



Vayeshev

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CONTENTS: Holzer (Page 1); Simckes (Page 9)

*Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.*

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**BIBLICAL PROPORTIONALITY: THE WAR TO RESTORE OUR FAITH IN MAN**

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I am blessed to work as a surgeon in Sourasky (Ichilov) hospital, a major academic center in the heart of Tel Aviv. In that capacity, I interact with patients and physicians from all walks of Israeli life, well beyond the ‘bubble’ of our Anglo-heavy, Modern Orthodox neighborhood in Beit Shemesh.

Since the catastrophic events of October 7, Israelis have been burdened with emotions—shock, fear, sadness, anger, disappointment—which have matured into verbalization, often in the form of complaints or

questions. The deepest questions I have encountered at work center on loss of faith—but at work, it is not faith in God, but in man, that has collapsed. When I asked one of my fellow attending physicians how he was doing, he responded: “If despair was a hat, I would be wearing a sombrero.” A long discussion with a local *hiloni* patient fleshed out the despair: “It is clear that our lives here are doomed to forever be ‘by your sword you shall live.’” All the bridges we had built, the friendships we had formed, the goodwill extended to our ‘cousins’ presuming that they were rational actors had all gone up in the smoke of the *otef* towns. The assumption that 75 years of statehood had succeeded in making us Ben Gurion’s ‘normal’ people was laid to rest. It turns out that we remain just as much the subject of genocidal mania in 2023 as in 1903 Kishinev, whose pogrom was the key rallying event for

Zionist immigration in the first place.

The loss of faith in humankind stems from 'concentric' circles of displays of inhumanity.

At the center are the barbaric hordes who breached the gates on Simhat Torah and massacred, maimed, raped, and kidnapped with unspeakable cruelty and brutality. Mothers, children, the elderly, even peace activists who had assisted Gazans—none were spared in this sadistic orgy. The thousands of bloodthirsty marauders were accompanied by rampaging and looting civilians and shared their crimes in real time with noncombatant family and friends back in Gaza, who celebrated with gusto, with no vocal dissenters—such that despite the protestations of well-meaning international actors that “ Hamas does not represent the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza,” it seemed plain that the port of the Philistine pentapolis had become a monstrous moral miasma. It is one thing to learn of Nazi horrors in the abstract; it is another to live the human incarnation of the demonic firsthand and to perceive the horror of an entire society convulsed by bloodlust.

Then there is the Muslim world. The streets of Amman, Cairo, Istanbul, Islamabad, London, France, and Sydney are congested with thousands who rage and rant at the Jewish state and Jews. Mobs of Jew hunters are on the prowl, from Dagestan to Cooper Union. People cannot possibly deny the ghoulish attacks, available for all to see, proudly recorded on the terrorists' own cameras. And yet deny they do, or minimize, after first applauding—and censure any of their own number who dare to cast shade on those who

performed these pogroms. And a vast army of trolls descends upon social media to trot out photos of dead children, real and imaginary, knowing that the accusation of Jewish pedicide stirs something primal in the European Christian soul, something terribly dark, which defies reasoned analysis and critical inquiry. How is it possible that millions, hundreds of millions, are so morally compromised? How is it that there seems not a whit of self-awareness of such obvious, raw inhumanity perpetrated by their coreligionists? Why is it that the self-critical op-eds in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* seem to only ever bear Jewish or Israeli names? Where is the sympathy from our peace partners in the Palestinian Authority? Why such anemic reactions from Israeli Arab leaders?

Then there are the fellow travelers. The college kids and professors, the overeducated, who would seem like the best candidates to “know better”—these beautiful minds look radical evil in the face and stand unambiguously with the perpetrators. By the logic of anticolonialism and valorization of the oppressed native, the Jewish state is a shining beacon: it is nothing less than the culmination of the struggle of a native, for academics even indigenous, people, who were massacred and forcibly displaced by European imperialist colonizers, who endured oppression and exploitation for two millennia and finally reclaimed their ancestral lands. But somehow the Jews were too successful, contributed too much to Western civilization, had too much agency, lost too much melanin to be the winners of the intersectional race to the bottom, to most pathetic, and thus most sainted. And the rank bigotry of many of the leaders of the Black Lives

Matter movement, the ostensible scions of the great American civil rights movement, is nigh incomprehensible to modern heirs of R. Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Jewish freedom riders.

