**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**Flattering the Wicked & Powerful**

As Jacob returned to the Land of Canaan, he dreaded an inevitable encounter with his estranged brother, Esau.  Jacob tried to propitiate Esau by presenting him with a gift of 550 animals.  Esau initially declined the gift, noting that he already had enough material possessions.  Jacob persisted in his effort to lavish an expensive gift on his brother, resorting to the use of highly exaggerated language.  “No I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably (Genesis 33:10).”

Jacob’s rhetorical excess can be variously understood; Nahum Sarna commented that that might have been Jacob’s intention.  Esau was at liberty to interpret his brother’s remark in whatever way suited him.

Pseudo-Jonathan and Rashi explain that Jacob was comparing the face of Esau to that of the angelic being with whom, earlier, he had wrestled all night long.  The language of Scripture, and in particular its emphasis on faces, lends support to such a reading.  In providing an etiology for the place name Peniel, Jacob said, “I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved (32:31).”  Pseudo-Jonathan understood the conclusion of 33:10, ותרצני, not as referring to the Esau’s unexpected warmth and affection for Jacob immediately upon their encounter, but rather to Jacob’s earlier peaceful reconciliation with the angelic being before its dawn departure.  To modern readers, Jacob’s comparing Esau with a divine being might seem like an absurd rhetorical over-reaching, bound to backfire.  But, in antiquity, when rulers would often have themselves declared deities, Jacob’s words could readily be accepted and serve the purpose of assuaging the anger of a strongman.

Another way of reading the verse has Jacob saying that a meeting with Esau is like a pilgrimage to a shrine, which perforce includes a benefaction.  The Pentateuch repeatedly sets forth the obligation for male Israelites to pay homage to God by visiting His abode thrice annually.  The performative commandment is accompanied by a warning not to arrive empty-handed (Exodus23:15; Deuteronomy 16:16).  Jacob hoped to secure Esau’s acceptance of the gift by making their brotherly reunion like to an experience of religious worship (Genesis Rabbah 78:12).  The host deity accepts the pilgrim’s offering not out of need, but in order graciously to provide the worshipper with the positive feeling that his gift has indeed been accepted.  As Ramban observes, the Levitical cult also operated under this premise (Leviticus 1:4, Isaiah 56:7).

Some scholars understand the expression “to see your face” as the equivalent of an acknowledgment of gratitude for having received an audience with royalty or quasi-royalty.  In his capacity as viceroy of Egypt and before revealing his true identity, Joseph told his brothers that they could not “see his face” again unless they brought along Benjamin (Genesis 43:3).  In a rage after Moses rejected his offer to allow the Israelites to depart without their cattle, Pharaoh told Moses, “Be gone from me!  Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die (Exodus 10:28).”  David countenanced the repatriation from exile in Geshur of his murderous son, Absalom, but did not allow Absalom to “see his face” – that is, Absalom was denied a royal audience with his father the king (II Samuel 14:24).

By employing this same language, Jacob hoped to give Esau the impression that, despite Jacob’s having stolen both Esau’s birthright and his blessing, Jacob nonetheless regarded his older twin brother as family royalty.  Rabbenu Bachya explained that in elevating Esau to such an august status, Jacob provided justification for his giving to Esau, and Esau’s accepting, the gift at issue, since it is customary to offer a gift in appreciation of having obtained an audience with a high-ranking personage.

Simply put, Jacob was here flattering Esau.  Using hyperbole to praise powerful people, including using God’s name as a linguistic intensifier, was common in antiquity.  The woman hired by Joab in the plot to bring back Absalom from exile said of David, “My lord is as wise as an angel of God, and he knows all that goes on in the land (14:20).”

