



# Is reconciliation between brothers and peoples possible?

**THE BOOK** of Genesis is replete with sibling rivalry – Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, all struggle with each other in different ways.

Cain murders Abel in the first murder in Biblical history and the text challenges us with classic questions that ought to disturb us to this day: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain asks. And God responds: “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground!” (Genesis 49:10).

Isaac and Ishmael don’t exactly get along either. In the text, the Isaac story dominates, and the Ishmael story fades away. In the end, they both go their separate ways.

The same is true about Jacob and Esau. They struggle with each other even in the womb of their

mother! They quarrel over the birthright. Jacob tricks Esau. Esau gets angry. Jacob runs away to Haran for a long time.

And then, in Genesis chapter 33, we find the fascinating story of momentary reconciliation between brothers. At the beginning of this chapter, Jacob sees Esau coming, accompanied by 400 men! So, he is naturally afraid. He divides the children among his wives, Leah and Rachel, and prepares for the worst. Yet, he goes to greet Esau and bows seven times, out of fear or out of respect, we don’t quite know. And then, all of a sudden, we are surprised by the big moment of the encounter between them.

*Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him, and falling on his neck, he kissed \*\*\*\* him; and they wept.*

In the Torah scroll, from which we read in our synagogues, the word he kissed him is marked with four asterisks on the parchment. This, of course, has led classical commentators to offer various interpretations of this puzzling text.



Peter Paul Rubens, The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, 1624

Was Esau’s kiss genuine? Was his purpose in coming to meet his estranged brother to repair their relationship after so many years? These are the questions that disturb our commentators as well as us today.

According to the greatest Jewish medieval commentator, Rashi:

*There is a difference of opinion in this matter. Some interpret the asterisks to mean that he (Esau) did not kiss him wholeheartedly. (But there is another opinion). Rabbi Shimon Ben Yohai said: It is well known that Esau hated Jacob; however, his compassion was moved at the moment and he kisses him wholeheartedly.*

Another classic commentary, Bereshit Rabbah (a classical rabbinic commentary on the book of

Genesis), agrees that Esau’s motives were not pure and does so by using a pun on the Hebrew word to kiss. Instead of coming to kiss him, the Midrash argues, Esau came to bite him, since this man Esau is essentially an evil person, and therefore he certainly cannot be trusted.

But another midrash, Avot D’ Rabbi Natan, takes issue with the interpretation of Bereshit Rabbah and says: Everything Esau ever did was motivated by hatred, except for this one occasion which was motivated by love.

Were the embrace and the kiss genuine? Was this a real moment of brotherly reconciliation? Could it have led to a totally new relationship between the two estranged brothers? Had the brothers changed?

Earlier in the Torah story, Jacob had struggled with God and become Israel, the one who struggles with God. In this rather mystical encounter, is he the old Jacob the trickster? Or has he changed to

become Israel, the person who is genuinely prepared to struggle and live with God and his fellow human beings? Similarly did his brother Esau also go through a profound process of transformation?

According to the great 19th century German rabbi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, considered by many as the founder of Modern Orthodoxy, who authored his own fascinating commentary to the Torah:

*This kiss and these tears show us that Esau was also a descendant of Abraham. In Esau, there must have been something more than just the wild hunter. But Esau, also, gradually lays the sword aside, turns gradually more and more towards humaneness, and not just Jacob on whom Esau has most opportunity to show that and how the principle of humaneness begins to affect him.*

*I find this to be a very helpful interpretation.*

It seems that both Esau and Jacob had to change to make reconciliation possible. Similarly, both Isaac and Ishmael undergo processes of transformation and meet at the father's funeral in another act of reconciliation in the unfolding stories of estranged brothers in the book of Genesis

The same can probably be said for the current interlocutors in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or in any conflict with estranged brothers or peoples.

### **Then and now**

Contemporary readers of the Biblical story can only wonder: Was reconciliation between Jacob and Esau only momentary? Could it have worked for the long haul?

In our contemporary situation, who is Jacob? And who is Esau? Who is the strong? And who is the weak? Or maybe we are both strong and weak at the same time!

In the Biblical story, they go their separate ways. So at least the war between them ended. No more fighting. You live here and I'll live there. Separation becomes the operational modality. Not peace. Just an armistice, the cessation of active warfare.

Some people today might call this coexistence. Each group lives separately. As long as you don't shoot missiles at us, you can live over there in Gaza, or in Lebanon, or wherever. We can live our separate lives.

Or within Israel, the Arab minority and the Jewish majority live generally separately. Integration is not the model. Love and mutual understanding are really not needed for mere coexistence. This is not an exciting solution, but it is better than killing one another.

Nevertheless, in our contemporary context, we have witnessed some remarkable processes of reconciliation!

The most important one is the great reconciliation between the Jewish People and the Catholic Church. According to rabbinic thinking, the people of Israel are seen as formerly Jacob and the Christian world is represented by Esau, who becomes Edom. This is one of the great reconciliations in human history. The religious leaders of Christianity and Judaism actually embraced and kissed

at Vatican II in the 1960s and since that time have been in genuine dialogue in a spirit of trust and mutual respect. (See "55 Years Since Nostra Aetate" in The Jerusalem Report of November 9, 2020.)

The second great act of reconciliation in our time was the visit of Sadat to Jerusalem, his speech in the Knesset, and his initiative to establish peace with Israel. This peace, even if it is very cold, has lasted for all these years.

The third act of contemporary reconciliation was perhaps the handshake (not an embrace or a kiss!!) between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, at the famous signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn, on September 13, 1993. The intentions were honorable, but the reconciliation process has faded from sight, diminished greatly, and almost disappeared. Nevertheless, I believe that we must still hope that reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians will still be possible in the not too distant future.

In addition, we wonder: will the followers of Judaism and Islam – the children of Isaac and Ishmael who go their separate ways in the Biblical narrative – be able to reconcile with each other in our time? The leaders of Islam will have to go through their own process of reformation, as the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches have done. But the religious leaders of Judaism will have to engage in this also, by working seriously and systematically to reach out to moderate Muslims, who do exist, to engage in this process together.

Some first steps have been made in this direction – I personally have been involved in some of them – but much more effort will be needed to pull off a sustained reconciliation process by Jews and Muslims in the years and decades ahead. The good news is that there are some serious efforts to do this going on right now – both in Israel and internationally – which offer a better future for Muslims and Jews around the world.

The most important example of these efforts is known as the Religious Peace Initiative, led by Rabbi Michael Melchior and Rabbi Prof. Daniel Roth and their Muslim colleagues, which is gaining traction in Israel, Palestine and abroad.

So, is reconciliation possible between brothers or peoples who have been in conflict for a long time?

The Biblical narrative, as well as some remarkable contemporary developments, offer us some excellent examples of the possibilities and benefits of such reconciliation. But more will be needed in our time, by courageous and future-oriented religious and cultural leaders. ■

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