And then there is the vast majority of humankind, people who are downright infuriating: the bothsidesism in which intelligent people, even popes and UN secretaries-general capable of inspiring, insipidly register knowledge that something has happened but cannot muster the moral faculties to distinguish villain from victim; or even those world leaders who do not (yet) urge a ceasefire, but so helpfully remind us, incessantly, of the need to try to spare innocent civilian lives, because apparently Jews need to be reminded of such things. And the wide world of Facebook denizens, who go on as though the worst pogrom since the Holocaust hadn't just occurred; who continue to gush about interior décor, and sports, and fashion, and all that trivial nonsense while "thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground" ([Genesis 4:10](#)), who invest so much in that which matters so little right now to so many whom they count among their friends and acquaintances.

A key concept of the Enlightenment is that of the rights-bearing universal man. As Moshe Halbertal explains, it is that "our moral vocabulary shouldn't be reduced to associational language... the tribe, the nation, the race, the religious groups, etc., but

humans as such, with no other attribute, are subjects of robust moral concern."<sup>1</sup> In the events on and after Simhat Torah 5784, there has been a collapse of humanism. The vicious killers dehumanized themselves with their savagery. Their defenders around the world betrayed a profound cultural tribalism that privileges group association over a shared sense of humanity. And their fellow travelers, in embracing ideologies of revolutionary class struggle, forgot the idea of the human or even intentionally left it behind. And then most of the rest pay lip service to humanistic ideals but lack the moral acuity or motivation to act or even just assess the situation properly.

My colleagues and patients see all of this and are defeated. Physically, they know, we will prevail over Hamas, and as a moral army, we will do so with our humanity intact. But what of our humanism? How can we have any faith in humankind, and how can we possibly reciprocate that which is not extended?

David Grossman<sup>2</sup> predicts that the faith will be gone. "If I may hazard a guess: Israel after the war will be much more right-wing, militant, and racist. The war forced on it will have cemented the most extreme, hateful stereotypes and prejudices that frame—and will continue to frame all the more robustly—Israeli identity. And that identity will from now on also embody the trauma of October 2023, as well as the polarisation, the internal rift."

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<sup>1</sup> Moshe Halbertal, "On the Fragility of the Human: Améry on Counter-Enlightenment," archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sHPVEG7c> and accessed on November 1, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> David Grossman, "Israel Is in a Nightmare. Who Will We Be When We Rise from the Ashes?" *Financial Times*, October 12, 2023, archived at <https://www.ft.com/content/50f33279-d637-426c-bb8b-3ce3965c14f3> and accessed on November 1, 2023.

Zionism itself was born of a profoundly pessimistic outlook about the possibility for humankind to apply or sustain humanistic values.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the State itself was made possible only by the collapse of empires, and the struggle against colonialism was (initially) a human rights movement, such that national self-determination would be the best guarantee of universal rights and freedom for the individual.<sup>4</sup> In the instance of Israel's history, the approval of partition by the United Nations was also an expression of humanism on the part of the international community, chastened by its abysmal failure during the Holocaust. The Jewish state is thus paradoxically constitutively skeptical of the possibility of humanism, but it owes its very existence to its exercise.

