

# Jewish Ideas Weekly

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## What's Left?

By Elliot Jager

Usually, when Israelis speak of Left and Right, they are differentiating mainly between security hawks and peace-camp doves—not between liberals and conservatives in general, or in the American or European sense. By this definition, Israel's left wing is in a sorry state.

From Israel's founding in 1948 until Likud's upset victory in 1977, every government was headed by Labor, which once had its own hawkish wing. Not until Likud's defeat in 1992 did a Left coalition return to power, with the La-

bor and Meretz parties garnering 56 out of 120 parliamentary mandates; this comeback paved the way for the ill-fated Oslo accords. Since then, the Left has succeeded in electing only one government, which, under the brief, calamitous, stewardship of Ehud Barak, culminated in the second intifada.

Were elections to be held now, every survey shows that Israel's left wing would gain no further ground, and that Labor and Meretz would struggle even to hold onto their current sixteen seats in the Knesset. Nor would the center-left Kadima party, which is running neck and neck with center-right Likud, be able to form a coalition government.

The political historian Colin Shindler has traced the beginnings of the Zionist Left's gradual fragmentation and decrepitude all the way back to Hamas's suicide-bombing campaign in the spring of 1994, within scant months of the Rabin-Arafat peace ceremony on the White House lawn. Today, as the ideological assault against Israel mounts internationally, the Zion-

ist Left finds itself bereft of arguments.

Carlo Strenger of Tel Aviv University, a columnist for *Haaretz*, has complained that the Left gets no credit for having been the first to support the establishment of a Palestinian state, an idea now accepted by all; but he also worries that his fellow leftists, by refusing to admit that they were "partially wrong" about the Palestinians, have created an impression of having broken faith with the Israeli mainstream. It is more than an impression:



Ehud Barak.

Most Israelis do accept the idea of a Palestinian state, but with trepidation; the Left does so with enthusiasm—and, unlike the mainstream, tends to believe that a peace deal will satisfy Palestinian aspirations once and for all. More honestly than

Strenger, the journalist Gershom Gorenberg has acknowledged that Israel's mainstream simply does not trust the peace camp to do a proper job of protecting the country's interests at the negotiating table.

Beyond policy issues, the Zionist Left has also been poorly led. Ehud Barak, the current head of Labor, is widely detested, and his party is gearing up for a bruising leadership contest. Meretz leader Haim Oron has been unable to fill the shoes of his predecessor Yossi Sarid. Nor are the Left's prospects brightened by the initiatives being pursued by extra-parliamentary left-wing groups patently out of step with the national consensus.

The Gush Shalom movement, for instance, has made a hero of the nuclear spy Mordechai Vanunu, is in the forefront of the campaign to boycott products produced over the Green Line, and supports the Palestinian "right of return" to Israel proper (by, to be sure, "mutual agreement"). Yesh Gvul and Courage to Refuse have urged army

conscripts and reservists to dodge military service over the Green Line. The European-funded Geneva Initiative, spearheaded by Oslo architect Yossi Beilin, offers a fanciful platform intended somehow to reconcile Israel's security needs with the uncompromising Arab Peace Initiative. Peace Now champions a Palestinian state in the territories "occupied as a result of the 1967 war," with no reference to settlement blocs that by common consensus will remain Israeli under any conceivable agreement.

Consensus is the relevant word: the plain fact is that the country has shifted to a consensus position on security issues. The new viable "Left" is Kadima and the new viable "Right" is Likud, and the two are not at all far apart. In tone, Kadima is positioned softer, Likud is positioned tougher; but no profound issues of principle divide Tzipi Livni and Benjamin Netanyahu.

So is the Labor-Meretz Left not only dead but buried? Certainly, any uptick in Arab terror will send Israelis further into the arms of the Right. But specific events at home—recent examples include the move to legislate loyalty oaths for Palestinian Arabs seeking to marry Arab citizens of Israel, or the eviction of Palestinian families from their dwellings in east Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood—have the potential, at least temporarily, to galvanize left-wing forces. The Labor party could also be resuscitated by a new leader like Shelly Yachimovich, who has carved out a populist niche for herself in the Knesset by downplaying the peace camp's discredited security positions while focusing instead on social and economic inequities.

And then there is this: the parliamentary Left may be down and out, but the Left that dominates the Israeli judiciary, the media and the arts, the educational system and other large parts of the bureaucracy—that Left is another matter, and another story.

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## A Jewish Renaissance?

