

## Facing Our Fears

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The story told in Parashat Vayishlah of the meeting between Jacob and Esau is well known. But a closer consideration of the details of the tale speaks to very contemporary concerns. The overall backdrop to the scene is the pervasive feeling of fear. Esau, Jacob learns, is approaching, and there are 400 men with him. Is it a lavish welcoming party? (This is not unheard of in the Middle East—I myself experienced just such a welcoming party in Egypt when I was traveling there with some American Cabinet officials in 1980.) Or is it a prelude to belligerency? Are the loud sounds they are making just the sounds of 400 excited people from a demonstrative culture, or are those cries of war? Jacob assumed the worst. He didn't bother asking the messengers who reported Esau's approach whether the 400 men were armed or not. Jacob reflexively got ready for battle, and our rabbinic commentaries make his preparations even more vivid—dividing the camps so that he could fight without risking losing everyone and preparing a path of retreat just in case. And what was the cause of this premature readiness to attack? Genesis 32:8 tells us: "Jacob was profoundly fearful, and felt as if he were hemmed in (ויצר לו)." Did he have reason to fear Esau? He certainly had reason to fear the Esau of 20 years ago, whom he had robbed of his blessing and his dignity. But did he have reason to fear *today's* Esau, whom he did not know at all, except by projection in his own mind? Jacob didn't think, in his paralyzing fear, that it was at all necessary to ponder that question.

And, while we're on the subject, did Esau have anything to fear from Jacob? That's not at all far-fetched. Jacob had, after all, shown himself in the past to be unscrupulous and uncaring about his brother. And he just may have heard about the many grown sons of Jacob, some of whom were tough guys, able to take down an entire city, as it later turned out. It was an explosive moment as they approached

each other, each fearing the other, and expecting the worst. The rabbis tell us that when Esau ran to Jacob and embraced him and kissed him, it was a moment of divine intervention, in which Esau's hatred was miraculously turned to love, despite himself. Well, there was no doubt a miracle here, but given Jacob's deep-seated fear, it seems that the miracle was rather that Jacob did not interpret Esau's running towards him as an act of war, and have his sons, in concert with him, shoot a barrage of arrows at his brother and his men. What horrors could that scene have eventuated in? And yet, we have to recognize that given all the ingredients of panic, it is, indeed, a miracle that blood was not shed that day.

Both as Americans and as Jews concerned with and connected to Israel, we are not strangers to how mutual and pervasive fear and mistrust across the lines of race, across the lines of policers and the policed, across the lines of occupiers and the occupied, create the conditions for tragedy and the perpetuation of hostility. And miraculous escapes, of the kind the Torah treats us to in Vayishlah, have neither been forthcoming nor very readily imaginable. (I should add that I do not speak here of the unfathomable crimes of October 7 itself; those are in a category by themselves, and the impulses behind the unique cruelty of which human beings are capable are things I will likely ponder without success for the rest of my life.)

A story about fear and suspicion: almost 20 years ago, I traveled with a group of families from my synagogue to Eastern Europe, and we spent Shabbat in Budapest. We had a definite plan for where we would worship on Shabbat morning (the Dohány Street Synagogue), but Friday night worship plans were left open. Now we were accompanied by a local "docent"—a very kind and knowledgeable Jewish woman from Budapest. And when I made what seemed like

a natural suggestion on a fair summer evening, “why don’t we just go across the street to the public park and sit on the grass and pray there?”, our Hungarian friend kind of blanched, and said that she did not think that was a good idea. When I asked her why, she couldn’t quite say, but it was clear she was anxious about it. We managed to allay whatever fears she had, and we went to pray in the park. About halfway through the *tefillah*, we noticed that a group of police officers had gathered a short distance away, and they were watching us, and talking to one another. Finally, they began to approach us. What was this about? We didn’t know, but it was clear to me that my reflexes and those of our Hungarian friend were quite different. I wasn’t sure what they would say to us, but I didn’t feel threatened. She apparently did. And when they strongly suggested to us that we might be more comfortable in a corner of the park where there was less human traffic, I more or less took that at face value. Maybe I was being naive—I do not know to this day. But the essential point is that police officers trying to be helpful is part of my daily experience as a white American. Our friend, living in Budapest over many turbulent decades, was not taught in the same way that “the police officer is primarily your friend.” We finished praying just fine in the corner of the park to which we obediently moved. But the incident made vivid for me at that moment how our experiences craft our lenses, especially those through which we see uniformed authority, and those lenses get case-hardened, such that what may look entirely neutral and innocent to one person may trigger all sorts of panic in another. Add to that the reality—which was not the case on that Leil Shabbat in Budapest—that there are often reasons why police officers or soldiers might also have experiences generating fear and terror for *them*. Consider all of this, and you begin to understand something: that when people talk about the need for communication and understanding, the need for more sophisticated training and mentoring for police officers and soldiers, and the overcoming of the tendency we have to collectivize the “other,” they are not simply mouthing platitudes. None of it is easily done, but it is crucially important.

Black Americans, Palestinian Israelis and those in the West Bank—given their experiences, and the natural mental projections to which they give rise—have also, like our friendly guide in Budapest, not learned at their parents’ knees the mantra “the police officer or the soldier is your friend.” Their not-unrealistic suspicion also begets suspicion and fear in those facing them. And we, as Jews, should be able to understand that. If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot avoid the conclusion that, given the traumas in our own history, we do not always approach those who are different—and especially those who have power over us or who can otherwise harm us—with a neutral demeanor, free of fear and suspicion.

What Jacob’s story teaches us is this above all: that there is a terrible and dangerous deficit of understanding, and of trust, and of generous faith, in what we assume are the motives of those who look, talk, and live differently from us. And this is what urgently needs to be addressed. The public figures who have said so are not giving us bromides. They are speaking the truth, though it will not be easy to accomplish it. First and foremost, because it requires us to go beyond our comfort zone, and beyond the ingrained fears we may not even know we have. It takes honesty, determination, and courage. Not miracles.