For religious Jews, it is tempting to respond that humanism is itself misguided: traditional Jewish practice, Halakhah, has little to say to or about those outside our faith community, and classical and medieval works of Jewish thought and ethics focus upon matters related to the self or the Jewish other. However, it should be recalled that these texts emerged in settings in which Jews were strictly prohibited from addressing themselves beyond their own communities, and

the institutionalized contempt with which Jews were held by the societies within which they were (begrudgingly) tolerated discouraged meaningful engagement, even on the level of the individual. It should be unsurprising that Haredi society, frozen in these texts and realities, is notoriously parochial. A common trope is that this world is but an *olam ha-sheker*, a world of falsehood, an antechamber before the real world to come, a vale of tears dominated by evil and deceit, in which we are simply to amass our own spiritual riches and give succor to our coreligionists in advance of the divine reality that comes after life, and in this world at the end of days.

Even in the Bible, sources can be adduced to the effect that we never had faith in general humanity, and reciprocally, we owe little or nothing to the gentile world. [Psalms 116:11](#) already said, "I said in my haste, 'All men are liars.'"<sup>5</sup> Worse, a well-known [Rashi](#) (Genesis 33:4) cites a [decontextualized and probably corrupted]<sup>6</sup> [Sifre](#) (Numbers 69): *halakhah hi bi-yadu'a she-Esav sonei le-Ya'akov*—"it is a well-known *halakhah* that Esau hates Jacob"—and indeed, since the addition of *ve-hi she'amdah* to the Haggadah in the Geonic period, there has existed a Jewish conception that antisemitism is

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<sup>3</sup> Gil Troy, "Zionism: A Response to Antisemitism?," in [The Routledge History of Antisemitism](#), eds. Mark Weitzman, Robert J. Williams and James Wald (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2023), 390-398.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Burke, "Human Rights and Empire," in [The Routledge History of Western Empires](#), eds. Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 468-482.

<sup>5</sup> Biblical translations are taken from the *KJV*.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Lockshin, "Sinat Yisrael (Hatred of Jews)," in [Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism](#), eds. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 273-285. While Rashi could be read as talking merely about the literal biblical characters of Esau and Jacob, he is cited early on as a source for antisemitism being endemic to the non-Jewish world. Lockshin maintains that the inclusion of this passage in Rashi, in the form of expressing a principle—"halakhah hi bi-yadu'a"—helped to disseminate the idea that hatred of Jews is inevitable.

endemic to the gentile condition and inevitable.

However, what the psalmist said in his haste is not how the psalm concludes. The author is redeemed from his troubles and is restored, physically and emotionally, to the community: “I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all His people” ([Psalm 116:18](#)). The classical rabbinic sources do not see antisemitism as immutable.<sup>7</sup> And [Sifri](#) (Deuteronomy 32:4) explains “A God of faithfulness: that He believed in the world and created it”—i.e., God has faith in man.<sup>8</sup>

The twentieth-century realities of national sovereignty and truly humanistic societies, such as the United States and post-war Europe, allowed for Jews and Judaism to have a voice once again. These events led to a re-examination of earlier sources, those which emerged before Christianity and Islam muffled and muzzled us. Orthodox thinkers since the nineteenth century such as R. Jacob Ettlinger, R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, and R. Samson Raphael Hirsch all spoke of a Jewish mission to all humankind, albeit a passive one, as a model to emulate.<sup>9</sup> Twentieth-century thinkers such as R. Abraham Isaac Kook, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, R. Aharon Lichtenstein, R. Jonathan Sacks, R. Menachem Froman, and, *yibadel le-hayim*, R. Yoel Bin Nun all found

humanistic values within Judaism at the earliest biblical foundations of the Jewish mission.

To be sure, the liberal Jewish streams’ interpretation of “*Tikkun Olam*”—recentering of Jewish thought and practice around social justice and universalistic concerns, to the detriment of the particular and particulars—is not a tenable reading of traditional sources. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that this ideology emerged among Jews and that Jewish people are at the forefront of defending human rights, keeping Western democracies honest in their commitment to humanist ideals.

