



The Gift • Parshat Vayishlach

In one of the most tender scenes in all of Genesis, Jacob and Esau reunite. Much has happened in the intervening years since they lived under the same roof as brothers. Jacob left his parental home alone and as a fugitive from his raging brother. He returned with a large retinue of wives, children, and sheep. Esau left for Mount Seir to become a nation of his own. When the two meet eyes, the Torah invites us into this exchange of high emotion: “Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept” (Gen. 33:4).

After they separated and Esau surveyed Jacob’s household and the many gifts Jacob brought for him, Esau sought clarification, “What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” He answered, “To gain my lord’s favor” (Gen. 33:8). Jacob was so nervous about this meeting that he tried to mollify Esau with presents. Jacob may have tried with these gifts to compensate Esau for stealing Esau’s birthright. Jacob may have tried to impress Esau that he was a changed man, a man of wealth and stability.

But Esau was interested in his brother, not his brother’s offerings. “Esau said, ‘I have enough (*yesh li rav*), my brother; let what you have remain yours” (Gen. 33:9). *Yesh li rav* can also be translated as “I have a great deal,” as if Esau was stating that he, too, had accumulated wealth since the two met. He no longer needed the largesse of an inheritance. Jacob was insistent, “But Jacob said, ‘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. Please accept my present which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty.’ And when he urged him, he accepted” (Gen. 33:10-11). The face of a potential murderer had softened, for Jacob, into an image of God. Esau understood that rejecting Jacob’s gifts was a way of rejecting him. Accepting these gifts was an acknowledgment that time had changed these brothers.

The expression, “I have enough” was understood by Biblical commentators in a variety of ways.

Rashi, basing himself on a midrash, states that “with these words he [Esau] admitted his [Jacob’s] right to the blessings.” In other words, Esau had made peace with the past and accepted Jacob’s place as spiritual heir. R. Ovadiah Sforno regards Esau’s answer more sharply: “I most certainly do not need this gift,” as if Esau were telling Jacob that he needed no handouts from a rich younger brother. *Ha-emek Davar* states that with these three words, Esau was communicating two messages. Esau had plenty and did not need more and that Jacob was his brother, not his master, and, therefore, did not need to give him tribute. Radak, Rabbi David Kimche, may offer the most emotionally intuitive interpretation of this statement: “After all these years, Esau finally acknowledged that he had not suffered as a result of Jacob being blessed, so he was able to say, ‘Keep what is yours!’”

This brief and poignant exchange makes us wonder about the purpose of gift-giving more generally. In 1925, Marcel Mauss, a philosopher

and sociologist, wrote an important and oft-cited article, "Essay on the Gift." He combed ancient cultures and ethnographic data from America's Pacific Northwest and Polynesia to understand the role that gift-giving plays in societal structures. Giving a gift is perceived as an outward expression of generosity that emerges from the giver's own volition, will, and desire. But Mauss concluded from his research that gift-giving represents a "strict accounting system" that reflects rights and duties. Gift economies are those where there is an obligation to give, an obligation to accept, and an obligation to reciprocate. Just think of gift-giving within peer groups and the bottle of wine that gets transferred from house to house as a Shabbat gift.

The intricate system of reciprocity and expectation in gift-giving changes it from a magnanimous gesture to an expectation freighted with the anxiety of rejection. In a gift exchange, there is always the worry that the parties not match, in cost or extravagance, the gift of the other. Consider, for example, diplomatic gifts and what they symbolize. Or think of the difficulty of purchasing a gift for a superior. I dropped a question into a search engine: "What should you buy your boss as a gift?" The screen was littered with tchotchkes, like an "Essence of Leadership" pen holder and "Great Boss" T-shirts. Coasters, key chains, and posters were all flush with inspirational quotes. But it's hard to imagine any boss happily wearing one of these shirts or hanging such posters. The gifts then go into storage to be regifted to someone else who also doesn't want them.

Cultural critic and essayist, Lewis Hyde wrote a book called *The Gift* that I once purchased at the J. Paul Getty Museum gift shop and could not put down. There he writes that common to each notion of a gift is "that a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us." Thinking of Hyde's words, we turn back to the Esau and Jacob encounter and realize that when Esau said to Jacob, "I have enough," he was not rejecting Jacob's gifts but bestowing upon Jacob the most potent gift of all and one that could not be

purchased: his forgiveness.

Jacob came armed for this tense moment with an impressive cache of presents. Esau had none. There was no gift exchange or false attempt at superficial reciprocity. Esau gave Jacob the raw gift of his embrace and his tears. He gifted Jacob with a long-absent sense of fraternal feeling. With his three words, I have enough, Esau told Jacob that he no longer needed a birthright. All of the gifts before him were meaningless. All he needed and wanted was a brother. When Jacob declared that seeing Esau was like seeing God's face, Jacob, too, acknowledged the immensity of the moment. He, too, needed a brother. Jacob could never see God's face, but, if he could, it would be the face of acceptance and relief.

Leaders can bestow many gifts on others, but no gift is greater than emotional validation. When have you received this gift? Who in your life needs this gift? How will you pass it on?