in order to change

¹⁴ (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).

his relationship with his brother, he would have to "wrestle" with himself and with God, facing the disturbing and frightening aspects of each.

Waskow's experience of connecting this biblical story to his own life enabled him to "wrestle" with God, Torah, and Jewish tradition, "fighting it and making love to it at the same time,"¹⁵ rather than simply accepting, rejecting, or ignoring Judaism.

Besides seeing his own relationship through the lens of the Torah narrative, Waskow learns from Jacob and Esau about what it means to struggle more directly with God. Waskow understands Jacob's match by the Yabok River as taking place with God, the One who integrates "Things-As-They-Must-Be" and "Things-As-They-Ought-To-Be,"¹⁶ meaning the paradoxes and contradictions that are built into life. For Jacob, these are most evident in his having to take his older brother's blessing in order to fulfill his own spiritual destiny. Esau must also wrestle "on his own side of the river . . . against the God whom he too realized as the source of his hatred and shame . . . [and] defeat."¹⁷

Through this wrestling, Jacob and Esau realize that God is the root of both love and hate; this enables them to see that they can change many of the bitter aspects of their lives, and of the world, that had appeared fixed, including

¹⁵ Waskow, Godwrestling, p. 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 7-10.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 8.

their own relationship. Waskow believes this understanding is at the heart of the Torah and of monotheism: what is and what can be, warfare and freedom, are sponsored by the same God. By striving with the apparently opposite aspects of God, Godwrestlers can at times unify them, and at other times dissolve the negative by understanding and protesting against it. In addition to seeking wholeness through encounter with God, Waskow describes Godwrestling as played out among people: it "is to make in human action and on the human level the same unification of the same opposites that God unifies."¹⁸

Waskow distinguishes Godwrestling from what he calls "talking" with God, which is "one-dimensional," and only "celebrates Life-As-It-Ought-To-Be." He implies that this is the way too many Jews relate to God and to Judaism, and that by ignoring the disquieting aspects of God, such "talking" avoids reality and "turns to a mere rattle in the throat,"¹⁹ making it impossible to bring greater unity to God and to the world.

Waskow's emphasis on understanding God as the source of both good and evil, and on the need for human beings to unify opposites in both the human and the divine realms, echoes the Zohar's reading of the Jacob-Esau story. In addition, while Waskow's interpretation of the story is quite different from that of the rabbis, he consciously emulates their process,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

attempting to make his book both "midrash in the ancient fashion" and "autobiography in which my own life becomes midrash."²⁰

Waskow applies the concept of Godwrestling to a variety of Jewish texts and issues, a few examples of which are discussed below.

Gender roles. Rigid sex roles and the subjugation of women are areas in need of change towards wholeness and harmony. Waskow finds hints in the Bible of the possibility of equality between women and men, and of the transformation of sex roles, sexuality, and reproduction and birth. In particular, he refers to life in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve disobeyed God; Jeremiah's prophetic reference to "a new thing on earth: a female shall encompass a warrior" (31:22);²¹ and the Song of Songs, which "celebrates a transformed relationship between women and men and a transformed outlook on sex."²²

Interfaith dialogue. Dialogue with other traditions can be a form of Godwrestling if it goes beyond platitudes. For example, because of the Holocaust, some Jews refuse to view as inevitable the strands of anti-Semitism in Christianity, and some Christians are digging deep within their traditions to root out teachings that gave nourishment

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹ Waskow's translation, *ibid.*, p. 170.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

to the Holocaust.²³ To address such sensitive issues honestly, participants must be willing to acknowledge their fear, shame, anger, and uncertainty about their own and others' traditions. They must also translate theological discussions into changes in day-to-day relationships, and in liturgies and celebrations. Such shifts in practice are the equivalent of Jacob's wrestling match with D'77N "turn[ing] into embracing Esau in the morning."²⁴

Messianism. Traditional, God-centered Jewish messianism must attempt to incorporate into itself the socially vigorous, world-transforming aspects of Marxism, so that Jews can more actively wrestle with God to bring to birth the Messianic Age. There are five areas of life that changed in the shift from the biblical Eden to ordinary history. In the Messianic Age these areas must be reversed, leading to: 1) harmony between humanity and nature; 2) equality between women and men; 3) human prosperity without toil; 4) an end to the exile of the Jewish people from the land of Israel; and 5) the abolishment of war. In 1978, when Waskow wrote Godwrestling, he found all of these areas to be in great turmoil, indicating, he believed, that history was at a crucial threshold between disaster and transformation.²⁵

As one of the leaders of the Jewish Renewal Movement, Waskow demonstrates familiarity with and interest in

²³ Ibid., pp. 158-159.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 166.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 169-171.

mysticism and leftist political activism, seeking to combine insights from these areas with those from within more mainstream Jewish tradition. He combines a psychological and introspective approach similar to that of Rosenberg with a belief like that of the midrash and the Zohar that individual actions have a great impact on the world and on God. He also hopes to demonstrate that Torah texts, as well as apparently esoteric concepts such as messianism, are relevant to the everyday lives of modern Jews. Godwrestling appears awkward and dated in some ways, particularly in its discussions of Marxism. At the same time, it presents an interesting combination of a modern perspective on social issues with a traditional approach to the development of Jewish theology. Even those who do not resonate to the contents of Godwrestling may find the author's process a helpful model of engagement with the text.

"A Little Over Jordan"²⁶

Emily Dickinson writes of Jacob's wrestling match at Peniel as being with an angel, yet also enabling Jacob to struggle with God. The first stanza of her poem "A Little Over Jordan" describes the opponents clearly as "An Angel and a Wrestler." She pokes fun at the angel, who, when morning came,

. . . begged permission
To breakfast and return.

This divine being begs a human being, and needs to eat in the

²⁶ The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1924), p. 300. Also see appendix to this thesis.

morning! He is also the target of Dickinson's pun, entreating Jacob to "break" the "fast" hold he has on him.

Jacob does not escape Dickinson's humor, either: while this match may be an exalted moment in his life, he is still "wily," just as he has been in many of his interactions with his family. He demands a blessing from his opponent, addressing him as "stranger," but after he receives the blessing, the world around him, and thus his understanding of the wrestling match, changes:

Light swung the silver fleeces
Peniel hills among,

and Jacob, "astonished," finds that he has "worsted God!" Dickinson's poem brings together the understandings of Jacob's opponent as an angel and as God, responding with humor to the amazing notion of physical struggle with, and even victory over, a representative of God.

"Jacob"²⁷

In this poem Ruth Brin presents Jacob's struggle as being directly with God, and as an important means through which he came to know God. The poem is written in the first person, from Jacob's point of view as he looks back on this experience. He remembers that, as he waited by the Yabok River, his loneliness reminded him of God's loneliness. Even so, at first he believed that his opponent was another man; this accords with the Torah's description of the beginning of

²⁷ Harvest: Collected Poems and Prayers (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1986), p. 36. Also see appendix to this thesis.

the match: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him" (Gen. 32:25). It is not clear from the poem at what point Jacob realized that his struggle was with God, but his perception did change, since, recounting the experience, he says:

When He came I didn't know Him,
Thinking He was another man.

Brin makes it clear that she reads Jacob's struggle as being with God. However, she implies that the wrestling match is also a metaphor for the struggles Jacob has undergone throughout his life. Looking back, Jacob can even see those struggles as positive, for, he says:

In the darkness of my tent I pray to God,
To remember my children, and to come to them.

I pray to God that through their struggles
They, too, will learn to know Him.

"Jacob" is one of a group of poems Brin wrote and arranged by parashah. Her intent in this collection seems to be to create work that can be used liturgically, and that expresses a personal and accessible connection to the text. These concerns are reflected in the poem's transparency and simplicity, and in its identification with Jacob's inner thoughts, which appear rather opaque in the Bible. Here Jacob speaks to his own children, passing on what he learned at Peniel. Brin hopes that Jews of her day, Jacob's descendants in the metaphorical and midrashic sense, will hear that message as well.

"You have striven with . . . human beings . . . :"
Intimate Encounter with Another Individual²⁶

The biblical story of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau includes two significant and contrasting images of intimate encounters with another individual. Jacob wrestles with the mysterious being next to the Yabok River, and soon afterwards he embraces his brother. He receives the name Israel in recognition of having prevailed in struggles with human beings, as well as with אֱלֹהִים. These characteristics of the text, as well as the overall biblical portrait of Jacob as a particularly human individual, invite responses that focus on close interactions between individuals.

The authors of the midrash and the Zohar read this text differently. They understand Esau, and Jacob's opponent, whom they see as Esau's guardian or angel, in typological and symbolic terms; therefore they do not see this narrative as one about individual relationships. Gersonides, on the other hand, perceives Esau as an individual, and draws lessons from this story about how one should behave in encounters with enemies. Seeing Jacob's opponent at the Yabok River and Esau as individuals also is characteristically modern, reflecting the more widespread contemporary concern with interpersonal relationships rather than with relationships among nations or cosmic forces.

²⁶ Quote is from Gen. 32:29.

"Jacob and the Angel"²⁹

Stephen Mitchell's poem, which portrays a man holding and making love with a woman until dawn, draws several analogies between the encounter he describes and Jacob's meetings, first with the mysterious being, whom Mitchell refers to as an angel, and then with Esau. Like Rosenberg's story "Jacob at the River," Mitchell's poem combines Jacob's two encounters, indicating that he sees them as connected.

The title of the poem, however, refers only to the angel. This image continues in the first line, which describes a woman with "arms pinned back, impaled against the night," like the wings of an angel as commonly portrayed. In the biblical text, Jacob at first seems to believe he is wrestling with a man; however, when dawn breaks, he asks for a blessing, implying that he realizes that his opponent is not an ordinary human being. In Mitchell's poem the man's perception of his partner also changes as dawn breaks and he is able to see her face more clearly in the "first half-light." He perceives something familiar, presumably from childhood. It was:

Something about the eyes . . . He *knew* those eyes,
Intimately the mouth, the child's skin,
Forgotten long ago. . . .

The woman's face seems to remind the man of a child he knew, perhaps a sibling. Thus Mitchell introduces echoes of Jacob's reunion with his brother after many years,

²⁹ Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets, eds. Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf (n.p.: Avon Books, 1980), p. 556. Also see appendix to this thesis.

implying that the encounter which the poem describes contains elements of both wrestling and reconciliation; at the same time he comments on the biblical text, suggesting that the being with whom Jacob wrestles appears both strange and familiar to him.

