Dvar Torah V'Yishlach

1. Jacob lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, Esau was coming, and with him were four hundred men; so he divided the children with Leah and with Rachel and with the two maidservants.

2. And he placed the maidservants and their children first and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and her Joseph last.

3. And he went ahead of them and prostrated himself to the ground seven times, until he came close to his brother.

4. And Esau ran toward him and embraced him, and he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

This moment of reconciliation between Jacob and Esau has often been read through a lens of suspicion. One example of this is Rashi's comment on 33:4

and kissed him: Heb. וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ. There are dots over the word. There is controversy concerning this matter in a Baraitha of Sifrei (Beha'alothecha 69). Some interpret the dots to mean that he did not kiss him wholeheartedly. Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai said: It is a well- known tradition that Esau hated Jacob, but his compassion was moved at that time, and he kissed him wholeheartedly.

Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg was a German Rabbi and scholar of the 19th century, best known as author of the Torah commentary Haketav VehaKabbalah. He explains the second view in Rashi that Esau was sincere with Jacob through a comparison with Lavan. "He kissed him" is only one word in Hebrew, implying the sincerity of the moment. However, in the encounter with Jacob and Lavan, "he kissed him" is written as two words, implying the lack of sincerity Lavan has in greeting Jacob.

(ד) וישקהו. בידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב אלא שנכמרו רחמיו באותו פעם ונשקו בכל לבו (רש"י מרז"ל), טעמם בזה לפי שאמר כאן ויחבקהו וישקהו בחבור הכנויים, אבל בלבן נאמר ויחבק לו וינשק לו הפועל לבד והכנוי לבדו בדל שביניהם כי בזמן שהפועל מתעצם ומתקשר עם הנפעל ממנו בעצם ולא במקרה וכונה חיצונית אז ישמש הכתוב בחבור הכנוי עם הפועל, כמו כי אהבת נפש אהבו (ש"א כ') לא אמר אהב אותו כי אהבת דוד עם יהונתן היתה אהבה עצמיית איש את אחיהו ידובקו בלתי תלויה אהבה בדבר, אבל בעת שהאהבה היא תלויה בדבר ראוי להשתמש בפועל נפרד מהכנוי ואיננו מחובר בתיבה אחת, לכן בספור מעשה לבן עם יעקב שהכנוי נפרד מהפועל ואמר ויחבק לו וינשק לו (ולא וישקהו ויחבקהו) דרשו רז"ל בב"ר שמא זהובים הביא והנם בחיקו שמא מרגליות הביא והם בפיו, אמנם כאן שבידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב ויקרא מקרה שחבק לו ונשקו היל"ל ויחבק לו וינשק לו כמו בלבן, ע"כ אמר שאותו הפעם נשקו בכל לבו וזהו וישקהו בחבור הכנוי

However one understands the sincerity of Esau, the Netivot Shalom asks what pushed Esau to embrace Jacob. Jacob was scared for the safety of himself and his family. Rashi had previously brought down (Yeshivish expression) on Genesis 32:7-9

7. The angels returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother, to Esau, and he is also coming toward you, and four hundred men are with him."

8. Jacob became very frightened and was distressed; so he divided the people who were with him and the flocks and the cattle and the camels into two camps.

9. And he said, "If Esau comes to one camp and strikes it down, the remaining camp will escape."

Rashi:

the remaining camp will escape: Against his will, for I will wage war with him. He (Jacob) prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for war, and for prayer. For a gift, [as Scripture says] (verse 22): "So the gift passed on before him." For prayer, [as Scripture says] (verse 10): "God of my father Abraham…" For war, [as Scripture says]: "the remaining camp will escape." - [from Tanchuma Buber, Vayishlach 6]

The Netivot Shalom argues that the key factor which allowed Esau to embrace Jacob was a response to "And he (Jacob) went ahead of them and prostrated himself to the ground seven times, until he came close to his brother". It was Jacob's prostration to Esau that was the determining action. However, the Netivot Shalom then follows with a symbolic reading as to why the prostration succeeded.

Rabbi Moshe Alshich Hebrew (1508–1593), known as the Alshich Hakadosh (the Holy), was a prominent rabbi, preacher, and biblical commentator in the latter part of the 16th century, suggests that Esau had two dimensions to his personality. One was the "bad guy" Esau. The second dimension was that that of being a brother to Jacob. The prostration of Esau relieved the bitterness and anger of Esau and allowed the "brother" aspect to be dominant.

אלשיך על בראשית פרשת וישלח פרק לג פסוק ד

(ג) על דרך הפשט יאמר כי הנה שתי בחינות היו לעשו, א. מצד מהותו במה שהוא עשו. ב. במה שהוא אחיו שיהיה בו צד טוביות. והנה בתחלה היה מסתפק אם היה מתנהג בבחינת עשו או אחיו כאומרו אל עשו אחיו פורש למעלה. ובזה יאמר וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים עד גשתו עד אחיו למתק מרורות חמת בחינת היותו עשו עד גדר הקרא אחיו

The Midrash Sechel Tov takes a different approach. Jacob did prostrate, but it was not directed to Esau as a sign of humility or submission, but rather to God as a firm prayer that God be compassionate to Jacob. Esau misunderstood and thought Jacob was bowing to him, but this misunderstanding achieved the positive result.

וישתחוו ארצה שבע פעמים. נגד הקדוש ברוך הוא היה משתחוה שיטה לב עשו עליו לטובה, דא"ר חנינא בר יצחק לא זז משם, משתטח והולך, עד שהכניס מדת הדין למדת הרחמים: עד גשתו עד אחיו. דימה עשו שהוא משתחוה לו, לפיכך נתגלגלו רחמיו, זש"ה כי שבע יפול צדיק וקם (משלי כד טז)

In the end, Jacob understands that he cannot fully reconcile with Esau and that the brothers must continue their journey. Jacob promises to meet up with Esau in Seir, but that is to be only in a distant future.