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Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

32: 3-23

Jacob prepares to meet Esau DIG: How long had it been since Jacob had been in Canaan? What had transpired in the mean time? Why wasn't Esau angry at Jacob any more? In what order did Jacob present his gifts to his brother? Did Jacob's actions display a lack of faith or wisdom? Why?

REFLECT: When you have wronged someone and want to be forgiven, how do you show you are sincerely sorry? How can Jacob's story help you more effectively ask for forgiveness for your sins? What obstacles get in the way of reconciling a broken relationship? How can reconciling with others foster a person's spiritual growth?

Parashah 8: vaYishlach (He sent) 32:3-36:43

(see my commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click [Af](#) - Parashah)

The Key People include **Jacob** renamed **Isra'el**, **Esau**, messengers, **sons of Hamor**, **Dinah**, **Shechem**, **Deborah**, **Rachel**, **Benjamin**, twelve **sons**, and **Isaac**.

The Scenes include **Seir**, **Edom**, **the Jabbok River**, **Peniel**, **Succoth**, **Shechem**, **Luz**, later named **Bethel**, **Ephrath**, and **Mamre**.

The Main Events include sending tribute; wrestling all night with **God**, **Jacob** renamed **Isra'el** after **his** encounter with **God**, meeting **Esau**, **Dinah raped** and the town **circumcised**, then **murdered**; house purified and **altar built** at **Bethel**, eternal promises of **children** and **land** repeated; **the death of Rachel** on the road; **Benjamin's birth**, the visit to **Isaac**, **his death**, **Esau's** generations, and **Esau's** move to **Edom**.

Twenty years had passed since **Jacob** was in **his** homeland. **ADONAI** took **him** away from Canaan and it was **ADONAI** who brought **him** back. During **his** twenty-year absence, **Jacob** matured through many hard experiences **he** encountered while living in Padan-Aram. **God** grew **him** up! **He** had to mature, because, when

he returned to Canaan, **he** would encounter many difficult situations which called for **God's** wisdom. **He** would not have had such wisdom if it were not for the tough lessons **YHVH** had taught **him** while living with **Laban**. This parashah discusses some of the situations that **Jacob** encountered upon **his** return to Canaan.

Jacob was about to have a life-changing experience with **God**. **He** had just spent twenty some years in a frustrating relationship with **Laban**. When **the LORD** told **him** to leave and travel back to Canaan, **Jacob** must have thought that **his** worst troubles were behind **him**. Not so. This parashah records one of **Jacob's** most serious, personal trials - **his** confrontation with **his brother Esau**. How prepared was **Jacob** to handle this? What had **God** been doing in **his** life in order to prepare **him** for such an encounter? Naturally, **he** was stronger and more mature from **his** experiences with **Laban**. Yet, there still remained one boulder left in **his** flesh which needed to be smashed. Since **God** is the **God** who sanctifies as well as saves, we are about to read about a great moment in **Jacob's** sanctification process.

Jacob learned that **his brother** had settled south of the Dead Sea, so he **sent messengers ahead of him to Esau in the land of Seir (say-ear), the country of Edom (32:3)**. **The rabbis teach that the messengers were angels**. Seir was a mountain range, running north to south, where **Esav** had settled and started the nation of **Edom**. This was due south from **Galeed**.

Ya'akov instructed his servants exactly how to address **Esau**, saying: **This is what you are to say to my master Esau, "Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there until now" (32:4)**. **Jacob** humbles **himself** before **his brother**, even calling himself a **servant**. **He** knew that **the LORD** had said: **the older will serve the younger (25:23)**, but **Ya'akov** does not insist on the fulfillment of the blessing that **he** had obtained from **his** father; **he** was very submissive. In addition, **he** wanted **Esau** to know that **he** had no desire for any of **his** possessions; **he** said: **I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes (32:5)**. But evidently **Esav** had heard that **Jacob** was migrating back to Canaan.

Though **his** anger against **Jacob** had long since cooled, **he** himself did not know what **Jacob's** intentions might be. For all **Esau** knew, **Ya'akov** might be coming with a large body of fighting **men** to claim **his** promised boundaries and possessions and to subjugate **him**. When **he** learned of **Jacob's** approach toward Canaan, **he** then assembled an army of **his** own and marched forward to meet

Ya'akov, preparing for whatever may come. **Jacob's messengers** met **Esav** much sooner than they expected.⁵⁰² **When they returned to Jacob, they** had terrifying news. **We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you and four hundred men are with him (32:6)**. This frightens **Ya'akov** because **four hundred men** were far too many for a mere escort. **He** naturally jumped to the conclusion that **Esau** still intended to kill **him**.