The connection between the woman as angel and as sibling also parallels a midrashic understanding of Jacob's comment that seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of אֱלֹהִים (Gen. 33:10). One rabbinic interpretation of Jacob's statement is that the being with whom he struggles at the Yabok River is Esau's guardian angel, and therefore looks like Esau. Mitchell, who is Jewishly knowledgeable and has translated and written commentaries on portions of the Bible, is presumably aware of this interpretation, which sees Esau as symbolic of the oppressive Roman empire, so that his face could not possibly appear like that of God or an angel of God. Mitchell seems to echo and then reverse this interpretation, reading the biblical text as demonstrating that one can see something significant and even holy in the familiar nature of a person with whom one is intimate, even if one aspect of that intimacy is struggle or even antagonism.

In portraying his poem's "Jacob" as having an encounter with a female, Mitchell echoes Zoharic references to Lilith as one aspect of the demonic opponent with whom Jacob wrestled. While the woman in Mitchell's poem is certainly not described as demonic, the man's experience with her does

contain elements of danger. He holds her "arms pinned back . . . in his desperate embrace," and before they separate a "wound" is part of what "she had come there to bestow" upon him. Again, the poem reflects the apparently contradictory aspects of intimacy: in addition to wrestling and reconciliation, close relationships may include both danger and awe-inspiring encounter with the divine. Moments of recognition may yield both the joy and the pain, the "naming" and the "wounding," of self-knowledge. This embrace of paradox, in itself, is also reminiscent of the Zohar's reading of biblical texts.

The lovemaking described in the poem concludes with the end of night, as did Jacob's wrestling match. With the sky "lucid" and the sun "risen," it is also clear what the woman "had come there to bestow--a wound, [and] a name." Thus the man of the poem is changed in the same ways that Jacob is changed in the biblical narrative. For the biblical Jacob these alterations symbolize a new maturity, an ability to repent past mistakes, and a greater readiness for his role as progenitor of the people Israel. The poem describes an encounter of more ordinary proportions, with more limited consequences, yet the echoes of the biblical naming and wounding imply that, through intimate relationships with others, human beings may be able to experience a connection to the Divine, as Jacob did at Peniel.

Finally, Mitchell's poem reflects a poem of the same name by Israeli writer Yehuda Amichai, which Mitchell

translated for inclusion in an English language anthology.³⁰ Amichai's poem also describes lovemaking, using imagery from Jacob's wrestling match with the mysterious being. Amichai's poem does not contain echoes of Jacob's meeting with Esau, and in fact it introduces imagery from a very different biblical text, the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac.³¹ Overall, Amichai's poem emphasizes the more dangerous aspects of intimacy, as reflected in his choice of language to describe lovemaking: the man and woman each held and "defeated" the other, "and both of them knew that a hold brings death." In Mitchell's poem the moment of sexual climax is implied by the word "recognition;" here Amichai focuses instead on the "death" that is said to follow sexual climax. Amichai echoes the same theme through his reference to the binding of Isaac, which portrays intimacy, danger, and sacrifice as closely linked.

Like Waskow, Mitchell resonates to the elements of both fighting and lovemaking that can be perceived in this biblical text. While Waskow applies these concepts to human relationships with God, Torah, and Judaism, Mitchell focuses on intense moments of connection between individuals. Both authors recognize the contradictions that are often present in life. Waskow urges his readers to work to unify

³⁰ Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, eds. and trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 40. Also see appendix to this thesis.

³¹ The poem's line "then someone called her suddenly from above, twice," is similar to the description of the angel who called to Abraham from the heavens, twice, telling him not to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22:11).

opposites, and thus to bring closer the Messianic Age. Mitchell confirms the brief instances of intimacy in which connections with God and human beings, with past and present, are joined together; for him, these moments, when experienced and acknowledged, are themselves redemptive.

"The Wrestler"³²

This poem by Richard Chess, which describes a wrestling match with a schoolmate, is another response that focuses on the themes of struggle and lovemaking, but in Chess' poem it is struggle that predominates. The tone is self-mocking: though the poem's speaker loses his wrestling match, he identifies with Jacob, and refers sarcastically to his opponent as an "angel."

The parody continues throughout Chess' poem: the biblical Jacob appears to be helped by prayer, is wounded but able to walk, and is the victor in his match. In comparison, the poem's speaker says that "no prayer could save me," he is "crushed," and clearly loses the match. To add insult to injury, though the speaker is a "blessed son of Isaac," the boy who wins is smart and bookish, endowed with the intellectual skills Jews have stereotypically been understood to possess, in comparison with and perhaps compensation for the physical abilities of the goyim as traditionally symbolized by Esau.

The poem's description of the wrestling match contains

³² Tikkun, March/April 1989, p. 79. Also see appendix to this thesis.

echoes of homosexual lovemaking. The speaker describes his opponent Ed as "the smartest boy in violet shorts," a stereotypical choice of color for gay men. At first, he mistakenly confuses Ed

with one of the dumbbell-tough thugs
who flicks his ashes at girlish boys,

implying that he soon understands that Ed is not one who disdains "girlish boys." Following this realization, the speaker flips "onto my safe belly" and rises, "ass first," in a gesture reminiscent of homosexual lovemaking.

As Jacob's encounter at Peniel concludes he is prepared to reconcile with Esau. In contrast, the speaker in Chess' poem ends up in defeat "on the matted earth." It is only his children who are able to rise up, and they do so "to take revenge" rather than to seek an end to antagonism. In this poem, Chess reverses many of the redemptive themes present in Jacob's biblical wrestling match, seeming to comment that the real-life struggles of Jacob's descendants do not necessarily fit into the biblical understanding of history as patterned and purposeful. Though this is a distressing truth, humor can help soften the blow and defuse the anger this realization can bring.

"Last Words"³³

Sharon Olds' poem is one of a sequence chronicling her father's illness and death. She likens the visit at which her father last speaks to her to Jacob's wrestling match with

³³ The Father (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 23. Also see appendix to this thesis.

the mysterious being. Just as the being must beg Jacob to let him go, Olds is so reluctant to leave her father that he must ask her to do so. Unlike Jacob's opponent, he changes his plea into a demand for a "Last kiss!" voicing his "command for mercy." Amazed that this call for connection is the final message her distant and inexpressive father speaks to her, Olds sees the interaction in an almost miraculous light:

. . . To plead that I leave,
my father asked me for a kiss! I would not
leave until he had done so, I will not let thee go except
thou beg for it.

Though most of Olds' relationship with her father has been full of frustration and even hatred, at this moment of intense vulnerability for them both, she, like Jacob, finds unexpected redemption. Jacob demanded a blessing, and received a new name he had not even asked for. By remaining in her father's hospital room, Olds expresses her love and need, and receives the blessing of her father's last words. Like Mitchell and Chess, Olds writes about an intimate encounter and its paradoxes, reflecting the presence of both struggle and blessing in Jacob's encounter at Peniel, and in her own relationship with her dying father.

"Non-Professional Wrestling"³⁴

This sermon by Rabbi David Azen of Holy Blossom Temple tells the story of Jacob and Esau's relationship, drawing from it the homiletical lesson that people must wrestle with

³⁴ The American Rabbi 20 (April 1988):9-12.

those different from themselves. Rabbi Azen sees the twins' entire relationship as one of struggle, from their wrestling in the womb to their reconciliation near Peniel. Jacob's match with the mysterious being is an integral part of the brothers' story, since through that encounter Jacob is able to become both "humbler" and "more assured." This makes it possible for him to do "teshuvah," repenting his earlier deception of Esau, so he can approach him in a more open manner.³⁵

Like Waskow, Rabbi Azen sees wrestling with oneself and with others as prerequisites for being able to encounter God. He warns his listeners not to "live in our own isolated worlds, scared to hear a different view or experience, unable to reach beyond ourselves." Instead of caricaturing those who are different, "as Jacob did with Esau, and the rabbis with Rome," Jews today should follow the model of Jacob after his wrestling match, seeking out and meeting "the people who would give us the most by challenging us the most,"³⁶ whether they be "our own brothers and our own sisters," "our friends," or even "nations."³⁷

Like many of the authors discussed above, Azen reads Jacob and Esau's story as one of paradoxes. However, rather than focusing on moments of intimate encounter between individuals, as do the poets discussed in this section, Azen

³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

draws from this text a more general lesson about relationships with others. Though Azen responds to this story from within the homiletical tradition, his message of openness contrasts sharply with the readings found in the midrash and the Zohar, and to some extent that of Gersonides. This difference reflects the pluralistic environment in which Azen functions, which is so unlike that of the earlier commentators.

"Have you but one blessing, father?:" Jews and Non-Jews³⁸

Beginning in the Bible itself, and continuing throughout Jewish history, in most Jewish texts Esau has symbolized non-Jewish nations or individuals. By medieval times it was clearly established that, for Jews, he stood for Christians and Christianity. For reasons discussed above, this traditional interpretation is rarely reflected in modern Jewish personal and literary responses to the Jacob-Esau cycle. Some writers do see Esau as symbolizing other groups of non-Jews, and two such responses are discussed below.

The biblical understanding of Esau as the "other" brother, and, more importantly, the rabbinic understanding of him as evil and dangerous, conflict with the values of many Jews today, particularly those who are religiously and politically liberal. This section concludes with a brief look at this issue through the eyes of modern Jewish thinkers in the United States and Israel.

³⁸ Quote is from Gen. 27:38.

"The poem on our Mother Our Mother Rachel"³⁹

This work by Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun⁴⁰ is from a group of poems he wrote against the background of the Yom Kippur war. In this poem he laments the strained relationship between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, understanding Jacob and Esau as symbolic of these two peoples.

