

Brotherly Reunion . . . or Battleground?

“Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau”
(Genesis 32:4.)

As Genesis 32 opens, Jacob, with his entourage of wives, children, handmaids, household staff, animals and treasures, is travelling back to his homeland, to Canaan. He has just spent twenty years working for his uncle, Laban, and now leaves as an economic success. But what awaits him at home? His father, Isaac, is still alive; his mother, Rebecca, is probably already dead; and now he is distressed by news that, *“Your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him”* (Genesis 32:7).

Why is Jacob distressed by this news? The text does not say, but inspired by traditional Jewish approaches to the sacred text we can imaginatively and prayerfully engage with the biblical story, even ‘reading between the lines’ of the text. After reading the story in **Genesis 32:4-24**, let’s begin our reflection by recalling what we know about the two brothers.

Jacob is the favourite of his mother, Rebekah. He is a homebody who becomes a schemer and steals the birthright of his elder twin brother. Esau is a man of the outdoors, quick tempered, a hunter-gatherer. He is the favourite of his father, Isaac. At their last meeting he was furious with Jacob, his final words being: When the time is right, I will kill my brother Jacob! (see Genesis 27:41) We can well imagine that Jacob is frightened by Esau’s approach; that he fears for his life and for the safety of his household. Yes, his brother may be coming to greet him; but, then again, he might be coming to kill him!

For Jacob, who has a history of being a schemer, quick thinking is called for. Let’s imagine what could be going through his mind:

I need a plan. Is this the time to try to heal old wounds? Maybe I can set the scene for reconciliation. I have the financial resources to do it. I’ll show him I’m a man of means. I’ll shower him

with gifts from my ample supplies. That should soften his heart. And, just perhaps, Esau might even be coming to say ‘let bygones be bygones’.

But, then again, suppose he’s not. Why is he coming to meet me with four hundred men? I need a plan to deal with the worst-case scenario. And, after twenty years with Uncle Laban, the shrewd wheel-dealer, I’ve learned a few tricks. I’ll divide my entourage and my treasures into two camps, and have them move out separately. If Esau attacks one, perhaps the other camp will escape and survive...

When you imaginatively, prayerfully and ‘playfully’ enter into this scene, anticipating a meeting between two estranged brothers, what do you see; what insights emerge? Do you smell reconciliation in the air, or is it battle plans?

Can you relate to the complexities of the moment? Have you experienced estrangement and reconciliation in your own family or community life? What dilemmas have you encountered in the reconciliation process? What do you think of Jacob’s handling of the situation? What counsel would you give him?

The story of Jacob and Esau’s reunion in Genesis 32 certainly displays elements of both hope and distrust, progress and uneasiness, and in this tension the Torah masterfully captures the challenges and risks of taking steps to reconciliation. •

Bibliography: Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1994); Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* (New York, 1988). Scripture: JPS.

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