

A Priest and a Rabbi Walk into a Classroom

Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Genesis 33



Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ² He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³ He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these with you?' Jacob said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your servant.' ⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸ Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favour with my lord.' ⁹ But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' ¹⁰ Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour. ¹¹ Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it.

¹² Then Esau said, 'Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.'

¹³ But Jacob said to him, 'My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴ Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.'

¹⁵ So Esau said, 'Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.' But he said, 'Why should my lord be so kind to me?' ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷ But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth (Booths).

¹⁸ Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city. ¹⁹ And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred pieces of money the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent. ²⁰ There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel (God of Israel).



The entire word of VAYISHAQEYHU “and he kissed him,” that is in **Genesis 33:4**, has dots over the Hebrew letters. In this, the commentators of Judaism were seeing *something* of merit, in that they said variously that the kiss was either “insincere,” or else that Esau intended to really “bite” Jacob. The root meaning of the *niqqudot* “piercings” over the word may well have guided that initial idea.

“וירץ עשו לקראתו ויזבקהו ויפול על צואריו וישקהו”
(שם לג.): כולו נקוד מלמד שלא נשקו באמת
רבי שמעון בן אל עזר אומר: “נשיקה זו של
אמת וכולן אינן של אמת”

“And Esaw ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell upon his neck, and kissed him.” (Genesis 33):

All are dotted [of *Vayishqeyhu*] to teach his kiss was insincere.

Rabbi Shimon ben El'azar said, “His kiss was sincere, but all his other acts were insincere.”

~ *Avot of Rabbi Natan, perek 34:5*

Why are there extra dots in Genesis 33:4?

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I was reading Genesis 33 and noticed extra dots (i.e. not part of the niqud that I understand) above the letters of "and he kissed him" in verse 4 (picture from archive.org's Biblia Hebraica):



and he fell on his neck **and kissed him**, and they wept.

A little bit of Googling shows that similar dots occur fifteen times in BHS. * One explanation:

[The dots] were inserted to call attention to some important homiletical teaching in connection with the words, but possibly they indicate that the words or letters were doubtful and are to be deleted, presumably when Elijah comes and resolves the various scribal disagreements that have sprung up. Ezra is hedging his bets saying that if Elijah says 'why have you written these words' he will reply 'I have placed dots over them' and if he says 'you have written them correctly' then he will remove the dots! (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 30b).

With regard to Genesis 33:4 in particular, Rabbinic sources seem to disagree about whether the dots are meant to emphasize the reconciliation between the brothers or to indicate that this word should be understood as "and he bit him," yielding a very different interpretation.

The “love” bite!

By Rabbi Alan Garber

December 14, 2016

When Jacob and Esau finally meet in this week’s sedra the Torah describes;

“Esau ran to meet him and hug him, and he fell on his neck, and he kissed him and they cried”. (Genesis 33:4)

In a Torah scroll, there is a dot written above every letter of the word *vayishakayhu*, “and he kissed him”

The Midrash Rabbah (78:9) brings a dispute as to what this represents;

Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar says; “Whenever there are more letters than dots, we expound on the letters, and when there are more dots than letters we expound on the dots. Here, where the number of letters and dots are equal we learn that at that moment Esau’s mercy was aroused and he kissed Jacob with all his heart”.

Rabbi Yannai replied; “If that is the case why are their dots at all? Rather, Esau came not to kiss Jacob, but to bite him. Jacob’s neck miraculously turned to marble, and Esau blunted his teeth on it. That is the meaning of and they wept – Jacob because of his neck and Esau because of his teeth”. How can there be such a divergence of opinion about Esau’s intentions? The Shem MiShmuel suggests that Esau came to attack Jacob in two methods, and that rather than disputing each other Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yannai are presenting the two different sides of Esau’s attack.

Before the meeting with Esau, Jacob prepares himself in three ways; by sending gifts of appeasement, by practically preparing for war, and through prayer. In Jacob’s prayer he makes a strange request:

“Save me please from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau” (Genesis 32:12)

Jacob has only one brother, and furthermore, why does he describe Esau first as a brother and then state his name? The Ohr HaChaim (1696-1743) points out that Jacob was more fearful of Esau as a *brother*, than Esau, the physical threat. The Esau as a brother represented the spiritual threat of being befriended and influenced by Esau’s immoral outlook on life.

This explains the two opinions in the Midrash. According to Rabbi Shimon, by embracing and kissing Jacob, Esau hoped to bring Jacob down by attaching Jacob to his immoral outlook. According to Rabbi Yannai, Esau also approached Jacob as the physical threat.

In a few weeks time we will be celebrating Chanukah. Unlike Purim which celebrates the victory and the saviour of the Jewish people from the threat of physical destruction, on Chanukah we celebrate our saviour from spiritual destruction. The Greek-Assyrians didn’t want to annihilate us; rather they sought to assimilate us into Hellenistic culture. Throughout our history we have faced this two pronged attack of Esau. Today we are living at a time where Jews around the world are generally not under the fear of physical attack. Our biggest threat is being spiritually drawn away from our heritage and assimilated into the wider culture.

The Shem Mishmuel points out that the Midrash specifies that Jacob’s neck turned to marble as opposed to metal which is often used as an analogy of something that is hard. He points out that unlike metal; marble has a special halachic status that it can not contract spiritual impurity. Jacob, our spiritual fore-bearer, set a precedent of being able to face the attack of Esau’s “brotherly love-bite” and remain impervious to it.