In great fear and distress, Jacob devises a survival plan and **divided the people who were with him into two groups, the flocks and herds and camels as well**. **He** thought: **If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape (32:7-8)**. But along with human wisdom, **Jacob** also **prayed**. This showed where **his** confidence lay.

In **his** prayer, **he** acknowledged **Elohim, the God of power and justice who had protected Abraham, Isaac and himself, and ADONAI, the LORD who had kept His covenant promises, the merciful redeemer**. **He** prayed: **O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, "Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper" (32:9)**. If **Esau** were to kill **him** or **his** family, this promise could never be fulfilled. So **Jacob's** prayer is based upon **God's** promises to **him (28:13-15)**, and not on **his** own merit. This is true of any believer who has received blessing from **the LORD**.

The goal of prayer is to get our will in line with **ADONAI's** will, and to that end **Ya'akov** continued to pray. **He** poured out **his** heart and said: **I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only a staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. 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. 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 (32:10-12)**. **He** spent the **night there**. All this should have given **Jacob** great confidence, but **he** was controlled by fear at this point.⁵⁰³ As **he** lay down to go to sleep, **he** thought of **his** vast holdings and decided to send **a gift to his brother Esau**, showing **his** good will **(32:13)**.

The next day **he** selected **thirty female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys (32:14-15)**. This selection process took the whole next day. **He** selected

a total of 580 animals, which shows how much **God** had blessed **him** because **he** gave only a portion of what **he** had. The giving of presents is far more common in the East, and has more significance, than with us. Hardly any transaction of importance can take place without **a gift**.⁵⁰⁴



The gifts **Jacob** sent ahead of **him** were not a bribe, but rather an expression of conciliation. **He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself and said to his servants: Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds (32:16).** There were five groups of animals. There was a group of 220 **goats**, a group of 220 **rams and ewes**, 60 **camels**, 50 **cattle**, and 30 **donkeys**, with spacing between each group. The goal was for **Esau** to receive five gifts, one at a time.

He instructed the one in the first group: When my brother Esau meets you and asks, “To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?” then you are to say: They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us. He also instructed the second, the third, and the fourth and fifth groups who followed the first: You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him (32:17-19).

Then **he** added, “Be sure to say: **Your servant Ya’akov is coming behind us.**” **For he thought to himself, “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; and later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me” (32:20).** The word **pacify** here, is the Hebrew word *kaphar*. It is the same Hebrew root as the word *atonement*. What that means is that **Jacob** was seeking **Esau’s** forgiveness.

After sending off his **gifts**, **Ya’akov** remained behind with **his** family and the rest of

the servants to spend the **night** at **his** camp near the **Jabbok** River. At first they were north of the river as **Esau** approached from the south. But apparently unable to sleep, **Jacob** rose and embarked on a dangerous night-crossing. **He** decided to move the animals, **his** family and **all his possessions** across the river to the south. **That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions (32:22-23).** The **Jabbok** was fordable, and **he** wanted to get the remaining animals across the stream before encountering **Esau** the eventful next day.

*On April 16, 2007 Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and wounded many more before committing suicide at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia. It was the deadliest shooting in modern American history, and I am sure that when the shooting started that day, there were plenty of prayers being sent up to **God** as students were cornered and executed. But that didn't mean there wasn't some planning going on, planning how to slip out a back door, planning where to hide, or planning to jump out a window (which several students did to save their lives). Many of those killed were believers and **God** had a plan for their lives. Did their planning to escape from that assassin show a lack of trust in **God**? Would standing at their desks and singing "Amazing Grace" have been more spiritual? Sometimes, in the face of death, the natural instinct for survival takes over and people try to survive. Their planning should not be taken as lack of faith, and neither should **Jacob's**.*

So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, and he had returned to the northern bank of the **Jabbok** River to spend a second **night** there alone **in the camp (32:21)**. Having done everything **he** could humanly do, **he** decided to spend the rest of the night in prayer. While waiting **seven years to get Rachel, it seemed like only a few days to Ya'akov (29:20),** but while waiting only **a few days to meet Esav, it seemed like seven years. He** still felt vulnerable from an attack by **Esau**, but that was exactly where **God** wanted **him**, having no one else to turn to. Now the real struggle would begin.