Yeshurun's poem contrasts the ideals and dreams of the Zionist pioneers, as epitomized by second Israeli President Yitshak Ben-Zvi, with the pragmatic political and military approach that came to be exemplified by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. The poet believes that Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have much in common. Yeshurun grew up in a Hasidic home in the Ukraine and settled in Palestine in 1925. There he discovered that the "first Arab I met in the country, a man with a black beard, reminded me of my father." He also encountered the reality that "it was not Herzl or Weizmann who brought me to the land of Israel but the Arab docker who transported me from the ship to the shore of Jaffa."⁴¹ Yeshurun sees both Jews and Arabs as representing well-defined worlds of tradition, morality, and

³⁹ The Syrian-African Rift and Other Poems, trans. and foreword by Harold Schimmel (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), pp. 34-35. Also see appendix to this thesis. The translation of this poem here, including capitalization of words, is taken from Schimmel.

⁴⁰ The literal meaning of his adopted name is "the fathers are looking [at us];" The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself, eds. Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, and Ezra Spicehandler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 89.

⁴¹ As quoted in *ibid.*

language, strongly rooted in their respective landscapes. Both peoples have been victims of exile and tragedy; both have been threatened with their own disappearance.

Ishmael is the biblical figure usually understood to represent Arabs, but Ishmael does not share the same mother with Abraham's other son, Isaac; thus, Yeshurun sees Jacob and Esau, full brothers and even twins, as more appropriate symbols of Jews and Arabs. In contrast to the reconciliation of the twin brothers of the Genesis story, though, the quarrel between Jews and Arabs has remained tragically unresolved, as Yeshurun laments in this poem.

The poem's opening words set the scene, referring to Israel's then-current state of war: "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵי הַמְּלֻאֲמִינִים" ("And the two reservist guys went"). Yeshurun then brings together the history of three eras: his own time, when war is raging; the 1950s, when Israeli policy was moving away from its pre-state idealism; and the days of the patriarchs, when Jacob was running from Esau, but would eventually reconcile with him.

Using biblical verses from the story of Jacob's flight from home (Gen. 29:1, 4), Yeshurun portrays Jacob confusing the reservists of 1973 with two political figures of Israel's early statehood, Ben-Gurion and his party secretary Nehemiah Argov. Jacob asks these Zionist leaders, "מֵאֵן?" ("from Whence?"), but they do not respond. Jacob is reminding them of the people Israel's biblical values, and of their own socialist and Zionist roots and ideal of living peacefully with the Arabs. He is concerned that they seem to be

replacing these principles with what they believe to be pragmatism. He is also asking them "where they are coming from," meaning, what solutions do they have to the conflicts with the Arabs? However, Ben-Gurion and Argov have no answers to either question, and therefore, at the time that Yeshurun writes this poem, they have been replaced by the reservists, and by war.

The first stanza ends with an allusion to the binding of Isaac, "וַיֵּלֶךְ שְׁנֵיהֶם" ("and the two went off;" cf. Gen. 22:6, 8), suggesting that the road Ben-Gurion and Argov took helped lead to the potential or actual sacrifice of their metaphorical children, the Israelis of Yeshurun's present day.

The poem's second stanza steps into the past again to celebrate the Zionist ideals that were more visible during the early years of the state. Yeshurun describes Ben-Zvi's house, a modest wooden shack which he renovated when he became president of Israel. As president, though, he took on a position of little political power, becoming only a symbol of the right way to live: simply, close to the land and local artisans, without pretensions of "high" European culture.

Inside this house sits Jacob, progenitor of the people Israel, who still have the potential to embody Zionist ideals. However, they have shut out their brother Esau, symbolic here of the Palestinian Arabs. In the biblical narrative, Jacob's personality was such that he stayed in

camp, while Esau hunted outdoors; here Yeshurun employs these characterizations to point to Esau, or the Palestinian Arabs, as "outsiders" of another sort, excluded by force, rather than choice.

Within the house, "IMU DN" ("Esau's Mother") weeps for her banished son. Again, Yeshurun employs a verse from the Bible (Judg. 5:28), using it here to describe her looking through the window and wailing. In its biblical context the verse describes the mother of Sisra, a Canaanite general, waiting for him to return home from battle, not aware that he has been killed by Ya'el. In that story the reader knows what the mother does not, and watches with scorn, sympathy, or both as she tries to reassure herself that her son will come home. Though the poem's reader understands that Esau's mother is Rebecca, the poem does not name her, leaving the word "DN" open to a range of understandings. She is also the earth, this land, and the Mother as a symbolic figure, a reminder that all people have mothers, are born, and die, and all mothers grieve for their fallen children, no matter what their differences or national alliances.

The poem's implication is that Esau's mother, like Sisra's, waits in vain; her son, the Palestinian Arabs, will not be able to return to the land that had been their home, their mother. Yeshurun does not refer to the fact that Esau's mother is also Jacob's mother, but this echoes in the mind of the reader. Thus Yeshurun silently offers his point of view: Jacob and Esau share, and love, the same mother,

the same land. He also asks the question: how can Jacob cause such pain to his own mother? Or, by analogy: how can the Jews be so cruel to the land, excluding one of her "children," the Palestinian Arabs?

Yeshurun's concern for the land continues in the stanza that follows, which speaks sorrowfully of the "אדמה מסופה" ("Punished Earth"). He pleads with his readers not "להתחיל איתה" (to "start up with her"). In Hebrew, this phrase can imply the sending of sexual signals to another individual. Instead of flirting in this potentially harmful manner, Yeshurun urges his readers "לדבר לה" ("To speak to her"), a phrase which can refer to asking for a woman's hand in marriage. Thus, Israeli Jews must seek ways to "speak," in the sense of negotiating, rather than fighting about and on the land. They must also realize that both they and the Palestinian Arabs are emotionally "married" to the land, so they should take seriously this committed relationship that requires thought and compromise one would not expect in a mere flirtation.

If the two brothers who share the same mother--the two peoples who love the same land--were able to reconcile, they could concentrate on beautifying it ("להדר"). Both peoples have been close to the land, and have nurtured it, "כמו כרים לבשו" ("[just] as meadows wore sheep"). To acknowledge this commonality, the poet urges "אל תקרא לה בשמות רבים" ("Don't call her by many names"); she is not Israel--Jacob's other name, but a word never used in this poem--nor is she Palestine.

She is the Earth, the Mother, not a political football or a symbol of nationalist aspirations.

Instead, Yeshurun tells his readers "קרא להרחל" ("Call her Rachel"), because Rachel is a symbol of compassionate motherhood, and of familial love that can overcome rivalry. In the Bible, she weeps for her children who have gone into exile, and it is for her sake that God finally promises that they will return (Jer. 31:15-17). Yeshurun sees the Jews as exiled by anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and the Palestinian Arabs as exiled by the Zionists, so the biblical Rachel weeps for both peoples.

In the midrash, "רחל אמנו" ("Our Mother Rachel") pleads with God to return the Israelites to the land. She confesses that she and Jacob had arranged secret signs so he would know whether he was marrying Rachel or her sister Leah. But when Jacob married Leah, Rachel repented and disclosed the signs to her sister to prevent her humiliation. This story of loyalty between siblings overcoming jealousy finally moves God, as the arguments of the patriarchs, Moses, and the Torah had not.⁴² Thus Yeshurun urges the two peoples to turn away from their rivalry and their harsh decrees, following the examples of the sister Rachel and of God, and to do so for the sake of the Mother Rachel, that is, the land.

Continuing to emphasize the two people's commonalities, Yeshurun then summarizes his point explicitly:

⁴² Ekhah Rabbah 24:12-14.

אדם נולד כילד ומת כילד.
כל זה בסמוך לאם.

(A man is born as a child and dies as a child.
All this dependent on the Mother.)

The poem's last stanza is almost identical to its fourth stanza, but the second version is shorter, creating a mood that is both more urgent and more intimate. The final stanza leaves out the words "כלבושה" ("her wardrobe") and לבשו ("wore sheep"), which contain echoes of Jacob and Rebecca's deception of Isaac, in which Jacob brought sheep (הצאן) for his mother to cook for Isaac (Gen. 27:9), and she dressed Jacob in Esau's clothing (וחלבש) and in goat skins (הלב'ישה) (27:15-16). Thus Jacob stole the blessing intended for Esau; yet the poem ends with the possibility of this theft, like the words that echo it, being wiped out, perhaps by the Jacob of today sharing with the Esau of today.

In the Bible, Yeshurun seems to say, reconciliation came when it seemed impossible. For the sake of mothers, whose children die among both peoples, for the sake of the common Mother, the Earth, could reconciliation come again, even though it may not seem possible? Yeshurun emphasizes this challenge with a final shift in language. In the fourth stanza he speaks distantly and even awkwardly of אוחה ארץ ("her the Land"), but the poem closes with the words הארץ הזאת ("this Land"), a more intimate description of what he hopes might truly become the two peoples' common ground.

This Yiddish poem by Russian writer Leyb Kvitko was written at a time when he had great hopes for Jewish life under the Bolsheviks. The poet speaks for his people to "Esau," his non-Jewish Russian comrades, reflecting on what Russian Jews might owe, or be believed to owe, their non-Jewish compatriots. Kvitko also celebrates Russian Jews' new opportunity to become farmers and otherwise be involved with the land, a right that had been largely denied them under the Czars.

Kvitko was one of a circle of Jewish writers working to create an anti-Zionist and anti-assimilationist culture within early revolutionary Russia. They celebrated the Jewish break with the shtetl past and with the trading occupations into which their fathers had been forced. They embraced what they perceived as the new Jewish discovery of nature, and expressed their hopes of becoming workers, farmers, and students in what would finally become a shared homeland.

Kvitko opens his poem with a description of Esau as "hairy," making it clear that he is referring to the biblical Esau, who is depicted this way at birth (Gen. 25:27). Ironically, Kvitko calls Esau "blessed," since it is he who works the fields, both in the Bible and in Kvitko's romantic

⁴³ Leyb Kvitko, גרינע גראס [Green Grass] (Berlin: Jewish Literature Publishing Co., 1922), p. 146. English translation in: The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, eds. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), p. 296. Also see appendix to this thesis.

image of non-Jewish Russians. The poem's speaker--Jacob, and the Jews of Kvitko's day--believes that he owes Esau a debt. In the Genesis narrative Jacob stole his brother's blessing (27:1ff), and that act echoes in Kvitko's poem. However, the more pressing issues are contemporary "debts," such as the farming skills and love of nature that non-Jews have developed, from which Jews have benefited, or even the "debt" that anti-Semites claim Jewish "financiers" owe their non-Jewish comrades.

