Jacob, Esau and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

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Angel for Shabbat—Parashat Vayishlah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Now these are the generations of Esau—the same is Edom” (Bereishith 36:1).

The Torah devotes thirty verses informing us of the extended family of Esau, including lists of the various chiefs of the family divisions. Why would we need to know this genealogical listing since Esau was the rejected son of Isaac and Rebecca? The Torah will, of course, devote its full attention to Jacob and family, but why bother with the family and chiefs of Esau?

Perhaps we can gain some insight by considering the verse that precedes the Esau list. “And Isaac died and was gathered unto his people, old and full of days; and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him” (35:29). Esau and Jacob, twin brothers, come together to bury their father. In spite of the longstanding enmity between them, they were both sons of Isaac. Although the Torah’s story is ultimately about Jacob/Israel and family, it wants us to remember that Esau is also part of our family and part of our story. The togetherness of Jacob and Esau at Isaac’s burial is reminiscent of the togetherness of Isaac and Ishmael at the burial of their father Abraham.

In Midrashic typologies, Esau and Jacob are arch antagonists. Esau is portrayed as violent and wicked, the antithesis of the Godliness that Jacob typifies. They seem to represent an endless and non-reconcilable hatred. They seem to be engaged in an eternal zero sum battle: if one wins, the other loses.

It seems that way.

But the Torah, by devoting so much attention to Esau’s family and chiefs, is offering another way of seeing things. Jacob and Esau are brothers. They come together as family to bury their father. There is a great rift between them…but there is also the possibility of reconciliation.

The Torah wants us—the family of Jacob—to look more carefully at the family of Esau. It wants us to see that Esau’s clan also have virtues; they have leaders, family solidarity, traditions. They are still our relatives, in spite of all our differences.

By listing the clans of Esau, the Torah is suggesting that the ancient and deep antagonism doesn’t have to be forever. It is not a zero sum situation where one must win and one must lose. Rather, reconciliation is possible if both sides respect each other and see each other’s humanity. Both can win. There’s no reason for endless strife and competition.

Esau and Jacob standing together at Isaac’s burial symbolize the possibility of peace between brothers. In spite of all the enmity that plagued their relationship, they were able to come together as brothers. The Torah’s listing of Esau’s family means that they continue to be important to us.

Old rivalries and hatreds can be overcome. We can win together. With all our differences, we can find common ground. The Torah points the way.