

## Jacob and Esau: Kiss or Bite? A Story of Conflict and Reconciliation

In the story of Jacob and Esau in the Torah (Genesis 25-32) there is a one word in the Hebrew text that continues to flummox Jewish rabbis. The word has some mysterious dots above it and can be translated as either 'kiss' or 'bite'. Some rabbis warn these dots are a scribal error that was never corrected but others believe the meaning of the word has significant insight into the coming back together of the two brothers.

Genesis 25 tells the story of these two twin brothers, with Esau [meaning 'hairy'] born first and entitled to his father's birthright, and Jacob [meaning 'he grasps the heel'] born second, gripping his brother's heel. Even in the womb the two boys were jostling each other.

*The LORD said to her,*

*“Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you will be separated;  
one people will be stronger than the other,  
and the older will serve the younger.”* Genesis 25:23

Isaac, the father of the twins, favoured Esau and Rebekah, their mother, favoured Jacob. When Esau came in from a hunt famished, Jacob managed to con him in to giving up his birthright as the firstborn in exchange for some stew. Later, when Isaac was on his deathbed, Rebekah fashioned a plan for Jacob to steal Esau's birthright by covering his arms with goat hair in order to trick the failing eyes of his dying father. And so the plan worked and Jacob received the blessing instead of Esau. Their father died and Esau pledged to take his revenge on Jacob as soon as the period of mourning for his father was over, but Jacob fled and years of conflict between the two brothers began.

Later in the story, we see Jacob fleeing from Laban, his uncle whom he has worked for for two times 7 years to earn his two wives, Leah and Rachel. In his flight from Laban he sees Esau, his estranged brother, approaching him. He sends him a message via his servants, hoping to find favour in his brother's eyes. The servants return, informing him that Esau still approaches, and with him 400 men. Immediately, Jacob is full of fear at what his brother will do, knowing that he wronged him by stealing his birthright. He decides to split his wives and their families, along with his men and goods, into two groups, hoping to protect them from the revenge he believes Esau will now take. He prays to God:

*“Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. <sup>12</sup> But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”* Genesis 32:11

Jacob hoped to pacify his brother's anger through offering him gifts:

“...from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: <sup>14</sup> two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.” Genesis 32:13-15

That night Jacob wrestled with God in the form of a man all night and asked God to bless him.

<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, [meaning ‘face of God’] saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” Genesis 32: 30

Jacob looks up and sees his brother approaching with his 400 men. Dividing his children amongst the two wives, placing his favourites- Rachel and Joseph- in the rear, he faces his fear and approaches his brother Esau.

<sup>3</sup> He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

<sup>4</sup> But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and **kissed** him. And they wept. Genesis 33: 3-4

It is this word in the Hebrew that poses a dilemma for the Hebrew scholar as to what exactly this means and what kind of reconciliation the brothers had following their conflict. The mysterious dots may have significant meaning:

וַיִּשָׁקוּ

In Judaism, the approach to scripture is such that God's true speech produces multiple interpretations made by humans. The Midrash (an ancient commentary on the Hebrew scriptures) shares these interpretations made by rabbis. On the word in question, there are several interpretations:

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar states that the dotted form of the word teaches that Esau felt compassion for his brother in that moment and **kissed** Jacob *with all his heart*.

Rabbi Yannai states that the dotted word indicates Esau came not to kiss Jacob but to **bite** him, further stating that Jacob's neck was turned to marble in that moment and his wicked brother's teeth were blunted. Hence the verse says that they both wept; Jacob because of his neck and Esau because of his teeth.

The latter seems a much more creative interpretation yet both are acceptable and neither is declared right or wrong in the Midrash tradition as both uphold the central theology of the Jewish faith.

What can we learn from the Rabbah in giving these two interpretations of the Jacob and Esau story, particularly in relation to the concepts of conflict, peace and reconciliation? Think about the story and the two interpretations and facilitate a discussion on the following:

- The length and intensity of conflicts (conflict can last a few minutes, several days, half a life time)
- The common occurrence of conflict between friends and family (why? What are the causes?)
- The fear that often prevents reconciliation (worry over what might be said or done, how old wounds might open up or new ones be sustained).
- The nature of reconciliation and how this is dependent on both people coming together (whilst the two are separate and not aware of or engaging with each other's stories there is no pathway for reconciliation).
- Reactions to the possibility of reconciliation after conflict (kiss and come together or bite and continue the conflict? There are always choices when we begin the journey of reconciliation)
- The nature of shared responsibility (both have contributed to the conflict and now both have a responsibility to the reconciliation; it cannot be achieved through just one person).

Following this encounter, Jacob offers gifts to his brother and compares this encounter with his earlier one with God :

*"If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. " Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it."*  
Genesis 33:10-11

Following this Esau wants Jacob to go to Seir and Jacob insists he must take the pace of the slowest, his children and animals, and will meet him there. He doesn't; instead going to Sukkoth and building shelters for his animals there.

Discuss the following:

- Why did Jacob offer gifts to his brother and call him 'My Lord'?
- Have the brothers been fully reconciled?
- Is either brother more invested in the reconciliation than others? Why?
- Why do you think Jacob describes seeing Esau's face as seeing the face of God?
- Why does Jacob choose not to go to Seir with his brother?



Image taken from: <https://www.jweekly.com/2018/11/23/these-tiny-dots-are-a-huge-torah-mystery/>

<http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/wpsite/>