In addition to acknowledging the existence of one or more of these debts, the speaker tells Esau that the Jews see the value of his "fragrant fields," and have, in fact, quietly been nurtured by the "savor" of the outdoors, which has "seeped" its way into the "gloom of distant days" that has so long been their lot. While Jacob was supposedly the fortunate brother, having received the patriarchal blessing, Esau also received "our blind father's blessing" of agricultural prosperity. Kvitko does not mention Jacob's blessing, perhaps because it has had, he believes, so little value, not having protected the Jews from oppression and pogroms, and not having encouraged them to be strong and agriculturally productive, like their non-Jewish comrades.

Besides being a "wild, wooded" man of the outdoors, the author reminds Esau that he is also "gentle," and he invokes that side now as he asks for Esau's forbearance. He hopes that his non-Jewish comrades will put aside whatever debts they believe the Jews owe them. His people--the "many-

thousand souls"--have suffered enough; now that they finally have the chance for a brighter future, they should not have to give up anything more.

Although Kvitko looks back on his people's past with pain, he has not given up on them; his "ancient heart" and his "ancient dreams" for them are still alive. He hopes that his non-Jewish comrades will look to their own "sheep" and "fragrant springs," which have long been their heritage. This is where their hands belong, rather than asking for payment from the Jews. If Esau will tend to his own livelihood, perhaps his "brother," the Russian Jews, can finally share in what Kvitko believes to be the true blessing: freedom to build a national Jewish culture, and to join in working and enjoying the "fragrant fields" of their homeland."

Like Yeshurun, Kvitko feels a strong bond with the non-Jewish people who share his homeland, and he hopes for reconciliation between these "brothers." Yeshurun, however, speaks as an insider, who sees his people misusing their newly "blessed" status of statehood by mistreating Esau. In

" Kvitko became one of the Soviet Union's most popular writers of children's literature, both poetry and prose. He published in Russian, Yiddish, and a number of other languages; by 1948, about 7,500,000 copies of his books had been sold. In that year he was arrested by the Stalinist government, and after four years of torture and interrogation he was shot along with other eleven Jewish writers. Two years later he was "rehabilitated" and his writing again became available in Russian and other languages, but not in Yiddish. Sol Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1972), pp. 203-206; Charles A. Madison, Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 400-402; A Century of Yiddish Poetry, trans. and ed. Aaron Kramer (New York: Cornwall Books, 1989), pp. 211-214.

comparison, Kvitko writes as an outsider, hoping to share in the tangible "blessings" of the Russian gentiles, which have so long been denied to Jacob's descendants.

Rethinking Jacob and Esau

A number of modern Jewish thinkers have recently called for the re-evaluation of the biblical and rabbinic understanding of Jacob and Esau in light of current relations between Jews and non-Jews. In Conflicting Visions: Spiritual Possibilities of Modern Israel, modern Orthodox scholar David Hartman writes about the religious and political divisions facing his nation, which he hopes to help heal. He points out that most of the Bible is limited to the Jewish people's story; we meet Ishmael and Esau only when they enter or leave that story. In the Bible, the history of the Jews is shown to be what excites God. Thus, he believes, coming home to the biblical land makes it easy for Jews to focus narrowly on their own story, and to feel there is no room for the rejected sons, Ishmael and Esau. In exile, Hartman writes, this was not a problem, since Jews had to make room for the other. The question today is whether Jews can make room for the other within their "own intimate, passionate home."⁴⁵

Hartman reminds his readers that the Bible begins with creation, demonstrating that God is not Jewish, and that there is a sacred story beyond that of the Jews. Referring to the importance of the oral tradition throughout Jewish

⁴⁵ David Hartman, Conflicting Visions: Spiritual Possibilities of Modern Israel (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), p. 233. Also see p. 232.

history, he calls on Jews today to reinterpret the Torah, including rabbinic tradition, in this light, so they can continue to "live by a word that is open and reinterpreted and recreated."⁴⁶ Hartman hopes that a new understanding of the biblical narrative would help make it possible to accept the Palestinians as a nation, just as Jews demand that the Palestinians accept them as a nation.

While Hartman, as an Israeli, calls for a reinterpretation of the biblical narrative in light of the return to the land, American Jewish scholar Michael Signer approaches the narrative in light of recent changes in Jewish-Christian relations. He writes that these relations have been transformed remarkably in the past fifty years, particularly since Nostra Aetate in 1965. However, many Jews remain ambivalent about dialogue with Christians, because of hostility to Christians and Christianity, and because of fears about Jewish survival. Signer believes that, ironically, rather than threatening Judaism, open encounters with liberal Christians might encourage "transformative dialogue" leading to "recognition of one's own tradition as one had previously not seen or understood it."⁴⁷ Such experiences might encourage the spiritual regeneration sought by many liberal Jews.

Though Signer's area of concern is different from that

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 242. Also see pp. 238-241.

⁴⁷ Michael A. Signer, "Reconciliation and Interpretation: Approaches to the History of Jewish-Christian Relations," Notre Dame, IN, n.d., p. 19. Also see p. 1, pp. 5-7, pp. 17-18.

of Hartman, he also calls for a Jewish re-examination of the Jacob-Esau cycle in Genesis, and of the rabbis' reading of that text as "an exclusivist covenant in which Jacob triumphs and Esau is always excluded."⁴⁸ He urges Jews to have the courage to examine their "darker side . . . the archetypes and myths we have woven with respect to Christianity."⁴⁹ Then they may be able to look anew at the openings the biblical story of Jacob and Esau provides for reconciliation between the brothers. Such reinterpretation could encourage "tears of grief and healing," like those of the two brothers, between the Jewish and Christian communities today.⁵⁰

While Hartman and Signer address recent changes in Jewish life that they believe call for reinterpretation of the biblical text, Samuel Schafler, president of the Hebrew College in Boston, examines the established Jewish view of Jacob and Esau in light of the history of anti-Semitism. He challenges the understanding of Jewish history as eternally cyclical and repetitive, which, he believes, has limited Jewish abilities to distinguish among and respond effectively to the variety of actual relations between Jews and non-Jews.⁵¹

Schafler calls for the re-evaluation of the traditional strategy of Jewish leaders for encounters with what many of

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ Samuel Schafler, "Enemies or Jew-Haters? Reflections on the History of Anti-Semitism," Judaism 37 (1988):352-358.

them have viewed as the "Esau" of their day. Such responses have often been based on the rabbinic understanding of Jacob's strategy in his encounter with Esau: *doron*, *tefilah*, *milhamah*, or, gifts and bribes, prayer, and, as a last resort, confrontation. This view blurs distinctions between myth and historical specificity, encouraging Jews to see non-Jews as living manifestations of the eternal, archetypal Esau, the ominous goy.

In fact, Schafler writes, the non-Jewish world has not always hated or threatened the Jews, and there is no uniform understanding of Jews and Judaism within classical Christianity. To stress Jewish suffering as a means of strengthening Jewish identity, as some do, is not truthful; it is also unwise, since most "men and women do not yearn to be ennobled by suffering or to wear the badge of persecution."⁵² Schafler challenges Jews today to study these issues with an open mind, in order to cope with actual anti-Semitism with greater wisdom and effectiveness, and in order to promote a healthier basis for Jewish identity.

Each of these thinkers writes from within a different area of concern. However, all of them make similar pleas, calling on Jews today to look beyond the rabbinic interpretation of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation. They believe that this interpretation has become a static paradigm that does not serve the Jewish people well in, nor speak honestly about, the contemporary world. Just as the rabbis

⁵² Ibid., p. 354.

of the midrash found this biblical text open to their questions and concerns, these modern Jewish thinkers also turn to the text, inviting others to join them in approaching it anew, with the questions and concerns of today, and tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

Stories are precious, indispensable. Everyone must have his history, her narrative. You do not know who you are until you possess some imaginative version of yourself. You almost do not exist without it.¹

The spoken word, as well as life and practice, must . . . be the constant companions and interpreters of the written word, which otherwise remains a dead, abstract concept in the mind, lacking all vitality and tangible content.²

Each of us is the bearer of a story, comprising the narratives and archetypes that help us, as individuals and peoples, to connect with our past, order our present, and imagine our future. For most Jews in the past, that story was based on Torah, in its broadest sense. Whether it consisted of Talmud study or Bible stories, folk tales featuring biblical characters, or Yiddish prayers calling on the merits of the matriarchs and patriarchs, to some extent we Jews have had a common language. For many Jews today, that language has become a foreign tongue.

The Torah, meaning specifically the *Humash*, the Five

¹ Lance Morrow, "Folklore in a Box," *Time*, September 21, 1992, p. 50.

² *Philosophie der Geschichte oder Ueber die Tradition*, 1:4, quoted in Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition," p. 285.

Books of Moses, still means something to many liberal Jews, though they may find it hard to explain why. Their difficulty in articulating the value of Torah is often due to ignorance. They may have learned little: a bar or bat mitsvah portion, some Bible stories as children, perhaps the Ten Commandments, and the Binding of Isaac, which is read at the High Holy Days.

Along with lack of knowledge come discomfort and confusion. Liberal Jews know that the Torah has been an object of reverence, something Jews have even died for, yet if they open the Humash and read it, they find what seems to be a combination of children's stories and arcane laws. Historical scholarship argues that the Pentateuch is a compilation of documents, composed by human beings, while fundamentalists claim that every word is "God's truth," and must be obeyed. Where does this leave liberal Jews? Often polite but distant, as one might be with an elderly relative about whose youth one has heard marvelous stories, but whom one has known only as confused and sickly.

This polite distance manifests itself in trite utterances about the Torah, such as the common assertion that "being a good Jew means being a good person, and the Torah teaches you how." Yet the Torah is full of distressing, confusing, and inspiring texts, with little direct instruction on "being a good person." Platitudes are a poor substitute for genuine concern about the many difficult or disturbing passages in the Torah, because platitudes do not

provide people with stories with which they can struggle, and by which they can live.

Like the rabbis of the midrash, we liberal Jews need to place ourselves in the long line of Jews seeking truth through encounter with the text--an encounter that happens only within a community. If we do not study what we can about how our ancestors thought, we live only in the present. If, on the other hand, we reify earlier interpretations, seeing them as "real Judaism," while commentaries from our own time appear tainted by modernity, we live only in the past. Neither of these paths empower us to bring our own questions to the text, to seek answers, listen closely, and then share the interpretations we find.

