

BREAK SCRIPT

YOM KIPPUR

I have been thinking a lot lately about Esav – who I think just may be one of the great heroes of the Torah. Wait, Esav – the evil brother of Jacob, a hero?

Here's Esav's story, at least what we know from the Torah: after struggling with infertility, Rebecca becomes pregnant with twins. When she gives birth, Esav comes out first, Jacob following close behind. The brothers grow up and Esav becomes a hunter – which pleases his father, Isaac, who likes meat and would have disliked lunch at IKAR. Jacob prefers to read a lot and begins to work toward a PhD in philology, which makes his Jewish mother very proud. One day, Esav comes home from a hard day out slaying bison and, exhausted and hungry, makes the foolish decision to trade brother Jacob his birthright for a bowl of soup. Not his finest hour.

Years pass and the boys grow into young men. An aging Isaac, still dealing with the physical and spiritual trauma of his youth (remember when his father almost slaughtered him as an offering before God?) decides that the end must be near, and calls his son Esav forward. He asks him to prepare a meal – the really good meat - and then receive the blessing of the firstborn son. Esav goes out into the field. Jacob, at his mother's urging and with the help of fur arm sleeves and other guiles, deceives his father into believing that *he* is Esav, and co-opts the blessing of the first born. Esav is devastated. He cries out in anguish, *barkheini gam ani, avi!* – can't you find a blessing for me, too, abba (Gen 27:34)? *Halo atzalta li brakha?* – did you not save a single one for me (27:36)? Nothing, Isaac replied. Sorry, kid – tough luck. NOTHING? Esav cries. Fine, says his father, *you will live by the sword, and you will serve your brother.*

Esav is understandably crushed and determines that once his father dies, he will take revenge by killing his brother. Rebecca, fearing for precious Jacob's life, sends him away – and for the next twenty years he lives far from home, marrying, having many children and amassing a small fortune. Eventually, Jacob decides that it's time to return home. He prepares to battle his likely still indignant brother, who he hears is approaching with 400 troops. Jacob is terrified, but when the two meet something extraordinary happens. Esav runs toward Jacob, hugs and kisses him and cries. Esav, with every right to his anger, instead embraces and weeps. A remarkable story of the possibility of forgiveness. Would that we could be like Esav and embrace our siblings – or any of the people who have caused us real hurt, forgiving them for their cruelty or insensitivity or manipulation, even when it left a permanent mark on our lives. Esav, trading resentment for reconciliation, becomes the unlikely symbol of what is possible when our hearts are open and we believe, fundamentally, in the ability of human beings to change.

Unless you read the Rabbis. Here's what they have to say about Esav:

The two brothers fought in the womb, each wanting to be born first. Esav said to Jacob: *If you don't let me go out first, I will kill my mother and leave through the stomach wall.* Jacob said: *This wicked one is a murderer from his inception* (Midrash HaGadol, Bereishit 25:22).

Esav was a hunter, but not only in the literal sense. He would trap and manipulate his father, asking questions that would make him appear pious. Then he would rob and extort – all the while pretending to be honorable. He enticed married women from their husbands (Rashi 25:28) and studied in the House of Idolatry. He was a hypocrite, a hater of peace, a *menuval* - a degenerate (Shocheh Tov 120:7, 14:3). *Esav was divorced from normal human values, consumed with violence* (Ibn Ezra). Throughout Genesis Rabbah, the major midrashic collection on the book of Genesis, Esav is described as “the Wicked Esav” and he and his descendents, the forebears of dreaded Rome, are maligned as *unrighteous, unworthy, unfit*. All the while, Jacob (the only one of the brothers to commit an actual act of deception in the Torah narrative), is depicted as studious (Bereishit Rabbah 63:10), morally wholesome, honest and deeply dedicated to the wisdom and traditions of his people.

Why does the Torah say that Esav was exhausted the day he sold his birthright? Well, the Rabbis say, if he was tired it was only because he had committed five crimes that day: he violated a woman, he committed murder, he denied God, denied the resurrection of the dead, and spurned his birthright (Bava Batra 16b).