One humanist ideal in particular seems to run like a scarlet thread through the entire biblical corpus. R. Yoel Bin Nun shows that biblical passages from the early chapters of Genesis to the last of the prophets address the challenge of empire. The tower of Babel is the story of the very first Mesopotamian empire, the short-lived Akkadian one—replete with ziggurats to recapitulate the mountains from whence its peoples came, which established Akkadian as a lingua franca—but which displeased God, and which He dispersed.<sup>10</sup> R. Yoel elsewhere<sup>11</sup> shows that Abraham receives the covenant after he is presented with the option of empire—after defeating the coalition of Mesopotamian powers in a rescue mission—and

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<sup>7</sup> See Lockshin, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> See Norman Lamm, [Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought](#) (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), 32. Translation of *Sifri* is my own.

<sup>9</sup> J. David Bleich, “Tikkun Olam: Jewish obligations to Non-Jewish Society,” in [Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law](#), eds. David Shatz, Chaim I.

Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), 61-102.

<sup>10</sup> Yoel Bin Nun, “*Kerisat ha-Imperiyah*,” 929 Project, archived at <https://www.929.org.il/author/23/post/327> and accessed on November 2, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Yoel Bin Nun, *Pirkei ha-Avot* (Alon Shvut, Israel: Tevunot, 2003), 54-71.

turns it down, preferring moral-spiritual leadership over coercion and oppression. In his recent *Nevi'im Mul Ma'atzamat*, he explains how the imposition by force of one culture's values—the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians in biblical times—upon many peoples, Israelites included, posed a theological conundrum for monotheism and a moral question for a beneficent God, and it is precisely this that occasioned tens of prophets to affirm Jews' spiritual—and sometimes physical—resistance.

The Bible is profoundly critical of empire, the forcible subordination of others to one's own associative commitments. By refusing to impose his values upon the world, Abram becomes Abraham—a “mighty father” becomes “father of all the nations.” The Bible sees in the model Jewish polity that emerges from the Abrahamic covenant the paradigmatic city on a hill, with a passive mission to all the world:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many

people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ([Isaiah 2:2-4](#))

In days like these, we seem so far from Isaiah's vision. But in the pain, there is consolation. In a censored passage, Maimonides [writes](#) (*Mishneh Torah*, Kings and Wars 11:6-9, translation by Sefaria):

Jesus of Nazareth who aspired to be the Mashiach and was executed by the court was also alluded to in Daniel's prophecies, as [Daniel] [11:14](#) states: “The vulgar among your people shall exalt themselves in an attempt to fulfill the vision, but they shall stumble.” Can there be a greater stumbling block than Christianity? All the prophets spoke of Mashiach as the redeemer of Israel and their savior who would gather their dispersed and strengthen their observance of the mitzvot. In contrast, Christianity caused the Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humbled, the Torah to be altered, and the majority of the world to err and serve a god other than the Lord. Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for His ways are not our ways, nor

are His thoughts, our thoughts. Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for Mashiach's coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together as [Tzeephaniah 3:9](#) states: "I will transform the peoples to a purer language that they all will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose." How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of Mashiach, Torah, and mitzvot. These matters have been spread to the furthestmost islands to many stubborn-hearted nations. They discuss these matters and the mitzvot of the Torah, saying: "These mitzvot were true, but were already negated in the present age and are not applicable for all time." Others say: "Implied in the mitzvot are hidden concepts that can not be understood simply. The Mashiach has already come and revealed those hidden truths." When the true Messianic king will arise and prove successful, his position becoming exalted and uplifted, they will all return and realize that their ancestors endowed them

with a false heritage and their prophets and ancestors caused them to err.

The religions that came to dominate the world took the Bible—a profoundly anticolonialist work, with a distinctly particularist program—and subverted and universalized it in service of their own colonialist aims. But these uses are unsustainable, and ultimately the dross will be removed and the precious essence will remain.