In researching and writing this thesis, I was amazed again and again by both the stability and the flexibility of the biblical text. I was struck by the creativity and brilliance of the commentators, as they wove together texts from many sources with the "texts" of their experiences, settling critical issues of human destiny and national history, and shedding new light on the biblical texts. While each commentator brings preconceptions to the text, these are merely starting points on voyages of exploration and discovery. Far from precluding honest interpretation, taking a point of view towards a text is a prerequisite for reading and understanding that engages with that text, rather than skimming over its surface. Unlike the sickly relative some may imagine it to be, the Torah is strong and open enough to

admit a wide variety of interpretations that speak honestly even in their diversity.

The biblical text I chose to look at in this thesis itself speaks about unity and diversity. It addresses the paradoxes often present in interactions with oneself, with others, with God, and between peoples, paradoxes centered on tensions such as those between likeness and difference, choice and destiny, reconciliation and alienation, redemption and exile. Each of the commentators discussed above perceives these themes differently, yet the same family of issues emerges repeatedly in their interpretations.

This shared reading is one example of the truths which may be discerned through dialogues with sacred texts. As I read through the eyes of the biblical authors, the rabbis, Gersonides, Moses de Leon, and a variety of modern writers, I perceived from their diverse viewpoints that life, religion, and ultimate meaning itself, are, at their core, paradoxical. There is no love without hatred, no growth without pain, no good without evil, no salvation without subjugation. This truth is, in itself, both comforting and distressing, and this tension is part of its vitality. Acknowledgment of, and engagement with, paradox makes our lives, and our stories, both painful and meaningful. Similarly, acknowledgment of, and engagement with, the reality of Torah makes its words, and its stories, both painful and meaningful.

A teacher of mine commented that although the word "rabbi" is often explained as meaning "teacher," he sees the

role differently. "A teacher can teach anything," he said, "but a rabbi must be an interpreter, must be able to help give new life to Jewish texts and tradition, and make them relevant in the present. A rabbi is a hermeneute."³

I identify with this description, yet I take it a step farther: I see myself not only as an interpreter, but as part of an ongoing conversation. In helping the commentaries of the past to live for my listeners, I hope to show that the text is more open than they might have imagined, and that readings that at first appear obscure are in fact the heartfelt searchings of people much like ourselves. Besides sharing the messages of earlier commentators, I hope to present Jews today with a paradigm of both patience and empowerment. Many of our ancestors saw themselves as part of the Jewish narrative, with the right to help shape that narrative, and the willingness to listen to its voices. Jews today who can envision themselves as significant enough to be part of the story, yet humble enough to learn from it, can also enter that narrative, to join in the community of engagement and interpretation that is Judaism, and to share in the excitement of learning, living, and creating Torah.

Rabbi Tarfon said: It is not your obligation to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it. (Pirkey Avot 2:20)

³ Dr. Michael A. Meyer, while teaching at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, December 23, 1993.

APPENDIX

Gersonides' Commentary on Parashat Vayishlah Ya'akov¹

Explanation of Words

"The מַעֲשֵׂי (deeds of love)" (32:11). These are those that God did for him, from the acts of goodness² and from what He promised³ him from among them.

"The truth" (32:11). This is that which God kept from his good promises, as we explained above.⁴

"With my staff" (32:11). Other than that possession I had nothing, only my staff that I carried with me on the road, in order to escape from dogs and the like.

"And strike me, mother with children" (32:12). This means perhaps he will strike me in such a manner that he will not leave me a remnant, meaning that he would strike the mother with the children and they would all die together. The relationship of this smiting to [Jacob] is that all of them are his possessions. Or, he is including himself

¹ Translation based on ben Gershon, ^{לְעִי}פִּירְשֵׁי הַתּוֹרָה, pp. 200-208.

² Editor's footnote: Not promised beforehand.

³ Editor's footnote: The promise itself. Because the מַעֲשֵׂי (deed of love) is the act of doing good gratuitously, and if so the promise itself is also included in the limits of the מַעֲשֵׂי. But He keeps the promise completely in truth, because after the promise it is fitting that God, may He be blessed, will fulfill it. And if it is so, from that point a person has the legal right and merit to claim its fulfillment.

⁴ Gen. 24:27, in which Eliezer spoke of God, "who has not withheld His מַעֲשֵׂי and His נְדָוָה from my master" (Abraham).

together with the others, as the sage ibn Ezra wrote, and the intention would then be "he will strike me," and [then] strike the "mother with children." And the first explanation appears better to us.

"I will cover over his face" (32:21). I will cause his anger to pass.

"And he wrestled" (32:25). In the manner of men who wrestle each other so that one causes the other to fall down.

"And the socket of Jacob's hip was strained" (32:26). It was dislocated in such a manner that he found himself limping on his hip when he arose.

"You have striven with מַלְאֲכִים" (32:29). It is considered that he became a prince among the angels, to strengthen your (Jacob's) providence and the closeness of your rank to [the angel's].⁵

"And the sun rose on him" (32:32). For the sun had already risen in another place, and it had not yet risen in the second place that was at a different meridian, and this is clear to anyone who has devoted any attention to the science of astronomy.⁶

"Socket of the hip" (32:33). This is the flesh that surrounds the bone that is called נִמְכָּח הָרֶגֶל. And it holds this bone just as the palm of the hand encircles that which

⁵ This translation is based on ibn Ezra's interpretation, which is referred to in the editor's footnote, and which says that the angel's words do not mean "you have striven with angels," but "you have become a prince among angels."

⁶ The editor's footnote refers to ibn Ezra, who explains that the sun rises at different times in different places; it does not rise all over the world at the same time.

it holds.

"Thigh muscle" (32:33). This is the name of the muscle that is on this socket, on the inner side of the body, and its meaning is well known.

The dots on the word "and he kissed him" (33:4) are to teach that his kiss was not wholehearted, but its meaning was placed exactly between the kiss and the absence of the kiss, and for this reason this word is in the middle between being written and being blotted out.

"What do you mean by all this camp which I have met?" (33:8) The intention of this is: "Who among the men is equal to you? All this camp which I have met." This is because a person gives a gift in order that there will be compensation from its recipient. [Esau] meant by this that it would be impossible for [Jacob] to be given compensation for a gift as wonderful as this. Or, its interpretation is: "What does this whole camp, bringing forth the gift, seek on your behalf?" as if Esau could not believe that such an extravagant gift would be sent to divert him.

"The face of אלהים" (32:10). The faces of the great princes.⁷ Or it means the faces of God's angels, indicating that he is a prophet, so that [Esau] would be afraid to harm him.

"Nursing" (33:13). Nursing cattle.

"At my pace" (33:14). At my leisure.

"I will leave" (33:15). I will leave alone and I will

⁷ Editor's footnote: see Targum Onkelos.

abandon.

Explanation of the Story

It mentions that Jacob sent messengers⁸ ahead to his brother Esau to attempt to make peace with him, if possible. Therefore he said to them, "Thus shall you say to my master, to Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I sojourned with Laban up until now, and God made me successful in [Laban's] house and gave me cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves. As soon as I had acquired those possessions, I separated from Laban, and I send this message to my lord to find favor in your eyes." All of this is to explain to Esau that he does not hate him, and that he will neither shun him nor hide his intentions from him.⁹ Rather, his intent was to conduct himself towards him as a brother. [Jacob] explained to [Esau] by these words that Jacob was not [Esau's] overlord, as Isaac had blessed him to be; rather, he had the rank of slave towards him. This has the wonderful effect of removing Esau's hatred from [Jacob]. Concerning this, Jacob said to his messengers, "Thus you shall say to my master, to Esau," so that it would be fixed in their minds that Esau was master to Jacob, and they would speak to him in the manner of

⁸ Editor's footnote: Cf. ibn Ezra, who believes they were humans from among Jacob's camp, and Bereshit Rabbah 75:4, which says they were angels.

⁹ Editor's footnote: The commentators make it clear, each of them in his own way, what Jacob intended when he said "to find favor in your eyes," (for example, Rashi said it was to divert Esau's mind from Jacob's wealth and to try to make peace with Esau). And our rabbi explains that in reality he informed him of his business, an act of one who is concerned to find favor by bringing about a meeting of minds. See the first practical application below.

a slave, as is explained by the sage ibn Ezra. The messengers then came and informed Jacob that they had carried out their mission, and that Esau was coming towards him with 400 men. Jacob was very frightened that harm would come to him from Esau, and it troubled him greatly. Even though God had already promised him that He would guard him wherever he went, Jacob feared that he might not deserve this wonderful providence, and because of this would be deprived of the promised good. This is because, while the promise of good may not be withdrawn when it is not essentially contingent, when there is a condition placed upon it, the promise is founded upon the fulfillment of the condition. This is like the blessings written in the Torah (as in Deut. 7:12-15; 11:13-15) for those who keep its commandments. You also find that Jeremiah said, "At one moment I will decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be uprooted and pulled down and destroyed, but if that nation of which I spoke turns back from its wickedness, I change my mind from the evil I planned to do to it. At another moment I say that a nation or kingdom shall be built and planted, and it does wrong in My eyes, and does not listen to My voice, then I change My mind about the good which I said I would bring upon it" (18:7-10). It is clear that the promise of good and the promise of bad revert with a change in those who receive it from good to bad or bad to good. Sometimes the promise of good is such a type that it is obligatory that it be conditional, even if (the condition) is not mentioned. When God promises good, it is

perpetual in every place and at every time. This makes it obligatory that [the promise] be on condition that the recipient conduct himself in such a way that divine providence will attach itself to him. It is impossible that perpetual good come to pass without such conduct, as we mentioned above, and we have already explained this in its entirety in the sixth section of The Wars of the Lord. There we explained that the promise for bad is conditional even if this is not mentioned, and we solved there all the problems that occur about this.

And when Jacob evaluated this, he was afraid lest he would be the cause of sin, and that this good would be withheld from him because he was undeserving of divine providence attaching itself to him in this wonderful manner. He had an additional reason to fear that his descendants might be slaughtered, since this was feasible without negating the promise, because it was possible that God would establish other descendants for him. Therefore Jacob tried to rescue whatever he could, and he divided the people who were with him and his property into two camps, so that if Esau were to come and smite the first camp, perhaps his passion would be cooled and the second [camp] would be saved.