And what of that great moment of reconciliation between brothers - the embrace and tears and the promise of change, possibility, forgiveness? At least *that* had to have been a moment of sincerity, even in the life of a boorish criminal? Ah, that can be explained by the language: Esav's intention was not to kiss Jacob - *l'nashek*, but to bite him - *linshokh*. By miracle, Jacob's neck became hard as marble in that instant, and the teeth of the wicked one were blunted. When the Torah says the brothers *wept* (33:4), one wept from marbleized neck pain, the other wept on account of his teeth (Bereishit Rabbah 78:9).

Why are the Rabbis so desperately and irrepressibly predisposed against Esav – who, from the *peshat* – the simple reading of the Torah – is not flawless but seems to be more buffoon than brute – not the brightest guy, but able to grow, change and forgive?

We might get a hint of what's going on with Esav by looking for a moment at the meteor that slammed into Siberia on a cold winter morning this past year. Travelling at around 45,000 miles/ hr, it hit the earth with such force that it blew out building and car windows for hundreds of miles, injuring one thousand people. Meteor attacks are so rare that it sparked all

kinds of conjecture. One nationalist political leader in Moscow blamed “war-mongers” in the United States. “It’s not meteors falling. It’s a new weapon being tested by the Americans,” he said. A local priest called it an act of God, while a human rights activist claimed that it was a “some military thing” that the government was trying to cover up.¹

I don’t know much about meteors, but I know enough about human beings to find this pricelessly demonstrative – a window into the ways of the human psyche and our persistent ability to find evidence that will fit with precision into the narrative we already hold, all logic and reason to the contrary. Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes in *Thinking Fast and Slow* about confirmation bias – the intrinsic desire to seek out evidence that will be compatible with beliefs and assumptions we already hold. And even more, we tend to read, in any new information, evidence of our own already established beliefs, even if an objective observer would see something very different. It’s called the halo effect: if you like someone, you are likely to see her behavior and even her physical appearance sympathetically. If you hear that this person donated a kidney, you’d of course believe it. If you hear that she slashed somebody’s tires because she took your parking spot at the JCC, you’d question the trustworthiness of the source.

This kind of thinking makes it extremely difficult for us to integrate information that challenges our definitions and assumptions. The vilification of Esav can be traced back to the second century, when it emerged as a Jewish response to Roman persecution the growing threat of Christianity. Seeing themselves as descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it made sense that the Rabbis would look to Esav as the eternal, archetypal Other, an association that was particularly helpful, writes historian Carol Bakhos, for purposes of “group-identity formation, boundary maintenance, and rabbinic notions of Jewish self-identity.” That identification became so definitional for Esav that two thousand years later it’s difficult to utter even a word of defense on his behalf without looking ignorant at best, or at worst, anti-Semitic.

This becomes more than a retroactive self-fulfilling prophecy, it is actually what some call a *narrative fallacy* – in which flawed stories of the past shape our view of the world and our expectations of the future. If we tell - generation after generation - the story of Jacob our forefather who fought bitterly with his brother but ultimately was able to overcome great differences and achieve reconciliation, then our narrative is one of shared humanity, empathy and the possibility of peace. But if the story we tell is one of our forefather Jacob being pursued relentlessly by a heartless brother who fabricated a moment of reconciliation only to

¹ <http://forward.com/articles/171304/synagogue-damaged-jewish-service-interrupted-as-me/?p=all#ixzz2L8G1R3SL>

violently attempt revenge, we tell ourselves and our children something very different – both about us and about *them*, whoever the *them* is.

The Rabbis grew to understand Esav based not on his actual behavior, but rather based on their projection of who they needed him to be – confirming their bias that the older brother of Jacob must be ruthless, unyielding, untrustworthy.

In all of the tumult of the past month in the Middle East, you may have missed the rally outside the Al Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem that accused Egyptian commander General Sisi of serving as an agent of the Jews in his slaughter of Egyptians.² While I suspect it was news to Sisi that he's now working for the Jews, it made perfect sense to the protesters, who orient themselves around a narrative of Jewish power that stands in stark contrast to the victim mentality we Jews often possess of ourselves.

