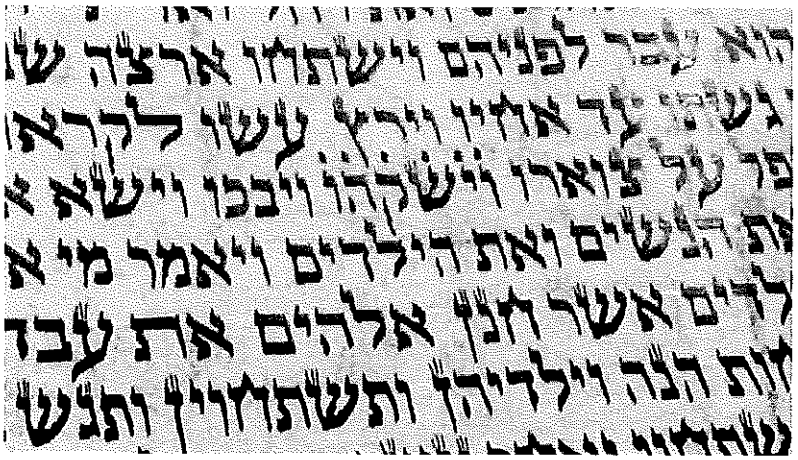
A REUNION

(1) Genesis 33:1-4

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.



(2) Sir Humphrey Appleby on the advantages of hugging

It is necessary to get behind someone before you can stab them in the back.

(3) Rabbi Yannai on the ambiguity of the word

The word for 'kiss' (vayishakeihu) and the word for 'bite' (vayishak*h*eihu) are only one letter different.

...hence...

(4) Ginzberg's 'Legends of the Jews'

In the vehemence of his rage against Jacob, Esau vowed that he would not slay him with bow and arrow, but would bite him dead with his mouth, and suck his blood. But he was doomed to bitter disappointment, for Jacob's neck turned as hard as ivory, and in his helpless fury Esau could but gnash his teeth [...] Esau bawled because his teeth were hurt by the ivory-like flesh of Jacob's neck.

(5) The midrash on opening cans of worms

Rabbi Huna said: the Book of Proverbs, 26:17, tells us, "A passerby who gets embroiled in someone else's quarrel is like one who seizes a dog by its ears."

Nahman ben-Samuel said: This may be compared to the case of a robber who was sleeping on a path, when a man passed and woke him up, saying, "Get up, for there is danger here." At that the robber arose and began beating the man. The victim cried out, "God, rebuke this wicked man!" "I was asleep," retorted the robber, "and you woke me up."

(6) But was it really just a kiss after all?

[See separate sheets]

(6) An emotional dilemma

A lot of the discussion about this scene hangs on the word 'vayishakeihu', the kiss. But the words 'vayipol al-tzavarav' are also open to debate: and Esau 'fell on Jacob's neck'. The word immediately before is 'vay'chab-heihu': and Esau 'embraced'.

So 'y'chab-heihu' was the hug. What was 'vayipol al-tzavarav', the falling on Jacob's neck? The general rule with interpreting the Torah is that if God says something twice, God means two things. There must be a meaning to that second phrase.

Perhaps, just as the meaning of the kiss blurred into having the meaning of a bite, the hugging merged into wrestling.

This is often how we are with our loved ones – not physically, but still, hugging and wrestling at the same time.

GW 14.12.16

Rabbi John D Rayner: 'An Understanding of Judaism', 1997

lying I will give to you and to your descendants ...' But it also changed his ideas.

For if the God of the Patriarchs was indeed the universal God, who holds sway in the most distant lands, then what can it mean to be the founder of a people with a special relationship to such a God? It can only be to render some service to all humanity. That is why, in his dream, he hears God saying to him: 'Through you and through your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed'. What he realises at this point is that the birthright he has always craved is, after all, not so much a privilege as a responsibility.

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Esau's Kiss

Shabbat Va-yishlach, 22 November 1980

'And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept' (Gen. 33:4). In this verse there is something peculiar: over the word וישקהו, 'and kissed him', there is a series of dots.

What is the significance of these dots? The specialists in the study of the Masorah, the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible, tell us that they are called *puncta extraordinaria*; and extraordinary they certainly are, for they are found only in fifteen places in the entire Bible (Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction*, p. 686). But what exactly do they mean? That, unfortunately, is not at all certain; but in all probability these dots are a device employed by the ancient scribes to call attention to the fact that they suspected that the word in question was wrong: either that it shouldn't be there at all, because it was missing in the best manuscripts, or that it was incorrectly spelt. In our case, for instance, the scribes may have thought that the word should be in the plural, saying that 'they kissed each other', since the verse goes on to say, in the plural, 'and they wept' (Arnold Ehrlich, *Mikra Kifshuto*, Vol. I, pp. 93f)).