Then Jacob prayed: "God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the God who said to me, 'return to your land and to your birthplace and I will do good for you.' Here I am undeserving of all the goodnesses and the truth which You did for Your servant. For with my staff I crossed

this Jordan, on coming to the house of Laban, and now on my return I have become two camps. Please, may it be good in Your eyes that You save me from the hand of my brother Esau, lest he come and slaughter me without leaving me a remnant. And You promised me that You would do good for me and would make my descendants like the sand of the sea, that is so numerous it cannot be counted. And nevertheless, I am afraid of Esau, being undeserving of this wonderful providence."

Jacob lodged there that night and he took from the property that was at hand a gift for his brother Esau to pacify him and make peace with him. From among the males he put in each flock (the number) that would be sufficient for that flock according to nature. This is what he sent him: 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 milch camels with their young, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 10 she-asses and 20 he-asses. He placed each flock by itself, and he commanded (the men) to leave space between the flocks in order to satisfy Esau's eye, so he would see the gift as larger. He commanded each of those who walked after the flocks to say to Esau when he asked him, "Whose are you and whose is it that goes before you?" to answer him, "This gift belongs to your servant Jacob, and it is being sent to my master Esau, and your servant Jacob is behind us." Jacob did this to cause his anger to abate, in that he would see the extravagance of the gift, and the extravagance of Jacob's self-abasement before him.

"The gift would pass" by Jacob's face (32:22) means

that he would see it in its passing, and would see that they had done as he had commanded them, leaving space between the flocks.

Jacob stayed that night in the camp.

Jacob got up that night and took his wives and his children and his maidservants and all his property across the ford of the Yabok, after he had crossed first to test the depth of the water, and (to see at) which place it would be best to cross. Then Jacob remained alone, in order to bring across a bit of his property that remained there, and he slept there. An angel of God appeared to him in a prophecy as if [the angel] were a man.¹⁰ Through the strength of [Jacob's] attachment to [the angel] and his closeness to him in rank, it appeared to him that he wrestled with him. Jacob envisioned the wrestling because of the distress of his imagination about Esau, and he thought to invent tactics to cause [Esau] to fall if he rose against him to smite him, for visions occur to a human being according to the imaginings of his heart.¹¹ The wrestling lasted until the break of dawn because that was the time that Jacob awoke according to his habit. It appeared to [Jacob] that his hip had been wrenched at its socket so the socket of Jacob's hip was strained in his wrestling with him. [The angel] asked Jacob to let him

¹⁰ Editor's footnote here refers to Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed, Part 2, ch. 42, which explains that angels only appear in visions of prophecy or in dreams.

¹¹ Editor's footnote here refers to Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 55b, which discusses good and bad dreams and which of these types of dreams occur to good and bad people, respectively.

go because dawn was breaking and the time was arriving when it was fitting for Jacob to turn to his concerns. Jacob did not want to loosen the connection that was between them if he did not bless him first. The angel said to him that his name would no longer be Jacob, but instead Israel, because he was a prince among the angels of God to the extent that he was close in rank to them, and his power was not exhausted by this.¹² He would be a prince also among men and he would not be defeated. Jacob was somewhat encouraged by this that Esau would not defeat him. Jacob asked the angel what [the angel's] name was to teach about his essence, in order that he would comprehend his essence perfectly. The angel informed him that his essence was very hidden (and) it was not possible to make it perceptible to a human being. We have already explained this in the first section of The Wars of the Lord. That angel blessed him there.

When he awoke, Jacob called that place Peniel "Because I saw פנים face to face and my being was saved" (Gen. 32:31). The sun rose on him when he passed Penuel, and he was limping on his hip because of what happened to him. Therefore, He commanded the Israelites at Mount Sinai not to eat the part from the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, but that which is not from this place is not forbidden for them to eat. This command was to explain this matter, the

¹² According to Samuelson's commentary in his translation of The Wars of the Lord, Treatise Three: On God's Knowledge, Gersonides uses the word פ, translated here as "power," to refer to the power through which the soul initiates various types of operations, such as perception, imagination, voluntary motion, and intellect; p. 106, footnote 26.

wonderful prophecy that came to Jacob, who, because of the extraordinarily close bond (תקן) which he had to the angel, had this experience. For faith in prophecy is one of the fundamental principles of the Torah. Nevertheless we said that Israel was commanded about this at Mount Sinai, because the Torah was not given more than once, as the rabbis said in Pereḳ Gid ha-Nasheh,¹³ and we have already explained this in the explanation of "be fruitful and multiply" in Parashat Bereshit.

[At this point Gersonides offers a lengthy excursus concerning the prohibition of eating the thigh muscle which is on the socket of the hip.]

We agree that this wrestling would be during sleep, since it is not possible that an angel of God would appear to a human being in this fashion when [the human being] is in command of all his faculties. The Master (Maimonides) has already taught us¹⁴ that in many places Scripture did not mention prophecy being in a dream or a vision, since it presumes that all prophecy is of this kind. Because of this Scripture did not mention in this place that this prophecy was in a dream or a vision.

Should a skeptic raise a doubt against us, saying, "How is it possible that this mark would remain on him, so that he

¹³ Editor's footnote here refers to Babylonian Talmud, Hulin 101b.

¹⁴ Editor's footnote here refers to Maimonides' Guide, Part 2, ch. 41, where he explains that even though all prophecy come through the agency of an angel, and occurs in a vision or dream, sometimes these facts are not explicitly mentioned since they are well known.

limped on his hip when he awoke?" we respond to him that this is possible for us for one of two reasons. The first is that we will see that a part of the body may be activated by the fantasies a person has during sleep. These fantasies will induce a part of the body to move itself, and you have seen that a man will dream that he lies with a woman and a nocturnal emission will appear, as if the whole thing took place while he was awake. Similarly, you might find that a person dreams that he is falling from a high place, and because of this his limbs move in a marvelous way during sleep, until he awakens because of this movement and finds that he already moved in this marvelous manner, and this is very clear from the senses. This is the reason that it is possible that when he saw in a dream that the socket of his hip was dislocated, a mark would remain on him there because of the movement which happened to him then, and thus it is possible that he found himself limping on his hip when he awoke.

The second reason is that sometimes a person's imagination is aroused by the things by which a person is moved during sleep. Thus, doctors derive important evidence about illness from the dreams of a sick person. For example, when a person who is sleeping is touched with a cold object, he will dream that he is in cold water or that snow and frost fell on him or the like. If the sleeping person is touched by something hot, he will dream that he is in a fire or that the sun is striking him or the like. There is no doubt about

this matter because the senses attest to it. This is the reason that when a man has an overabundance of sperm, and it is stimulated to come out, he will dream that he is lying with a woman. This is clearly the reason that when a pain occurs anew in a man during sleep, he will dream that he had been beaten in that place because of a quarrel which he had with another person in his dream. This happens frequently as well, as we comprehend through our senses. Since this is so, it is possible that what happened to Jacob is that because of his hard work in bringing all his property across the river, he got a pain in the socket of his hip during his sleep. It therefore appeared to him in the prophetic dream that he wrestled with this man and that the socket of his hip was strained in his wrestling. According to what we have mentioned there were three reasons for the wrestling that appeared to him during sleep: the first was the strength of the close bond (מקלט) he had with this angel. The second was that his troubled mind wandered while he was awake, inventing strategies to throw Esau down if he came to smite him. The third was the pain that he felt in the socket of his hip during sleep.

Scripture then relates that no sooner had Jacob raised his eyes and looked when there was Esau coming with 400 men. [Jacob] divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maidservants. The maidservants and their children passed first, and after them Leah and her children, and after them Joseph and Rachel, and he placed the most beloved to him

last, so that if anything would be saved, it would be the most beloved to him. Then he passed before them and humbled himself with all his strength before Esau, bowing to the ground seven times until he approached [Esau]. When Esau saw this extraordinary self-abasement, along with the extravagance of the gift, he ran towards him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept, in the manner of brothers who had not seen each other in a long time. Then Esau lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children and said, "Who are these with you?" and Jacob answered, "These are the children with whom God favored your servant." Then the maidservants and their children came close to Esau and bowed down, and so did Leah and her children, and Rachel and Joseph. They did so either because Jacob commanded them to, or because they saw that Jacob bowed to Esau. Esau said to Jacob, "Who is it whose love and hope of recompense are worthy to you of this whole camp which I have encountered? For in truth it would not be possible for a man to pay you fitting compensation for such an extravagant gift." Jacob answered that he did not send this gift with the hope of any other compensation except to find favor in the eyes of Esau, and it was enough for him if that was the reward. Esau answered that he had plenty, and that he would not take a thing, but Jacob pressed him and he accepted. Esau said to Jacob, "Let us travel together and I will go at your pace." [Jacob] said to him, "My master knows that the children are tender," because one of them was not yet six

years old, and there were many less than twelve years old.

"And also the flocks and the herds that are with me are nursing and it is incumbent on me to lead them. If in order to go quickly you were to drive them, through my desire to quicken my pace for the sake of correct conduct if you go with me, all the flocks would die." He thus ascribed the calamity to the flocks since they were the least of all those that would be in danger if he rushed.¹⁵ "This being the case, I implore my lord to pass before his servant and return to his place, and I will go at the leisurely pace of the animals before me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Se'ir." Esau said, "Since you do not want me to go with you, I will give you some from among the people who are with me to guard you on the way." Jacob did not want this because he trusted in God and did not "make flesh his strength" (Jer. 17:5). He already feared those remaining from the people who were with [Esau], lest they harm him.

Then Jacob traveled to the place called Sukot. There he built himself a house, and for his herd he made booths (סוכות); therefore the place is called Sukot. Thus it was called at the time of the giving of the Torah and afterwards, as it is [referred to] in the Book of Judges "and he punished with them the people of Sukot" (8:16). This is mentioned to

¹⁵ Editor's footnote here refers to Nachmanides' commentary on this verse, which says that Jacob did not say his party might die if they were driven too quickly because these words might then be understood to include the children. Nachmanides also thought that he might have been avoiding verbosity by referring only to the smallest animals, which were most likely to die, and not mentioning his additional concerns that the larger animals would be harmed and that the children would become weary.

add to the credibility of this story. This explains the words of the parashah.