If we believe that our friend's boyfriend is a parasitic narcissist, every word he says, even the way he drives or chews his gum will support it. If we are certain that our kids' school is mediocre, we'll find potato chips on the carpet. Emails that we receive from someone we perceive to be an unappreciative critic are read harshly, whereas the same concerns expressed by someone we feel respects and loves us are read as helpful feedback. We are naturally inclined to collect evidence to support positions we already hold, to substantiate claims that have already convinced us. How many of us turn to Jon Stewart or Nick Kristof after a particularly stunning news event because sometimes we just need someone to tell us what we already believe?

Similarly, each of us has built a self-perception based on a core narrative that either gives us confidence or strips it away, that liberates or constrains us. Growing up, some of us were seen as Esav: everything we did supported the theory of our disrespectful and defiant nature, every eye roll was considered evidence of rebellion. Others were seen as Jacob: even our worst behavior was justified, excused – we were good kids, would never do anything to purposely hurt someone. Once the narrative is created, our confirmation bias provides us with endless prooftexts to reinforce the assumption. The problem is the likelihood of narrative fallacy – we are probably building our self-perception on faulty information and assumptions. We are, eternally, the insecure middle school girl, the chubby boy who nobody picked for the kickball team, the loner, the mess, the helplessly self-destructive, the smart, ugly sister – even if we should have shed those narratives long ago.

Most of us, of course, no longer want to be who we were in 8th grade. We don't want to be defined – in our own eyes or the eyes of others – by our worst moments and greatest

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/17/world/middleeast/israel-turmoil-in-egypt.html>

weaknesses. This, of course, is what our work here today is all about. High Holy Days hit us each year just at the time that everyone is getting back to work from summer break and school is starting and we could easily get caught in the business of life – to say STOP. EVERYTHING. NOW. Who are you, really? Is that who you want to be? I know how busy you are. I understand the complexities of carpool coordination, starting a new semester at school, dentist appointments and fall season premieres and college football and the stuff of life. But hit pause. This is your life – the only life you are given. If the script you’re following is not the one you want to define you – if you’re living with limitations defined by others or defined by the past, if your narrative is choking you, or even just inhibiting you, *do something* about it. *Teshuvah*, our work of this intense period, is ultimately about washing away the narrative fallacy and starting over. Finding new possibility and entering the new year unbound by the past.

OK, so I want to change. I don’t want to be Esav – defined eternally by the wrong script. I want a fresh start. I want my parents/ friends/ yoga instructor/ kids/ husband/ community to see me differently. I want to see myself differently. But how do I get out of this narrative?

Rambam offers a number of practical strategies to begin on the path to *teshuvah*: from *call out to God for help* and *distance yourself* from the bad behavior to *give tzedakah to IKAR*. All of these make good sense. But the one that has always left me perplexed is *m’shaneh sh’mo* – change your name, as if to say *I am different*. *I am not the same person who did those things* (Mishneh Torah 2:4). But why should we let someone completely dissociate from his mistakes? We should regret missteps, but it seems to me dangerous and counterproductive to pretend that the past is not a part of us. But no, Rambam says. Sometimes you have to give a person the chance to say: *ani aher* – I am different now. Make space for him to shed the false narrative and start over. Let him break script.

So here’s the Jewish response to the paralyzing limitations placed upon us – whether by ourselves or others: do something so dramatic, so surprising, that it forces perceptions to change.

On Rosh Hashanah, I talked about Judah – who after generations of fraternal neglect and cruelty, breaks script and asserts his fundamental connectedness to and responsibility for his brothers. In so doing, he shatters the paradigm of isolationism and radical disconnect.

