Paired Perspectives on the Parashah

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Vayishlah:

Esau's Intentions — Hostility or Reconciliation?

When Jacob returns to the Land of Canaan after twenty years in exile, he receives alarming news: "The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and moreover he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him'" (Genesis 32:7).

Is Esau approaching as an adversary or as a loving brother? The text's silence regarding Esau's motives allows the drama to unfold in tension and ambiguity.

The number *four hundred* carries ominous associations. Sforno notes that David's personal militia also numbered four hundred men (I Samuel 22:2; 25:13; 30:10, 17). The parallel suggests a trained band capable of war, deepening Jacob's fear that his brother intends violence. Jacob reacts by dividing his camp, sending gifts, and preparing both for battle and for prayer.

Classical commentators diverge sharply in their reading of Esau's intentions. **Rashi** (on 33:4) and **Ramban** (on 32:8) interpret the narrative as one of potential hostility averted. Esau had set out to attack, but Jacob's humility, gifts, and deference helped transform his brother's wrath. The meeting's warmth at the chapter's climax—"Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him; and they wept"—thus becomes the triumph of conciliation over animosity.

Rashbam, by contrast, reads the same verses with an entirely different tone. In his view (on 32:7), Esau never intended harm at all. Having established himself as a prosperous chieftain in Seir, Esau came with his four hundred men not as an army but as an honor guard. The Torah's narrative of Jacob's fear, Rashbam implies, arises not from Esau's malice but from Jacob's imagination.

Modern scholarship also underscores the textual ambiguity. Rabbi Yehudah Kiel (*Da'at Mikra*) observes that the phrase *"he is coming to meet you"* (*ve-gam holekh likratekha*) can signify either friendly greeting or hostile advance. When Aaron goes out "to meet" Moses (Exodus 4:14), the phrase marks joyful reunion; when Edom comes out "to meet" Israel with "much people and a strong hand" (Numbers 20:20), it signals aggression. Both instances of fraternal encounter—Moses and Aaron, Israel and Edom—echo through this story of brothers divided and restored.

Some interpreters seek a middle ground. Esau's earlier resolve to kill Jacob (Genesis 27:41) was conditioned on waiting until after their father Isaac's death. Since Isaac remains alive until the end of chapter 35, Esau may have suspended his vengeance, even if the old resentment still smoldered. Jacob, for his part, may not know this—or may not trust it, given that Rebekah had not relayed Esau's full statement.

Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor captures this uncertainty best: Jacob could not be sure of Esau's purpose, so he prudently prepared for both peace and war — a stance that often defines moral courage in moments of fear and uncertainty. His elaborate precautions, gifts, and prayers reflect not cowardice but realism.

In the end, the Torah never clarifies what Esau intended when he set out with his men. Had his anger long subsided, replaced by the equanimity of a man who had built his own life? Or did Jacob’s humility and generosity soften a heart still hardened by memory? Scripture leaves the question open. The ambiguity itself may be the point: reconciliation in human relationships is often complex — sometimes leading to full repair, and at other times requiring a safer distance.