

## Face It!

### *On Apology and Forgiveness*

Many people (particularly men) often find themselves in a state of confusion and bewilderment when other people (particularly their wives) recall incidents or offenses from times immemorial. “I can’t believe that you still bring this up,” a husband might say, “I thought we put it to rest long ago.”

“I didn’t put it to rest, you did” would be the answer. The perplexed husband tries to reconstruct events. His wife was upset because \_\_\_\_\_, then they didn’t speak for a \_\_\_\_\_, he then bought her \_\_\_\_\_, and took her to \_\_\_\_\_, and since then everything was going smooth. Is he missing something here? (besides the blanks, of course.)

Yes. What is missing is an apology. He might not fully understand it, but he never apologized. True, he indicated that he was sorry, and acted in a way that showed his concern for his wife and his desire that their relationships will be restored to normality, but he never verbalized the words: “I am sorry for...” His wife preferred not to continue fighting at the time or perhaps accepted his actions as a semi-apology, but deep inside her a grudge remained, a feeling that the indirect message “I am sorry” could be interpreted in several ways. Is he genuinely sorry for being a jerk? Maybe he is sorry that I am so sensitive and that I take everything to heart and that other people would think that this whole thing is ridiculous and just because he loves me (or so he claims) he apologizes to make me feel good. Or maybe he feels uncomfortable with the current state of affairs and wants to put it behind him for totally selfish reasons.

The scenario described here involves a husband and wife, but such situations play out daily between siblings, friends, co-workers, and even governments. The biblical saga of the struggle between Yaakov and Esav provides another angle to the concept of incomplete or indirect apology, that of a person who goes through the process of apology and forgiveness internally, positioning himself as both the offender and the offended. After he emerges from the process innocent or not guilty, he proceeds to appease the person he offended, without feeling the need to issue a genuine apology.

The Torah highlights the problematic nature of Yaakov’s “apology” by using the key word פָּנָיו, which in Hebrew means face. It also means “ahead of” or “in front of”, both originally in the

sense of being in front of one's face or an extension of one's personality. The word is also closely related to the word פָּנִים, meaning inside. Here is an excerpt of the story of Yaakov's encounter with Esav, with the keywords in bold print:

וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מְלָאכִים לְפָנָיו... וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עֲבָדָיו עֲבְרוּ לְפָנָיו... כִּי־אָמַר אַכְפֹּרָה פָּנָיו בַּמְּנַחָה הַהִלַּכְתָּ לְפָנָיו וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֶרְאֶה פָּנָיו אוֹלֵי יֵשׂא פָּנָיו. וְתַעֲבֹר הַמְּנַחָה עַל־פָּנָיו וְהוּא לֹן בְּלִילָה־הַהוּא בַּמְּחֻנָּה... וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיאֵל כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים וְתַנְצֵל נַפְשִׁי. וַיִּנְרַחֲלֵן הַשֹּׁמֵשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת־פְּנוּאֵל וְהוּא צָלַע עַל־יָרְכוּ... וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־נָא אִם־נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְלִקְחֶתָּ מִנְחָתִי מִיָּדַי כִּי עַל־כֵּן רָאִיתִי פָּנֶיךָ כִּרְאֵת פָּנָי אֱלֹהִים וְתַרְצֵנִי

Yaakov sent messengers ahead [of his **face**]... he told his servants, pass ahead [of my **face**]... he thought “I will appease him [lit. wipe his **face** clean] with the offering sent ahead [of my **face**], and then I will see his **face**, [this way] he might forgive me” [יֵשׂא פָּנָי - lit. will raise my **face** – the person who apologizes is usually bent down, and upon forgiveness is allowed to raise his head].

The offering went ahead [of his **face**], and he slept in the camp that night... [after he struggled with an anonymous attacker and persevered] Yaakov called the place **Face of God**, for [he said] “I have seen God **face to face** and my soul was saved. The sun rose for him when he passed the **Face of God**, limping... Yaakov said [to Esav]: “please do not [turn down my offering] for I have seen your **face** as seeing the **face** of God and you forgave me...” [lit. wanted me].

The thirteen occurrences of the word פָּנִים tell us that Yaakov dreaded the encounter not because of the physical threat to his life, but rather because it was the first time, after running away and hiding for many years, that he is going to confront his past actions, face to face. His offerings are sent as an extension of his personality, of his face, and he wants to tell Esav that he is sorry. He seems to admit that what he did was not right, but at night he is embroiled in a subconscious battle between his own two faces, one representing him and the other his brother, Esav. The battle was a vision and not a reality, and Yaakov was not fighting the guardian angel of Esav but his own representation of his brother. The dreamtime struggle reveals his inner fears and tells us that he constantly doubted his actions.

At a certain point, when the struggle is so intense that it causes Yaakov real physical pain, Yaakov has an epiphany. His years of exile and suffering has expiated for his sin, and so he emerges victorious from the conflict and his brother must forgive him. In his dream, he gives himself an approval for the blessing he took from his brother and he renames himself Israel.

The possibility that it was Yaakov, and not God, who chose to change his name is supported by the fact that his old name, Yaakov, is still used throughout the bible, appearing 245 more times. That is despite the statement of the attacker: “your name shall be Yaakov no more.” In addition, seeing the struggle and the approval of the blessing an internal one, refutes the argument that God Himself approved of Yaakov’s actions.

On the following day, Yaakov faces the real Esav. He is servile and polite, even obsequious, but he never apologizes. He tells Esav: “Please accept my offering, for I have seen your face as the face of God, and you have accepted me.” He is not asking for acceptance. He is making a statement: “It is a done deal. I have already seen you in my dream and solved the matter. All you need to do is take my offering as a token of good will.”

Esav presses no more. When his offer to escort Yaakov is rejected, he returns home, only to pack up and leave, years later, because of competition with the flocks of Yaakov. His nation eventually becomes a bitter enemy of Israel, and we cannot help but ask whether a genuine apology could have written an alternative ending to this story.

Shabbat Shalom

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Questions for discussion:

If you wish to use this Dvar Torah to develop a discussion around the Shabbat Table, here are some guiding questions, not all of which are answered in the article:

1. What is the keyword in the story of the encounter?
2. Who else in the Bible had a name-change?
3. What is the difference between other name-change and that of Yaakov?
4. Is Esav an aggressor? How else can we interpret his arrival with 400 men?
5. Have you ever done something wrong and have not properly apologized? (the answer to that is usually negative)
6. Have you ever been offended and not offered genuine apology? (the answer here is usually positive, which makes one wonder how all the offenders are sitting around other tables, while all those who were offended are here with us.)