In the Christian context, the popularity of Martin Luther's sixteenth-century movement advocating a return to the Bible—*sola scriptura*—led to decades of devastating religious war:

It was the original forever war, which went on interminably, fuelled by religious fanaticism, personal ambition, fear of hegemony, and communal suspicion. It dragged in all the neighbouring powers. It was punctuated by repeated failed ceasefires. It inflicted suffering beyond belief and generated waves of refugees. No, this is not Syria today, but the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), which turned Germany and much of central Europe into a disaster zone.<sup>12</sup>

But this state of affairs culminated in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.<sup>13</sup> The treaty paved the way

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<sup>12</sup> Blurb for Patrick Milton, Michael Axworthy, and Brendan Simms, [Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East](#) (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> 1648 also marked the beginning of independence for Ukraine, but it was born not of lofty principles but of

for the emergence of the principle of sovereign territoriality, which brought about the end of colonialism three centuries on.<sup>14</sup> The Catholic church finally reconciled itself to the new state(s) of affairs—as well as to Bible study, human rights and the Jewish people—at the Vatican II council in 1965.<sup>15</sup>

In the Muslim world, imperialist dreams have not yet accommodated to the modern reality. Islamic history is periodized by a succession of imperial caliphates; the dismemberment of the last one in 1918, followed by the imposition of a European state model, failed because it did not reflect a process internal to the political culture of Islamicate lands. Initial Arab strategies aimed to restore the familiar. Efraim Karsh writes:

...[G]iving the notion of the territorial nation-state short shrift as a temporary aberration destined to wither away before long, pan-Arabism viewed the Palestinians *not* as a distinct people deserving statehood but as an integral part of a single Arab nation bound by common ties of

language, religion, and history, which was destined to substitute a unified Arab state, or rather empire, for the artificial Middle Eastern system created in the wake of World War I.<sup>16</sup>

With the founding of the PLO in 1964, a new or renewed ‘Palestinian’ identity emerged to reframe the ‘colonialist-anticolonialist’ paradigm for Western consumption: no longer would they see Israel as the embattled indigenous victim of Pan-Arab imperialist fantasies, but as foreign colonizers of a smaller minority.<sup>17</sup> The nihilistic behavior of Hamas on October 7, with their expectation of mass casualties in the Israeli reprisal, confirms that the actual interests of Palestinians are no more their aim than those of Lebanese are to Hezbollah; both instead serve as proxies for Iranian-led Islamic imperialism. Daesh demonstrated that such a lofty religious goal as territorial conquest could command the primal human gesture of sacrifice—at its worst, a catastrophic self-transcendent act of violence in which one “offers up” one’s own morality, oneself, one’s own people, and truth along with the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

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jealousy and avarice, and subordination to Russian imperialism—and it was soaked in the blood of Jewish genocide. In an ironic twist, this national identity is being relitigated at this moment, under the leadership of a Jew, no less.

<sup>14</sup> Hendrik Spruyt, “The End of Empire and the Extension of the Westphalian System: The Normative Basis of the Modern State Order,” *International Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (2000): 65-92.

<sup>15</sup> Giorgio Shani, “Transnational Religious Actors and International Relations,” in [Routledge Handbook of Religion](#)

[and Politics](#), ed. Jeffrey Haynes (London: Routledge, 2023), 308-322.

<sup>16</sup> Efraim Karsh, [Palestine Betrayed](#) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>17</sup> Avraham Sela, “The PLO at Fifty: A Historical Perspective,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 1, no. 3 (2014): 269-333.

<sup>18</sup> See Moshe Halbertal, [On Sacrifice](#) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 63-113.



Thus, the origin of Israel lies in the rejection of the idea of empire. The re-emergence of Israel was made possible by the downfall of the ideology of empire. And fittingly, Israel finds itself on the front against Islamic imperialism, the last gasp of empire.

Will this be a “forever war”? Are we to live by the sword?

Perhaps not. Perhaps there is hope.

The ‘warm peace’ of the Abraham Accords indicates the possibility of an Islamic Westphalia. Rich gulf states send thousands of their young people to American universities so that they might be moved from a culture which includes violent antisemitic protest to an embrace of humanism—if only the universities would do their job.

The West seems to have awoken to the realization of what is at stake: that humanism, that civilization itself, must be defended.

