

Esav's Divine Countenance

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The Jewish Center

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On September 20th, Hurricane Maria swept through Puerto Rico causing billions of dollars in damage. The victims of the hurricane haven't been in the headlines recently, but more than two months later, the majority of the island's residents are still without power. Here are US citizens in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Who's responding?

This week I learned a part of the answer.

UJA-Federation, in partnership with the Greater New York Hospital Association and a foundation called Afya, has sent more than 65,000 pounds of humanitarian supplies. The work they're doing is saving countless lives and every person in this room who supports Federation and its affiliates should feel a great sense of pride.

In my November sermon series, I tried to cover 100 years of American Jewish history in three weeks. This morning, I have a much less ambitious goal. I just want to understand the meaning of one pasuk in our parsha. And really I just want to understand the meaning of one word.

After decades apart, Yaakov and Esav finally stand opposite one another. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Yaakov's fears are misplaced. Esav never had any intention of harming his brother. But in the moment, Yaakov is terrified that Esav is still consumed by animosity and vengeance. And in the course of their reconciliation, Yaakov says something that's very difficult to understand. He wants Esav to accept the gift he's prepared and he says:

כִּי עַל-כֵּן רָאִיתִי פְּנֵיךָ, כִּרְאֵת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים--וַתִּרְצָנִי .

For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me charitably.

So my very simple question is: What does it mean to see the face of God?

And of all the places on earth where one might encounter the divine, could we imagine any place less likely than the face of Esav? Here was the man bent on fratricide – the archetypal opposite of our pious forefathers. What could Yaakov possibly mean?

Chazal make three suggestions.

- Maybe, as the Gemara (Sotah 41a) posits, we're barking up the wrong tree. Maybe we shouldn't assign any special significance to Yaakov's words. After all, Yaakov is in mortal danger. If he's saying something complimentary about Esav, his goal is only to flatter his brother and save his own skin.
- A second possibility is that we should read the word אֱלֹהִים – not as God – but as a judge. In פרשת משפטים, for instance, the Torah uses the word often to mean judges (Ex. 22:7,8). Yaakov is admitting to Esav that in this moment he is the judge and jury. He holds all the cards and Yaakov freely admits that he stands at the mercy of his brother.

- Or maybe אֱלוֹקִים is a reference to the angel with whom Yaakov struggled only hours earlier. “I’ve seen this story before,” Yaakov says. Your face reminds me of your archangel. “I’ve already wrestled with you and I know that I can survive.”

I want to offer a fourth possibility. I want to suggest that Yaakov chooses his words very carefully and he means exactly what he says.

It’s important to remember that the source of the conflict between Yaakov and Esav wasn’t the sale of the birthright, but Yitzchak’s conferral of the firstborn blessing on Yaakov. At its core, the enmity between these two brothers has its roots in the words of Yitzchak. As soon as he pronounces the בְּרִכָּה, the seeds of fracture are irrevocably sown.

What, then, are those words? How does Yitzchak’s blessing begin? וַיִּתֵּן לְךָ הָאֱלוֹקִים מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם

When Yaakov looks at Esav and says that he sees the face of אֱלוֹקִים, he sees the אֱלוֹקִים of his father’s bracha. He declares that he’s prepared to return to the moment in time when his path and the path of Esav began to diverge. “I recognize now,” Yaakov says, “that I could have been you and you could have been me.” For Yaakov Avinu, to see the face of the divine is to see to himself in the person of his brother.

And a closer look at the text reveals that this is the only thing on Yaakov’s mind. Everything about their encounter returns us to the scene in which Yaakov became Esav.

Of course we know that he wants Esav to accept his gift. But whereas the gift is called a מְנַחָה, Yaakov finally insists: וְקָה נָא אֶת בְּרַכְתִּי! To the extent it’s possible, Yaakov wants Esav to know that he’s perfectly happy to give back his ill-begotten blessing.

Yaakov says וַיִּרְאֵהוּ – he perceives something about his brother – just as the Torah tells us וַיִּרְאֵהוּ בְנֵי יִצְחָק – Yitzchak perceived something about Esav.

Perhaps the most essential part of Isaac’s blessing is הוּא גִבִּיר לְאֶחֶיךָ – you will be the master of your brother.

With the passage of time and accumulation of life wisdom, Yaakov now understands that fate is a funny thing. Yesterday’s axiom today may be outmoded. When Yaakov left home he was penniless and unattached; now he’s amassed a great fortune and built a family. Years ago Esav was seething with homicidal rage; now he’s the epitome of reconciliation.

Just who is the master of whom remains an unanswered question. It would have been so easy for life to turn out differently. It would have taken so little for our fortunes to have been reversed.

Of course the issue is most pronounced in the case of twins. But the idea has universal application. This, I believe, is what it means to see the face of the divine: To recognize that I and the person opposite me could so easily have gone down different paths.

It's not that human agency doesn't matter. It most assuredly does. But agency can't account for fate.

When UJA leaders identified those unmet needs in Puerto Rico they didn't just raise money, they decided to act. They called any donor they could think of with access to a private jet and organized dozens of flights to support the relief efforts.

They recognized, as Yaakov did, that the line separating disaster from safety is almost imperceptible. What causes a storm to spare one region and decimate another? We simply can't explain it. Had Esav returned from the field a moment earlier – had Yitzchak privileged his sense of touch over his sense of sound – the fortunes of his sons could have been reversed! Esav could have been Yaakov; Yaakov could have been Esav.

When we see the images of individuals in distress, of course we have to be moved. But Yaakov teaches us that being moved is insufficient. We have to see ourselves in them; we have to remember that the blessings we enjoy could just have easily have been bestowed upon someone else.

Perhaps that's part of why Chazal see Yaakov and Esav as the forerunners to the two goats that feature so prominently on Yom Kippur. One שְׁעִיר לַיהוָה and one שְׁעִיר לְעִזָּאזֵל – twin goats, identical in every way. One is fated to the service of the divine and one is fated to be cast off a cliff. Each could just as well have been the other.

We've spent time this year learning about Rabbi Jung's contributions to Zionism and Jewish education; to Kashrut and to Mikvah. But it seems to me that there was nothing that moved him more than the cause of helping someone in need. He saved thousands of Jews from certain death during the Holocaust. He took care of refugees here in New York in the aftermath of the war. And he spent decades working with the JDC to help Jews in need wherever in the world they may have been.

He appreciated the extraordinary capacity of this community and channeled that capacity into the performance of inspired acts of חסד and צדקה.

As members of The Jewish Center, we have the great honor of being the heirs to his extraordinary legacy. It's up to us to see the פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים of every person in distress – to see a reflection of the divine that reminds us how easily things could have turned out differently – how we could have been the ones in need.

After his passing, we established the Rabbi Jung Memorial Fund to continue the work Rabbi Jung began. And every year before Rabbi Jung's yahrzeit we dedicate a Shabbat to supporting it.

Every day people call on us for help.

Of course it's this fund that's there to help at times of crisis or when a natural disaster strikes. But it's also the fund that quietly and discretely helps the members of our community in much more mundane and less glamorous ways:

- Someone's fallen behind and can't make the rent;
- A family's breadwinner and is out of work and the tuition costs are just too much;
- Or someone is sick and their insurance just won't cover enough of the bill.
- The list goes on.

Of course we should all support the work of organizations like UJA. But as the prophet Isaiah said, עניים מרודים תביא בית, – charity begins at home.

We're not going to hold an open appeal as we've done in the past, but when the email or envelope arrives asking for your support, I hope you'll see the פני אלוקים, the face of the divine ותרצני – and respond charitably.