Practical Applications

There are ten practical applications that one may draw from this story:

The first practical application is ethical. It is fitting that one who has an enemy, and would like his enmity to depart, should approach him with all his strength and tell him his business, which should not be concealed in such a meeting of minds. This is because a person will only make known his particular concerns to one who loves him, and he will conceal them from an enemy. If he establishes in his [foe's] heart that he loves him, he will break his heart and his hatred will depart from it. That is why you find that Jacob sent messengers to Esau to inform him about his business, in order that [Esau] would be convinced that [Jacob] loves him.

The second practical application is ethical. It is fitting for a human being that he should always be afraid and should judge matters according to the worst possibility, in order that he might take discerning counsel to avoid the worst. Do you not see that when Jacob heard that his brother Esau was coming towards him with 400 men, he feared that they had come to harm him, even though he had already received the promise from God that he would guard him and be with him, and it was also possible for him to consider that [Esau] was coming to honor and protect him? Because of this [fear] he

took wise counsel about this according to what was possible.

The third practical application is ethical. When it appears that evil will necessarily befall a person, it is not fitting that he neglect to take counsel, in order to keep the evil at a distance, or to choose a particular evil to thus be spared another, saying that it is not fitting to choose an evil. This is not so, for it is fitting for a person to choose a lesser evil in order to escape a greater evil that is stronger than it for the sake of the good. Do you not see that Jacob, when he feared that Esau would slaughter all his camp, divided it in two in hope that one might remain? This is the reason he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maidservants, and placed the most beloved last, in order that if any remained, it would be the one most beloved to him.

The fourth practical application is ethical. It is not fitting that a human being refrain from praying to God, even at the time of greatest danger. As the rabbis said, even a sharp sword resting on a person's neck should not cause him to refrain from (seeking) mercy. Do you not see that our father Jacob, being in the ultimate danger, in his opinion, since his brother Esau, who had a deathly hatred of him, was coming to him on the road with 400 men, prayed to God that He would rescue him?

The fifth practical application is philosophical. It is to make known that it is possible that God might promise good to a human being, yet He might not keep the promise when

the promise is essentially conditional, like the promise God made to Jacob that He would guard him in all his goings. It is not possible for a promise like this to be fulfilled except for someone who, on account of his cleaving to God, this wonderful providence accordingly cleaves to him. This is why Jacob was afraid, because he reckoned himself of insufficient virtue for this wonderful providence to cleave to him. Rather, he was small and humble in relation to the good things that God bestowed upon him by means of providence cleaving to him.

The sixth practical application is ethical. It is that it is fitting for a human being to give up something of his own to his enemy. He should surrender to him as completely as possible, until he makes peace with him, even if his enemy is less in virtue and he is greater in virtue. This is because he does this submission for his own sake, that he might escape from his enemy, not for the sake of his enemy. It is also fitting that what he gives him be as perfect as possible, and that he arrange it in such a way that the gift appears greater. Do you not see that Jacob humbled himself before Esau in a wonderful manner and gave him this wonderful present? Jacob wanted perfection in it, which means that the males in each flock would be completely sufficient for the females. In addition, he commanded [his men] to leave space between the flocks in order that the gift would appear larger.

The seventh practical application is ethical. It is

that it is fitting for a person to keep from crossing at a place where there is danger until after he tests to make clear that there is no danger in crossing there. This is why you find that Jacob reckoned to himself that if he should discern while crossing the river that it was so high that it would not be possible to cross it, he would be able to turn back without harm overtaking them. He wanted to cross the river first before bringing across all that he had with him. If he took on the burden of bringing them over before he tested the depth of the water, and found the water to be such that he would not be able to cross, perhaps he would not be able to turn back with those of his wives and children whom he was bringing across.

The eighth practical application is philosophical. It is to make known the strength of the providence of God for those who cleave to Him, such as that which was shown to Jacob in the prophecy in order to ease his mind about what he feared, [so that he would know] that he had prevailed over the angel, and (thus) he would also struggle with human beings and prevail. Thus the reason is clear that He commanded that his name be changed, as He changed the name of Abraham and Sarah when He promised him that she would bear a child to him. It is as if He said that even if it was fitting that Jacob would be defeated, Israel would not be defeated. As the rabbis said,¹⁶ Avram does not beget, but Abraham does beget. This is the reason that this change was

¹⁶ Editor's footnote: see Bereshit Rabbah 44:10.

doubled for Jacob when God promised him that a nation and an assembly of nations would come forth from him (Gen. 35:10-11), as if He said that even if Jacob does not beget again, Israel will beget. This is the reason that the rabbis said¹⁷ that a change of name is one of the things that cancels the (evil) decree against a human being.

The ninth practical application is philosophical. It is to make known that it is not possible for a human being to comprehend the essence of the Active Intellect, as a few of the ancients thought. This is why the angel told him "Why do you ask my name?" as we have explained. We have already explained the true meaning of this in the first section of The Wars of the Lord.

The tenth practical application is to make known the virtue of Jacob. This is that his rank had already approached that of the angel so that it appeared to [Jacob] that he wrestled with him. The mark which remains from this prophecy attests to the truth of the prophecy, namely, that he found that he limped on his hip when he awoke. This is the reason that we are commanded not to eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, in order that this wonderful prophecy will be made known to us. In addition, this mark also attests to the truth of prophecy, which is a fundamental principle of the Torah; if one does not believe in prophecy, the Torah in its entirety falls.

¹⁷ Editor's footnote: see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh ha-Shanah, p. 16b.

Jacob at the River

by Joel Rosenberg¹⁸

Jacob alone at the river Yabbok. The moon's reflection dances on the blackness of the waters. All is quiet. Work, wealth and procreation of the past three Sabbaths of years sent on ahead. Do they exist, now that they've disappeared beyond the waters? Jacob, self-stripped, stands to his knees in water, searching its crests in vain for his reflection. And the river gleams, obsidian, unyielding--giving back only a twinlike name: Yabbok. Yaakob. Yabbok. Yaakob.

"Surely, I am just like water," Jacob says to no one. "Smooth and devious. I can flow where paths are cut for me. I'm flexible. I bend to serve. I steal away whatever sits within my grasp. I stay alive only by keeping on the move. I stop and I shall dry up, vanish. I am always on the run. To live is but to run. I live in borders between lands, but I am not a land, only the contours of a land, and even then, not my own land. I have no house. I am no house. The moon is dancing at my knees. She mocks me. I am no one. I am chaos. I am going mad. I am the Empty Space of God. I am the Kings of Edom. Tohu, Bohu, Tihamat, Leviathan, Behemoth and Rahab. *Where have all my labors gone?* They've turned to water, lapping at my knees with the dancing moon, unsaying my name. Yabbok. Yabbok."

Jacob stripped of kin and wives, of soldiers and of bodyguard, of concubines and servants, animals and wealth, of

¹⁸ Gates to the New City, ed. Schwartz, pp. 155-156.

amulets and godlets, standing empty in the lapping Yabbok, slowly goes berserk. He kicks and thrashes at the water, screaming: "Bless me! Bless me!" He throws his body at the swells and ripples, tumbling and frothing, pounding up explosions of thin water sheets that mingle with the moonlit river-mist, a luminous and radiant halo of pulverized droplets enveloping the raging madman. Yaakob wrestling the churning Yabbok ceaselessly throughout the night, piercing the countryside and forests with the echoing cry "Bless me! Bless me! Give me a name! Give me a name! Bless me! Bless me! . . ."

Some villagers on a hill beyond the Yabbok's southern shore, hearing these sounds, grow frightened. "A *melammu*!"¹⁹ Look at this, a cloud of God! There will be earthquakes, famine, rains held back--or worse: invaders from the North!" But drawing near, they see this play of northern lights give way to human form. It is a madman, thrashing at the river. "He is not from here," they tell each other. "He's a stranger. A berserk soothsayer, possibly a prophet or a dervish. Or a beggar, following these caravans of Syrian migrants that passed through a while ago; he's hoping for their table scraps, a coin or two, a quaff of ale. We'd better calm him down, though, he'll wake up the animals and children, the whole place will be a bedlam. Why, the cats are howling up a storm already. Let's go call that huntsman

¹⁹ A *melammu* is an Akkadian word representing the way that gods appeared in Babylonian mythology. Ibid., p. 754.

from Seir. You know, that hardy, hairy fellow, he's a match for this one, he'll know what to do."

And Jacob goes on pouring all his frenzy at the Yabbok, trying to shape its crests and swells into the letters of the alphabet and into words, to carve out names with fingernails, and shape the flowing stream into a text and into commentaries, but in vain. Into the night he raves, the pieces of the shattered and reshattered moon falling around his legs. He stumbles on a hidden rock, gouging his inner thigh. The cloud of slammed-up sheets of water streaks with red. An edge of pain creeps in the taunts and challenges. "A name! A naaaaaame!"

And then, as if by gradual stages, the incessant churning seems to undergo a change. It is slowly interlaced with silences. These grow into a cloak, a mantle of stillness, almost a straitjacket. The sounds of crickets, chirping birds and barking dogs intrude. The madman feels a long yearned counterweight answering his heaves and thrashes. Hands reach out to grab his wrists and pin them down. The water beads into a thousand moons against the surface of a hairy shoulder, droplets like the eyes of Argus staring back at him. He sees his beard and face--his own--look back at him a thousandfold. He smells the smell of hides, the blood of venison, the taste of leeks and garlic. The waters of the Yabbok have become a man.

They stand anchored against each other like the two legs of a wishbone, pushing isometrically, moving not north,

not south, affixed dead center, lodged against each other in what seems an everlasting impasse. And he sees that he cannot win over him. He touches him upon his inner thigh. He claps the inner thigh of Jacob while he wrestles him. He says: "Let me get out of here; the sun is coming up!" He says: "But I won't let you go until you bless me." So he asks him: "What's your name?" He says: "Jacob." He says: "Your name is not to be called Jacob anymore, but Israel, one-who-fights-the-god. For you have fought with gods and people, and you've won."

