



Parashat Vayishlach

Brother's keeper, take two... Esau and Forgiveness

by Marisa James on Saturday December 09, 2006

18 Kislev 5767

Genesis 32:4 - 36:43, Shabbat

The queer community is in a particularly good position to understand the struggles in this week's parasha. After all, what other community has such in-depth experience with the bittersweetness of parting and reconciliation?

Since last week's parasha, more than twenty years have passed since Jacob and Esau parted from each other with fear and anger, Esau threatening Jacob's life. So when Jacob learns that Esau is approaching with 400 men, he rightfully fears for his life and the lives of his family members.

But what of Esau? For twenty years he has had no recourse against his younger brother for taking his status, his blessing, his birthright. I think it's reasonable to believe that Esau might still be angry, and might not be approaching the reunion with only joy in his heart.

When Jacob hears that Esau is approaching, he sends messengers to his brother, divulging that he is traveling with his whole family, including his children and his flocks. Esau sends no reply. Esau is a hunter and Jacob a farmer, and Jacob assumes that Esau, with his 400 men, is preparing for a fight.

After sending Esau flocks of livestock, Jacob strategically divides his people and possessions, trying to ensure their safety. After his preparations are complete, "*Vayivater Ya'akov levado vaye'vek ish imo ad alot hashachar.* / Jacob remained alone. A stranger appeared and wrestled with him until just before daybreak." (Genesis 32:25)

With whom does Jacob struggle? I have always believed it was Esau, expressing years of anger in the only way he knows. The endless gifts Jacob sends cannot erase the past. The humiliated older brother, who can no longer claim his status as firstborn, might want to avoid a public reunion. No matter how much time has passed, the fist of Esau's heart does not fully unclench until it is clear that they are wrestling, finally, on equal terms. And when the brothers finally encounter each other by day, it is Esau who runs to embrace Jacob first.



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Making peace, finding and granting forgiveness, reuniting and finding joy amid terrors... these are the building blocks of adult life for many GLB and T people. With whom do we struggle? With our families, frequently; with ourselves, certainly. But this parasha teaches us that we cannot always be anticipating a fight. Whenever there is the possibility of reconciliation, it is worthwhile to look deeper and realize that we can never know the intentions of another. Even our twin has a mind that is not ours, that we cannot know.

Finding peace and forgiveness within my own family came only when I acknowledged the difficult truth that they will never fully understand my experience of the world, as I will never fully understand theirs. And while no one person can ever fully understand another, it's rare that a queer child in a straight family will have the ability to make that straight family see the world through queer eyes. After all, reunions do not always create new closeness.

And the wisdom we gain from Jacob and Esau is not only through their reuniting, but also through their parting. Their reunion is fleeting; there will be no further contact between them. Jacob and Esau teach us the painful but necessary lesson of what to do when a close relationship cannot be recreated or restored. They reconcile, they embrace, and they part ways in peace.



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