Still, it is the case that Rabbinic Judaism strongly opposes flattery.  In rabbinic Hebrew, the word for flattery is חנופה.  The root ח-נ-פ appears several times in Scripture.  While it always has a negative connotation, it does not necessarily mean flattery.  The Talmud asserts that flatterers, scoffers, liars, and gossipmongers do not merit receiving the Divine Presence (Sotah 42a).  The verse cited by the Talmud concerning flatterers is Job 13:16.  Yet the relevant word in that verse חנף is rendered in several translations not as “flatterer” but as “impious” (Jewish Study Bible), “hypocrite” (JPS), “godless” (NASB), or “tainted” (Robert Alter).  The Midrash cites Numbers 35:33, a verse warning against the pollution of the land if manslayers are not punished sufficiently, as proof of Biblical opposition to flattery (Sifre Numbers 161).  It therefore appears that the textual Scriptural basis for banning flattery is weak.

Yet the rabbis were insistent that flattery is abhorrent.  When directed toward a wicked person it gives the impression that bad is good and good is bad (see Sefer Yere’im 248).  It opens up the possibility of *Chillul Hashem*, the desecration of God’s name (Meiri Sotah 41b).

The most famous example of flattery recorded in the Talmud concerns King Agrippa I of Judea (41-44 CE).  As a scion of the Herodian dynasty, he was part-Idumean.  Upon reading the verse mandating that the Israelite king be native-born, Agrippa wept at the recognition of his own royal illegitimacy.  A throng of Jews flattered him by exclaiming, “You are our brother; you are our brother.”  Rabbi Nathan claimed that at that very moment Judea merited destruction for such a gross display of flattery (Sotah 41b).

Rabbi Simon ben Pazi permitted one to flatter a wicked person in this world.  He cited a prophecy about the final redemption.  “No more shall a villain be called noble.  Nor shall ‘gentleman’ be said of a knave (Isaiah 32:5).”  The implication of the verse is that in*pre*-messianic times – i.e., then for him, now for us – false or utterly unwarranted salutations are both commonplace and permitted.  Resh Lakish derived the same lesson from Genesis 33:10, Jacob’s obsequious words to Esau.

Rabbi Levi disagreed with Resh Lakish’s assessment that Jacob flattered Esau.  Rather, posited Rabbi Levi, Jacob’s mention of a divine being was cleverly strategic.  Rabbi Levi compared the Biblical story here to that of a man who sees that his neighbor is about to kill him.  The would-be victim turns to his pursuer and says, “This food that I am eating tastes just like the food I enjoyed in the royal palace.”  By mentioning his association with the king, the man hopes that his adversary will refrain from violence lest it arouse the wrath of his royal protector.  Similarly, by mentioning his prior encounters with divine beings, Jacob hoped to dissuade Esau from killing him.

Under what circumstances may one flatter a wicked person?  The later rabbis took for granted that in cases of imminent mortal danger one may say whatever is needed to avert death.  If sinful action is permitted in such frightful moments, a *fortiori* mere distasteful words may be uttered.  In less dire circumstances, when there exists only the *possibility* of physical harm or threat to property, the Talmudic commentators and halakhists came to differing conclusions.  Those who rule strictly infer from the Agrippa tale that Jews must be willing to take risks in standing up to -- not fawning over -- political leaders.  The lenient decisors posit that Agrippa was in fact a benign Jewish king who posed no real danger to his subjects, and that, under those circumstances, the Jews gathered in the Temple Courtyard were indeed wrong to flatter him.  But they went on to rule that, in cases of even remote possible danger, uttering unmerited praise is acceptable.

Sadly, during the long period of Jewish dispersion, our people have had to deal with many tyrants, Judeophobes, and anti-Semites who wielded the power of life and death.  Often, Jewish communal representatives felt it necessary and prudent to use flattering language in addressing hostile government officials and heads of state.  In an October 1933 letter sent to Adolf Hitler by the National Agudas Jisroel Organization in Germany concerning Orthodox opposition to the anti-German boycott, leading figures in German Jewry addressed the Fuhrer in a positive way (see Marc Shapiro’s *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy*, pp. 225-233).  At the time, that seemed to them to be the most prudent course of action.

Today, there are heads of state who enjoy having their egos stroked and who make policy decisions based on petty slights and personal grievances.  Judaism values honesty and forthrightness.  But, as the Jacob-Esau reunion teaches, the overriding value of self-preservation occasionally requires us to praise the unworthy.

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