However that may be, these dots were interpreted in *another* sense, as casting doubt, not on the accuracy of the text, but on the exact meaning to be ascribed to it; and in our case, whether Esau's kiss was, or was not, sincere. This question is raised in the Sifre to the Book of Numbers, which is one of the oldest Midrashim we possess, dating perhaps from the third century. The passage reads: 'The word וישקהו has dots over it because Esau did not kiss Jacob בכל־לבו,

whole-heartedly. However, Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai commented that, although it is well known that Esau hated Jacob, nevertheless on this occasion his latent love for his brother was roused within him, and he did kiss Jacob בכל־לבו, whole-heartedly' (to Num. 9:10).

So there you have a difference of opinion which runs through all the subsequent interpretive literature: that Esau's kiss was, and that it was not, sincere. Which view shall *we* take? Let us consider the evidence.

Did Esau have cause to hate his brother? Indeed, he did! For Jacob had cheated him, first out of his birthright, and then out of the paternal blessing due to him as the first-born. And that was no small matter. It meant that the younger brother was to have authority over the elder. As Isaac had said in blessing Jacob, 'Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you' (Gen. 27:29); and though the Bible doesn't actually say so, we have no reason to doubt that Jacob relished, and perhaps gloated over, the superior status that had been conferred on him. Not surprisingly, therefore, Esau was furious, and resolved to kill his brother at the first opportunity. It was for this reason that Rebekah, who knew of Esau's plan, advised Jacob to flee to far-off Mesopotamia. There he would be safe from his brother's vengeance; and there, incidentally, he would also be able to find a wife for himself among his kinsfolk.

All that, admittedly, was twenty years before the episode that concerns us, for that is how long it took Jacob to obtain from his uncle Laban the privilege of marrying his two daughters and of acquiring enough wealth for the homeward journey. But throughout all these long years, Jacob has not forgotten what transpired before he left. His fear of Esau has continued to haunt him, and his feeling of guilt towards his brother has never ceased to prey on him. And now, as he approaches the old, familiar landscapes, these memories come back with ever increasing vividness, and his anxiety is further intensified when he receives news that Esau is actually on his way towards him, and not alone, but with an army of four hundred men. The moment of truth is fast approaching. All Jacob can do now is to pray for deliverance, and to take various precautions in case his prayer should go unanswered.

It is at this stage that Jacob has his dream, in which he wrestles with a mysterious being. Evidently the dream is an enactment of his fears; and when the dawn awakens him, there, on the horizon, is Esau with his four hundred men. Yes, Jacob has every reason to fear the worst; and when Esau comes running towards him, and hugs him and kisses him, it can only be a trick, a way of catching him off guard, a sinister prelude to the fatal stab.

That is one way of interpreting our verse, and it was reinforced in the minds of the Rabbis by the tradition that Esau was the ancestor of the Edomites, Israel's enemies in ancient times, and furthermore a symbol of Rome, the cruel, oppressive regime of their own time. Obviously, therefore, Esau is the villain of the piece and must have been ill-intentioned. One Midrash goes so far as to say that Esau's real intention was not to kiss Jacob but to bite him – this on the basis of the similarity in Hebrew between the word *nashak*, to kiss, and *nashach*, to bite; only, by a miracle, Jacob's neck became hard as marble, so that he was unable to do so! (Gen. R. 78:9).

But not all interpreters have taken this line. Some have recognised that the Bible is more objective than the Midrash; that it does *not* paint its characters in black and white; that Jacob, as portrayed in the Bible, is by no means all good; that he *had* behaved reprehensibly towards his brother; that he *had* employed trickery to gain personal advantage; and that, conversely, Esau is by no means depicted as all bad; he has his weaknesses, of course; his craving for food and material things, for instance; but within the limitations of his earthy way of life, he conducts himself with honour and dignity; therefore he may well be capable of magnanimity, and the kiss of brotherhood may be genuine.

There are other reasons for thinking so. One is the passage of time; for even if twenty years is not long enough for Jacob to get rid of his sense of guilt, it may be long enough for Esau to lose his thirst for revenge. After all, even the Pope's mule, in Daudet's story, saved up his kick of vengeance only for seven years! Another reason is that the description of the reconciliation sounds so authentic; it uses the language of spontaneity, not of intrigue. That is why Abraham ibn Ezra, the medieval commentator, rejects so contemptuously the Midrash, which Rashi still repeats, about Esau having intended to *bite* Jacob. 'It is all right', he says, 'for little children, but the plain sense of Scripture is that Esau did not mean to do any harm to his brother, and the proof of it is that it goes on to say that they both wept' (Rashi to Gen. 33:4).