And, finally, the same prophets who predicted the collapse of empire and the Jewish return to history—from Hosea to Malakhi—predicted that we would be a beacon. They predicted that we could meet the challenges ‘proportionally’; that we could model a society characterized not by incandescent rage, but rather radiant love; that we could evince an ethics of care that expressed itself not in a shared hatred born of cultural tribalism, but mustering strength and resources

to help our brethren in this time of need, in concentric circles of humanity; that we could bring forth a sense of sacrifice that offers up oneself to *protect* one’s people, carefully prosecuting a just war that *preserves* one’s morality, and even the enemy, when at all possible.

And the prophet predicts that when we are done with wars, we will lock away that human passion for sacrifice in a walled compound on top of that hill, and the Middle East—and all the world—will be awash in plowshares and pruning hooks. May it be speedily in our days.

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### ***THE SOURCE OF JOSEPH’S DREAMS***

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Joseph’s two dreams of grandeur at age seventeen in *Parashat Vayeshev*, in which he symbolically sees his family bow down to him, are traditionally considered by biblical scholars and rabbinic commentators alike as prophetic, foretelling what occurs much later in the text when Joseph’s family actually bow down to him in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation directs our attention to the future fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams rather than to any past possible source for them. As the scholar Jean-Marie Husser puts it, “Nothing tells us where Joseph’s dreams come from. Indeed the narrator does not seem to be interested in the

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Rabbi Itamar Urbach of Israel for insisting that I write this article, Rabbi Shlomo Zuckier for

recommending that I submit it to *Lehrhaus*, and Rabbi David Fried, editor at *Lehrhaus*, for all his careful edits.

question.” ([Dreams and Dream Narratives in the Biblical World](#), 113).

This exclusive focus on the future rather than on the past violates the first rule of trauma analysis, namely to assess the history of the traumatized individual. Studying the narrative leading up to the dreams will indicate that Joseph has indeed gone through significant trauma. By analyzing his astonishing dreams as we would those of a trauma survivor, we find that they do indeed have a direct source in his past, particularly the traumatic encounter with Esau and his 500 armed men, in which his terrified family all bow down to Esau, starting with Jacob, seven times to the ground, followed by the concubines and their children, Leah and her children, and finally Joseph and his mother Rachel. (Genesis 33:3-7). The Joseph saga, then, begins at age seven, not seventeen, and the critical figure in the saga is Esau.

In fact, the impact of this shocking encounter upon Joseph is subtly hinted at in the text, when Jacob scolds Joseph for his outrageous dreams:

And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. “What,” he said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?” (Genesis 37:10 - [NJPS](#))

Notice that in his rebuke of his son, Jacob misquotes Joseph. Whereas Joseph only said

“bow down,” Jacob adds the words “to the ground.” Why does Jacob do so? The answer lies in the chapter relating the encounter with Esau, when Jacob “bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.” Joseph’s dream prompts Jacob to remember the troubled encounter with Esau. As the text says, Jacob “kept it in mind.” So Joseph and Jacob are both entangled with Esau. Jacob played Esau to gain the birthright, and Joseph played Esau in his dreams, becoming the person the family bows down to instead of Esau, to erase Esau’s potential power over the family.

The encounter with Esau was not the only trauma that Joseph experienced as a child. He also endured his family’s frantic flight from Laban, a seven-day trek from Paddan-Aram to the hill country of Gilead. And when Laban finally caught up to them and demanded the return of his household gods, his *teraphim*, Jacob issued a death sentence on anyone in the family in possession of Laban’s *teraphim*. (Genesis 31:17-35). It is not unlikely that Joseph knew that his mother kept the *teraphim* under her saddle, and may have connected his father’s curse with his mother’s death soon thereafter on the family’s journey to Canaan. Burdened by such traumas in his early life, Joseph dreamed of a way to restore the family’s refuge from its adversaries.

According to one *midrash*, Joseph was the family’s savior from the day he was born. Rachel feared she would be divorced because of her barrenness and would have to marry Esau, so Joseph rescued her from this fate when Rachel became pregnant with him. (*Midrash Aggadat Bereshit* 51:1).