Their discourse trades this way amid their unremitting standoff. (In the telling of it, an exchange of pronouns makes it hard to tell who speaks, until the one gives to the other his new name.) Then Israel summons one last question: "Tell me, and what's your name?" He says: "Why should you ask my name?" And there he blesses him.

Jacob came to call the place "the Face of God" (Penuel), because, he'd later say, "I've seen God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared."

The sun gleams red upon him as he finishes fording the Face of God. He walks on into Ammon favoring one side--his wounded thigh. No longer prisoner of a double. No more running from his shadow. No more living in the interstices. At last, landed, asymmetrical and aged. Somewhere, not far from here, is home.

A Little Over Jordan²⁰

A little over Jordan,
As Genesis record,
An Angel and a Wrestler
Did wrestle long and hard.

Till, morning touching mountain,
And Jacob waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To breakfast and return.

"Not so," quoth wily Jacob,
And girt his loins anew,
"Until thou bless me, stranger!"
The which acceded to:

Light swung the silver fleeces
Peniel hills among,
And the astonished Wrestler
Found he had worsted God!

--Emily Dickinson

²⁰ Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 300.

VA-YISHLAH

GENESIS 32:8-33

I sent my family on across the river,
Lovingly I helped them prepare their tents.

Tenderly I kissed my children and blessed them,
Not knowing if I would see them again.

Across the river from all I loved I waited alone,
Remembering the loneliness of God.

I sat by the moving waters in the darkness,
Waiting, listening, searching, yearning.

When He came I didn't know Him,
Thinking He was another man.

But He seized me with violence
And I fought, panted, gritted my teeth.

Straining and twisting every muscle,
I struggled for my life, and my strength held.

In the morning He marked my thigh and changed my name
And sent me back across the river to my life.

Around the fires at night I tell my children this story,
Knowing that they will also search and struggle in the night.

In the darkness of my tent I pray to God
To remember my children, and to come to them.

I pray to God that through their struggles
They, too, will learn to know Him.

--Ruth Brin

²¹ Harvest, p. 36.

Jacob and the Angel²²

Her arms pinned back, impaled against the night
He held her in his desperate embrace
For minutes, hours. Until at first half-light
He looked into the shadows of her face.

Something about the eyes . . . He *knew* those eyes,
Intimately the mouth, the child's skin,
Forgotten long ago. Beyond surprise,
He caught his breath and stared.

Recognition

Came casually, like an afterthought.
He felt her body ease, then move away
A fraction of an inch. A bird cried out.
Already what she had come there to bestow--
A wound, a name--was lucid as the sky.
The sun had risen. He could let her go.

--Stephen Mitchell

²² Voices Within the Ark, eds. Schwartz and Rudolf, p. 556.

Jacob and the Angel²³

Just before dawn she sighed and held him
that way, and defeated him.
And he held her that way, and defeated her,
and both of them knew that a hold
brings death.
They agreed to do without names.

But in the first light
he saw her body,
which remained white in the places
the swimsuit had covered, yesterday.

Then someone called her suddenly from above,
twice.
The way you call a little girl from playing
in the yard.
And he knew her name, and let her go.

--Yehuda Amichai

--translated by Stephen Mitchell

²³ Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, eds. and trans. Bloch and Mitchell,
p. 40.

The Wrestler²⁴

When that stinking angel Ed, the smartest boy
in violet shorts, lifted and dropped
me to the mat, when that slob landed
on me, I went deaf to the skinny birds
who ringed the mat with jeers,
heard only my breath escaping.
For a dizzy moment I confused him
with one of the dumbbell-tough thugs
who flicks his ashes at girlish boys,
but then I flipped onto my safe belly
and rose, ass first, to shake this nuisance
from my back.
He dropped me by the thighs this time
and worked my shoulder blades
toward the floor. No prayer could save me.
On the count of three Ed rose
like vapor and vanished down a dark corridor
toward some book, no doubt,
leaving me, the blessed son of Isaac,
crushed on the matted earth
from which my children have risen
to take revenge.

--Richard S. Chess

²⁴ Tikkun, March/April 1989, p. 79.

Last Words²⁵

Three days ago, my suitcases
were hunched there, in his hospital room,
in the corner, I had to pick them up
by the scruff of their necks, and leave him. I kept
putting them down, and going back
to kiss him again although he was exhausted,
shining like tarnished silver, and yet
I could not seem to pick up those bags
and walk out the door the last time. I kept
going back to the mouth he would lift, his
forehead glittering with effort, his eyes
slewing back, shying, until
finally he cried out *Last kiss!*
and I kissed him and left. This morning, his wife
called to tell me he has ceased to speak,
so those are his last words to me,
he is leaving me with--and it is ending with a *kiss--*
a command for mercy, the offer of his cracked
creator lips. To plead that I leave,
my father asked me for a kiss! I would not
leave till he had done so, I will not let thee go except thou
beg for it.

--Sharon Olds

²⁵ Father, p. 23.

השיר על אמנו רחל אמנו

יילכו שני המלואימניקים. תראי, אל תירוי.
 וישא יעקב רגליו בלך ארצה בני קדם.
 ויאמר להם יעקב: בן-עיריון תחמיה ארנוב, אחי מאין אחים;
 לבן-עיריון תחמיה ארנוב אין תעובה ואין חשיבה וילכו שניהם.

צריך של בן-עבי מנחת עץ
 מקומי פתוחים של בתיה לישסקי.
 ולא ציור על כל ציור ולא שאנאל
 על כל צרפת ובית נשא שישו ושישו.

בפנים יושב יעקב.
 עשו עומד בחוץ.
 בעד החלון נשקפה ותיכבב
 אם עשו בעד האשכב.

אדמה מסנפת.
 לא צריך להתחיל אותה. לדבר
 בה צריך. להדר בלבושה. כמו כרים
 לבשו צאן בן לבשו אותה ארץ.

אל תקראו לה בשמות רבים.
 קראו לה רחל.
 אדם נולד בילד ומת בילד.
 כל זה בסמוך לאם.

אדמה מסנפת.
 לא צריך להתחיל אותה. לדבר
 בה צריך. להדר. כמו כרים
 בן לבשו את הארץ הזאת.

-- אבות ישורון

²⁶ Syrian-African Rift, trans. and foreword by Schimmel, p. 34.

The poem on our Mother Our Mother Rachel²⁷

And the two reservist guys went. Look, don't shoot.
And Jacob lifted his legs and went to the land of B'nei
Kedem.
And Jacob said unto them: Ben-Gurion and Nechemiah Argov, my
brothers from Whence?
From Ben-Gurion and Nechemiah Argov no reaction no response
and the two went off.

Ben-Zvi's shack a wooden candelabrum
of local-made carvings by Batia Lishanski,
and not a painting on every painting and not Chagall
on every France and presidential mansion rejoice and rejoice.

Inside sits Jacob.
Esau stands outside.
From the window looks and wails
Esau's Mother from the lattice.

Punished Earth.
You needn't start up with her. To speak
to her you need. To trick out her wardrobe. As meadows
wore sheep so we wore her the Land.

Don't call her by many names.
Call her Rachel.
A man is born as a child and dies as a child.
All this dependent on the Mother.

Punished Earth.
You needn't start up with her. To speak
to her you need. To trick out. As meadows
so we wore this Land.

--Avot Yeshurun
--translated by Harold Schimmel

²⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

עשו,

באוואקסענער, געבענטשט מיט שמעקנדיקן פֿעלדן
דיר קומט פֿון מיר אַ גרייזער חוץ,
ער ליגט פֿאַרזונקען אין מיין טיף,
באַגראָבן אין מייןע פֿאַרשאַטענע אוצרות . . .

עשו,

שטיל, הינטער דייןע פֿלייצעס,
שטיל האָב איך געזויגן די ריחות פֿון דיין מול,
דאָס קרעפֿטיקע געטראַנק
פֿון דיר, עשו, שמעקנדיק פֿעלד.

עשו,

האַריקער, מיט בלינדן טאַטנס ברכה
אויף וואָלדן־קאַפּ,
אויף מילדן, בלאַנדן —
מאָן מיך ניט אַצינד. . . מאָן מיך ניט אַצינד. . .
טראַפֿנווייז דינס איז איינגעזונקען
אין מיין גרייזן אומעט.
טראַפֿנווייז אויסגעהויכט
מיט אַלע מייןע טויזנטער נשמות,
אויף אַש פֿון גאַנג,
אויף אַש פֿון זיין . . .

עשו,

אויף ברייטן פֿינגער־פֿלאַך פֿון שימל־אוראַלט
איז אויסגעשפּינט,
אויסגעשטיקט,
אויסגעשטריקט
מיין אוראַלט האַרץ,
מיין גרייזער טרוים,
מיין טונקל־גלאַנציק קוקן . . .
זוך דאָרט, זוך . . .

עשו,

קער זיך אָפּ פֿון מיר צו דייןע שעפּסעלעך.
צו דייןע שמעקנדיקע קוואַלן,
לייג אַרויף דיין האַנט אויף זיי,
דיין האַריק אַלטע האַנט . . .

--ל"ב קוויטקא

²⁸ גרין גראס [Green Grass], p. 146.

Esau,
Hairy Esau, blessed with fragrant fields;
To you I owe an ancient debt,
Deep debt within my marrow,
Buried in my innards' shadows. . . .

Esau,
Quietly, behind your back,
Quietly I sensed the savor of your good fortune,
Esau--that sturdy draft
of your fragrant fields. . . .

Esau,
Hairy Esau, with our blind father's blessing
On your wild, wooded head,
On your gentle, fair hair--
Don't ask for payment now, Esau . . . not now . . .
Drop by drop you have seeped your way
Into my gloom of distant days,
Breath by breath exhaled
With all my many-thousand souls,
On the ashes of the road,
On the ashes of being. . . .
Esau,
On the broad canvas of pain, of moldy distant days,
Is spun,
Is sewn,
Is stitched,
My ancient heart.
My ancient dreams
My dark glassy stare. . . .
Look there, look there. . . .
Esau,
Leave me and tend your sheep,
Your fragrant springs,
Lay your hand on them,
Your hairy ancient hand. . . .

--Leyb Kvitko
--translated by Allen Mandelbaum
and Harold Rabinowitz

²⁹ Modern Yiddish Verse, eds. Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk, p. 296.

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