

Noa Kushner  
Vayishlach: Room For All  
December 10, 2022

Benjamin, after studying with you I started seeing Esau in a whole new way.

In fact, your insistence that Esau has something to teach us Made me go back in Torah to the moment when Jacob first steals Esau's blessing

Remember? It's a long, dramatic scene where Jacob dresses up like Esau, going to far as to make his hands hairy to trick his blind father into getting Esau's blessing

The whole family acting as if they have no choice as if this strange charade is forced on them

Jacob asking his mother, Rebecca, "Are you sure this is gonna work?"

And Rebecca is pushing, really forcing the situation as if she herself does not believe that it is the right thing to do

And famously, Isaac the blind father, does not really seem to buy it, asking again and again, "Are you who you say you are?"

The tension is thick, we can tell – they know something's not right

But, and here is the tragedy, *they keep going through with it anyway*

*As if it must be this way*

*As if there is no other way*

And it's so strange, even Jacob who is supposedly stacking the blessing deck in his favor

His machinations are so repellent

He parents so clueless about how blessings work

*We end up feeling bad for all three of them*

2.

But now, Benjamin, after studying together, you helped me to see something new

Esau knows something they don't

You see, Esau is the only one who is not under this strange spell

He comes in from the field

Breathless, with the dish his father likes

Honest, ready to be blessed

But then, when everything begins to be revealed

When his blind father, Isaac, realizing the extent of his mistake realizes,

"Someone else came in and pretended to be you, Esau!

And I went along with it!"

When everything begins to be revealed,  
Unlike his family who act as if nothing can change, as if all is  
preordained, like clockwork

Esau has two shocking responses  
Like two violent bursts of fresh air:

First, Esau *cries*.

After all this tiptoeing around and planning and lying, Esau's  
cries are like sunshine, like disinfectant  
They cut through all that has been unsaid  
They cut through the machinations  
Conveying the unapologetic truth, all that was missing from  
the scene

Esau not only cries, he wails bitterly, in two different verses.<sup>1</sup>

וַיִּצְעַק צְעָקָה גְדֹלָה וַיִּמְרָה עַד־מְאֹד / a great bitter cry

As if Esau is crying for everyone else who has been caught  
up in games and pretense  
As if Esau is crying for all of us caught in our own lies, big  
and small  
All of us who think there can be no other way

I have to say, for the first time, Benjamin I thought of Esau's  
cry as the cry of truth itself

---

<sup>1</sup> (27:34, 38)

Truth entering the room

Painful but still, after all the carefully orchestrated moments,  
A relief

3.

But that's not all

When Esau finds out that his father has given his blessing  
away

He does a second thing, an incredible thing

Something so obvious and yet, something everyone else  
seems to have missed

When he finds out that his father has given his blessing away  
Esau asks for, no, he demands (!) a blessing, *anyway*

You see, Esau understands something many people in  
Genesis (and the world)

Do not seem to understand yet

That if there was once one blessing, now there can be two

That there is no such thing as 'no more blessing'

That while, sure, specific blessings with a predictive quality  
may be limited

The act of blessing, by definition, is inexhaustible and  
infinite

In fact, in just four verses Esau brings this up this precise  
point *three times*

When he first find out, Esau cries and says

“Bless me too, father!” (27:34)

בְּרַכְנִי גַם־אֲנִי אָבִי

And Isaac, still in a stupor says, “Your brother took your blessing”

But see,

Even if Isaac is slow to understand

Esau has not asked for *that* blessing, he already cried about losing it

*Esau just wants his own, additional, blessing*

בְּרַכְנִי גַם־אֲנִי אָבִי

So Esau asks again<sup>2</sup>

“Haven’t you saved a blessing for me?”

As if Esau is testing the family rules

Teaching Isaac, and perhaps Rebecca and where is Jacob – how thick are those tent walls, anyway?

It is unimaginable to me that Jacob is not listening somewhere –

Esau is teaching us all, “It doesn’t have to be this way”

Just because a mistake was made, doesn’t mean it has to *remain* this way

Without a hope for repair

So that even after Isaac, still clinging to his old rules

Throwing up his hands, asking,

---

<sup>2</sup>(27:36)

“Esau, it’s done, what do you want me to do?”

Even in the face of this  
Esau asks, demands, a *third time*<sup>3</sup>  
*Do you only have a single blessing?!*

הַבְּרָכָה אַחַת הוּא לְךָ אָבִי? /

“Bless me too, father!”

בְּרַכְנִי גַם־אֲנִי אָבִי

And then, he cries, that’s the second time he cries

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵשָׂו קוֹלוֹ /

he lifts up his voice and cries.