Another *midrash* says that Joseph also empowered his father Jacob:

And it came to pass when Rachel gave birth to Joseph (Genesis 3:20). As soon as Joseph was born, Esau's adversary was born, as it is said (Genesis 3:20): And Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away that I may go to my land and to my country." For Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman: "It is a tradition that Esau will fall at the hands of none other than Rachel's descendants, as it is written, *Surely the youngest of the flock shall drag them away* (Jeremiah 49:20). And why does he call them the youngest of the flock? Because they were of the youngest of the tribes." (*Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 73:7 - my translation*).

And in the prophecy of Obadiah, Joseph will be the flame to set Esau on fire and destroy him:

Jacob will be a fire and Joseph a flame; Esau will be stubble, and they will set him on fire and destroy him. There will be no survivors from Esau. The Lord has spoken. People from the Negev will occupy the mountains of Esau, and people from the foothills will possess the land of the Philistines. They will occupy the fields of Ephraim and Samaria, and will

possess Gilead (Obadiah 1:18-19 - *NIV*).

Joseph's grandiose dreams, then, are not just a coping mechanism to erase a traumatic memory but a strategy to restore the legacy of Jacob's supremacy over Esau. After all, the blessing that ensured Jacob's supremacy was not intended for Jacob but for Esau. Jacob had come in disguise, his arms covered in goat's hair, pretending he was Esau, and when Isaac asks him if he is really Esau, Jacob answers, "I am Esau your firstborn." Then Isaac repeats his question, "Are you really my son Esau?" and Jacob replies, "I am." (Genesis 27:19, 24- *NIV*). So does Jacob really receive the blessing intended for Esau? "May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow to you." (Genesis 27:29). Perhaps Jacob was unsure of his right to Esau's blessing, and hence bowed down to the ground before Esau at their encounter and then declared that seeing his brother's face was like seeing the face of God (Genesis 33:10).

Furthermore, when Isaac does offer Esau a blessing, he grants Esau the right to throw off the yoke of his brother whenever Jacob strays from the path of God, though Rebecca was told by the Lord that "the older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Actually, in his dreams Joseph seems to usurp Jacob's blessing when he substitutes himself for Esau and becomes the object of veneration.

Esau is not easily removed from the family legacy. According to the Zohar, the Messiah will not come until the tears that Esau sheds over his stolen

blessing are wiped dry; only then will our redemption be complete ([Zohar Shemot](#) 12b, Pritzker Edition); Also, in a bizarre talmudic *midrash*, when Jacob is brought from Egypt to the ancestral cave in Hebron for burial, Esau shows up and demands to replace Jacob in the cave. Angered by the disturbance Esau is causing, a deaf grandson of Jacob severs Esau's head with his sword, and the head rolls into the cave landing on Isaac's chest, as if Esau were returning to the bosom of the family (*Sotah 13a*).

Another tradition holds that Esau and Jacob are symbolically the twin goats of the Yom Kippur service, when lots are cast to determine the goat to be sacrificed and the goat to be sent as scapegoat to Azazel carrying Israel's sins (Abarbanel to Leviticus 16:4). The casting of lots echoes for me the future casting of lots in the Purim episode. Oddly enough, the Sages declare Purim as the only holiday to be celebrated in the Messianic era (*Midrash Mishlei 9:2*). A critical part of the celebration is the requirement of not knowing the difference between Haman and Mordechai (*Megillah 7b*)! This aspect of the holiday may be seen as a reminder of Jacob and Esau, as if Purim deserves the honor of an eternal holiday because the Jews of Persia acted in self-defense and in faith, uniting the hands of Esau and the voice of Jacob.

In conclusion, Esau haunts the Joseph saga. Although Joseph in his dreams attempts to erase the traumatic memory of bowing to Esau by substituting himself as the object of veneration, he cannot fully restore the legacy of Jacob's supremacy over Esau. The ultimate redemption requires a deeper reconciliation.

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