Last month, Yisrael Yitzhak Eichler, a right wing Member of Knesset from a Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) party stood before the Knesset and – in an act of political theater that turned out to be a poignant gesture of shared humanity with Arab Israelis - said, *in Arabic*: “We are with you in your struggle for democracy.” Just afterward, Ahmed Tibi, an Arab-Israeli Knesset member thanked Eichler *in Yiddish*, “In the name of the Arabs, I thank you for your support for democracy.” An unexpected outburst of creativity and sympathy that should force us all to

check our assumptions, our biases about both Haredim and Arab-Israelis. This moment will not dramatically alter the contours of Israeli society, but it is surely a breaking of script.

I think about the extraordinary Malala Yousafzai, who grew up in northwest Pakistan and, even as a child, fought back against the notion that girls and women with the misfortune of living under the Taliban were helpless and voiceless victims. Malala was 11 year old when she started blogging – at grave risk to her life - about the Taliban’s prohibition on girls’ education and their destruction of hundreds of schools in her region. Last year, she survived an assassination attempt while returning home on a school bus with her friends, but even before she took gunshots to the head and neck she was a hero in the global struggle for human rights and women’s rights. Who could have predicted such courage and moral clarity would emanate from a child - a girl - in that society?

I think about Dr. Jay Bradner, the research scientist from Harvard Medical School who discovered a molecule (JQ1) that seemed promising in tricking cancer cells into becoming normal cells in mice. The norm, of course, is to keep breakthroughs like that close to the vest throughout the lengthy process of developing, testing, patenting and manufacturing until they are ready to be sold. But rather than seek a patent – and perhaps motivated by his own father’s struggle with pancreatic cancer - this scientist mailed samples of the compound to 70 labs around the world *for free*, hoping “to get the discovery into the hands of any scientist who could advance it.” That approach, he said, just felt like “the more efficient way to do science—and maybe the more honorable way.”³ This discovery had the potential to earn him hundreds of millions of dollars – a personal fortune. But Bradner seemed more interested in saving lives and helping shift the culture toward an open-source model of drug discovery. An act of honor. A script, broken.

And I think of Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, who came to IKAR this past spring – the Palestinian doctor who worked at Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv. During the Gaza War in 2009, only four months after losing his wife to Leukemia, Abuelaish’s house was hit by errant Israeli tank fire and three of his daughters were killed. Abuelaish, with every reason to live out his days in anger and despair, instead started the Daughters for Life Foundation in their memory, providing scholarships and hope to young women in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. He has spent the 4 years since the tragedy travelling around the world teaching that hate is a poison and that reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians is possible. "I know that what I have lost," he writes in his book *I Shall Not Hate*. “What was taken from me will

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/11/jay-bradner/309122/> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOiKRVH0nQ8>.

never come back. But as a physician and a Muslim of deep faith, I need to move forward to the light, motivated by the spirits of those I lost." Abuelaish's pain fuels his fierce dedication to peace, which he believes will be achieved through the empowerment of girls and women – those who will carry on the hopes and dreams of his own daughters. "I hope that my children will be the last price [paid in this conflict]," he says.

One need not become an international peacemaker or famous cancer doctor to break script, but we can take inspiration from these people of strength and determination who refused to live confined by the expectations and limitations of others. Breaking script is the grown man who, like Esav, finds the courage to reconcile with his brother after years of estrangement. It's the stay at home mom who dares, after 15 years, to go back to work. And it's the accomplished professional who decides to leave work to spend more time with her family. It's the guy with the finance degree who left his job to work as a public school teacher because that's where his heart really is. It's the person who overcomes a lifetime of insecurity, and takes a real risk; the one who lets himself fall deeply in love, even after promising he would never love again. It's the greatest testament to our free will – each of us able to reframe the past, to redefine ourselves rather than endlessly perpetuate imperfect scripts. It is the ability to replace the *stalemate* in our hearts with a narrative of mobility and possibility.

There is so much that we can't control in our lives and in our world. But this – this is in our hands. This Yom Kippur, I pray that we find the courage to look at ourselves long and hard enough to determine if we actually like what we see. I pray that we find the strength to honestly acknowledge our patterns, contemplate our narratives, recognize our script – and then realize that we have the power to break it. Each one of us, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, has the power to *break the chain, to introduce into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace.*

I bless us with a year of mobility, surprise and grace.