You see, *Esau just keeps crying and asking until he breaks through*

He is not ashamed

He understands, he alone seems to understand, that  
blessings are not finite,

That blessings, by definition, do not run out

And then, a miracle happens

What do you know?, Isaac “finds” another blessing and  
blesses Esau

And Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has a beautiful treatment of this  
So intense is the pain of the stealing and the subterfuge

---

<sup>3</sup> (27:38)

When we tell this story, we sometimes don't remember this part

But it is true, in the end, *Isaac blesses Esau*

Not a nothing blessing either

A blessing of wealth and power and, importantly, the possibility of being his own person, not destined to serve his younger brother

A blessing that allows for something other than competition between brothers

See, Isaac finally learns: There is always another blessing

The child teaches the parent

The student teaches the teacher

There is room for us all

4.

Isaac learns from Esau

But, famously, Jacob takes a while longer to figure things out

So that this week

After a lifetime of accumulating four wives, depending on how you count, a lot of children, a lot of sheep not to mention a massive feud with his father in law

So that this week

Right before he is about to reunite with Esau, after having been estranged all this time

Jacob, famously, I know, it's Genesis right?

Jacob, famously, is alone and struggles with an angel all night, until dawn

I don't want to talk about who this angel is, too much there, Okay, it could be Esau himself, Esau's guardian angel, a rogue angel, God, a piece of Jacob and / or probably all of the above

And I don't have time to focus on Jacob's transformation that night

All right, it is a transformation that will take a life to complete And one that earns him the name Israel, "God wrestler"

But what I really want to talk about and need to talk about is that not only does Jacob fight fair

Wrestling without pretense

Without his historic propensity towards subterfuge or clever tactics

Unavoidably, unapologetically himself

I now believe what helps Jacob that night

Is that he remembers what he learned from his brother Esau Back when Esau confronted Isaac

See, I'm convinced, it is obvious to me that Jacob was standing close by

Perhaps with the costume of his brother still on his body

Jacob was standing close by and could hear everything

Every cry of Esau's, every cutting and honest sob



Jacob was standing close by and could hear it all  
Esau's pain at not receiving his intended blessing, true, but  
also

*Esau's determined insistence that he be blessed  
nevertheless*

Jacob was standing close by and could hear it all  
That there is always another blessing  
That there is room for us all

And so, as Jacob wrestles through the night  
We know there's strain  
Famously, Jacob's hip gets wrenched  
We know from Rashi that some say the fighting creates dust,  
some say so much dust is kicked up that it reaches heaven<sup>4</sup>  
But we maybe didn't notice, at least I never noticed before  
Right there in the Talmud<sup>5</sup>, in describing this very fight, the  
rabbis quote a verse from Hosea<sup>6</sup>:

וַיִּכַּל בְּכָה וַיִּתְחַנֵּן לּוֹ

"He cried and he begged him"

Only the rabbis are not sure, and we are not totally sure,  
who was it that cried, who was it that begged?

---

<sup>4</sup> Rashi to Gen. 32:25

<sup>5</sup> Chullin 92a:3

<sup>6</sup> Hosea 12:5

And while the rabbis seem to think it was the angel who  
cried and begged to be released  
I want to suggest this shabbat instead  
That Jacob learned from Esau  
That crying, honest crying, the voice of truth, has an  
unmistakable and enduring power  
And so it was actually Jacob who cried and pleaded  
Not to manipulate or gain power  
But to help convey a truth that was emerging from deep  
within him as he fought

And it was this ability to cry that helped him cut through what  
until then seemed to be an entrenched, irresolvable  
situation  
Allowing him a kind of dignity even in the face of struggle  
Exactly what he learned from Esau

So it now makes sense that the very next thing out of Jacob's  
mouth  
The word *berachtani* is basically the same  
Certainly the message is the same  
The very next thing out of Jacob's mouth  
As he struggles and cries  
Is what he heard once Esau say to Isaac  
Back when they were young in their father's tent

"I am not letting you go unless you bless me"

"I am not letting you go unless you bless me"

"I am not letting you go unless you bless me"

The rabbis say that this demand is because Jacob wanted to legitimately claim the old blessing that he stole long ago<sup>7</sup>  
Or it could be he wants a brand new blessing, after all, the blessing he gets is a new name, our name, Israel  
But I think it doesn't matter whether the blessing he gets is old or new or both, because it amounts to the same thing

"I am not letting you go unless you bless me"

You see, Jacob has learned the Torah of Esau (!)  
That as inevitable as things may seem, the cry of truth still cuts through every night  
That there is always another blessing  
And there is room for us all

Benjamin, I dare say, this is your torah, too  
Don't let us forget it

---

<sup>7</sup> Rashi to 32:27