But there is another and profounder reason. It is that Jacob has in fact changed. He is no longer the cunning trickster and the schemer for personal power he used to be. For the dream on the bank of the Jabbok has been a turning-point in his life. He has finally come to terms with himself; he has confronted, and struggled with, the evil within him, for that, according to one interpretation, is what his adversary symbolises; he has paid the penalty for his past misconduct, for that is presumably the meaning of the injury he sustains to his thigh; he has therefore expiated his guilt, and he is consequently able to face

the future with a new maturity. His character has undergone a transformation; hence the change of name from Jacob to Israel.

Of the medieval Jewish commentators, the one who perceived this most clearly was Obadiah Sforno, who lived in Italy in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. 'All of a sudden', he writes, 'Esau's heart was changed as he beheld Jacob's self-abasement' *(ad loc.)*. But the point is even better made by a contemporary Jewish commentator, Rabbi Gunther Plaut of Toronto. This is what he says: 'In the brothers' fateful meeting all is suddenly changed – and hardly because of the gifts that Jacob brings, for Esau is a wealthy man in his own right. The reconciliation occurs because it is Israel, not Jacob, whom Esau meets, and Jacob is a new man who asks forgiveness, if not in words then in manner, who limps toward him with repentant air and not deceitful arrogance. He is not a man to be put to the sword, he is a man who can be loved as a brother. The essentially simple and uncomplicated Esau, who himself has matured, senses this at once and runs to kiss his newly found brother. The two are now at peace, and Jacob-Israel, who has no further need to flee from Esau's wrath, settles down and builds a house' (*The Torah, A Modern Commentary, Genesis,* p. 325).

Does this account ring true to you? It does to me; and therefore I am inclined to think that the kiss is sincere, and that the *puncta extraordinaria* are, to that extent, unnecessary. But now two brief postscripts. The first is that just as one strand in Jewish tradition has been reluctant to concede that Esau could possibly be sincere, so there are those today who find it hard to believe that Israel's erstwhile enemies, such as Egypt, could possibly mean what they say when they talk about peace, that in reality they only want to buy time before launching another war. They are the people of whom Abba Eban has said 'they won't take yes for an answer'. And I don't mean to imply that they are necessarily completely wrong. Of course it is prudent to be cautious. But even while maintaining caution, we must surely believe in the *possibility* of reconciliation and peace; and not only with the Egyptians but, sooner or later, with the Palestinians as well. That time, perhaps, is not yet; but if it is ever to come, then we must work towards it; and that means that there will have to be some changes, not just on the other side – that is obvious – but on the Israeli side as well. They will have to give up the simplistic view that all is black and white, that there are only heroes and villains, that right belongs entirely to one party in the conflict, and wrong to the other; they will have to become a little more humble, more self-critical, and therefore more mature; they will have to advance from being Jacob to being Israel.

And here is another afterthought. Inasmuch as Esau symbolises Edom, and Edom Rome, therefore the reconciliation scene of our Torah portion may be regarded as pointing to the ultimate reconciliation between the Jewish people and the Gentile world generally. That time *certainly* has not come, and in the twentieth century it seems as remote as ever. Perhaps, therefore, the dots over וישקהו need to be retained. They represent a question-mark; for there can be no certainty that the time will ever come. There can be no certainty because it does not depend on God alone; it depends also on human beings, on their co-operation with God which they are free to extend or withhold. But the *hope* that it will happen, surely we must maintain and cherish *that.* Surely that is what it means to be a Jew: to live and work in the hope for the ultimate reconciliation, which is the messianic age. Then the dots over וישקהו, the question-mark over the kiss of brotherhood, will be finally removed, for all will know that it is sincere.

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Life and the Use we make of it

Va-yiggash, 18 December 1953

Pharaoh, intrigued by Jacob, the venerable shepherd from the desert, asks him how old he is, and receives a curious answer: 'The days of the years of my sojourning are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the years of my life' (Gen. 47:9). This answer so puzzles Pharaoh that he does not proceed with the interrogation. It has puzzled Bible commentators, too.

Perhaps the most helpful suggestion comes from Obadiah Sforno (c.1470 – c.1550, Italy). Jacob, he says, is drawing a distinction between *m'gurim* – sojourn on earth, mere existence, and *chayyim* – true living. His chronological age is 130. That may not be old by the standards of his father and grandfather, but it is a good span, and yet Jacob feels that his life has been short – not in terms of duration but of something else.

What is that 'something else'? Perhaps it is happiness. Perhaps Jacob means that he has suffered much. That is the view Sforno takes. Jacob's flight from his brother Esau, his twenty years' exile in Mesopotamia, his ill-treatment at the hands of his uncle Laban, his grief for his disappeared son Joseph, and the famine which has brought him to Egypt: all these might well have prompted such a reflection.