By Yehudah Mirsky

In recent years Israel has become a vast open-air laboratory for experiments in Judaism, re-fashioning rituals, reading old texts through new lenses, scrambling and fracturing familiar dichotomies between secular and religious. Secular yeshivot, mainstream performers singing medieval Hebrew hymns, non-denominational “prayer communities” in hip Tel Aviv, kabbalistic therapy movements, Judaism festivals on once-socialist kibbutzim—something is going on here, but what?

Yair Sheleg, a long-time contributor to *Haaretz* and a fellow of the Israel Democracy Institute, has for years been training a journalist’s eye and insider’s knowledge on Israeli religious life. An earlier book, *The New Orthodox* (Hebrew, 2000), documented the ways in which both mainstream religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox were adapting to secular Israeli life and culture. Now, in *From Old Hebrew to New Jew: The Jewish Renaissance in Israeli Society*, a follow-up Hebrew volume, Sheleg deftly explores the other side of the ledger: the not easily classifiable groups and individuals vigorously exploring Judaism outside the structure of the religious establishment and its institutions.

The political hegemony of Labor Zionism has been in dreary decline since the 1970s. No less consequential, and perhaps more so, is the steady dissolution of the social and cultural ethos with which Labor built the state’s society and culture. That ethos—statist, collectivist, secularist (with a place set aside for domesticated religious Zionism), and unmistakably Ashkenazi—registered extraordinary accomplishments, but ultimately proved no match for privatization, globalization, the emergence of identity politics, and the enduring human need for transcendence. Sensing that the Zionist rev-

olution against traditional Judaism had run its course, new circles, small at first, inaugurated a revolution of their own: a return not so much to tradition as to Judaism’s cultural treasures on new terms.

The backbone was study. The late 1980s saw the founding of two pioneering study centers (*batei midrash*): Midreshet Oranim, affiliated with the kibbutz movement,



and Elul in Jerusalem. In both, religious and secular joined together to read classical and modern texts in yeshiva style but without a yeshiva’s claim to traditional authority. Interestingly, they made a point of studying Talmud, trying to reach for wider Jewish horizons than those embraced by classical Zionism, with its leapfrogging of Diaspora history in favor of the Bible. The Zionist thinkers with whom they engaged—H.N. Bialik, A.D. Gordon, H. Brenner, B. Katznelson, A.I. Kook—were searchers themselves, swinging on the hinge of exile and revolution, despair and redemption.

By now there are dozens of alternative study centers, and their style has been adopted by a number of other institutions from yeshivot to paramilitary colleges. Meanwhile, as Sheleg details, large numbers of Israelis have also been swept up by non-institutional forms of spirituality: popular magic and serious study of kabbalah, New Age Judaism, Judaic psychology, Carlebach-inflected music, Chabad messianism, “HinJew” and “BuJu” syncretism, the ec-

static ups and downs of Bratslav Hasidism.

Throughout, Sheleg distinguishes between the cultural and the spiritual dimensions of this Jewish renaissance—between, in his words, “those searching for Judaism and those searching for God.” The former cohort is more Ashkenazi, more middle-class, and more attuned to the country’s cultural elites. Among the latter, one finds more Sephardim, more Russians, and, interestingly, more of the newly rich. Perhaps paradoxically, or perhaps not, those in the first group seek to influence their society and the world around them, while those in the second are chiefly concerned with their own spiritual fulfillment. Another paradox: the cultural quest is a more local drama, a search for a lost center with no easy or obvious road back, while the spiritual quest is in many ways part of a global trend.

What will the future hold? Materially, the cultural movement is still very dependent on American philanthropists, while the spiritual movement is a tempting moneymaker for shysters. Morally, Sheleg sees large potential pitfalls for each, with the cultural renaissance at risk of devolving into an ethereal, elitist aestheticism, and the spiritual revival at risk of winding up in religious dogmatism, hucksterism, and atavistic politics. Signs of degeneration are already visible.

But, in the meantime, what about the greater Israeli public? Can either of these currents affect it, and for the better? Both are up against the deadening forces of the mass media, cultural weariness, the inert categories of “religious” and “secular,” and a calcified religious establishment. But Sheleg also sees hopeful possibilities, should the Jewish renaissance succeed in presenting genuine and compelling alternatives to the pallid, dispiriting brew on offer in mainstream culture. This may be wishful thinking. Still, the 19th and 20th centuries saw several Jewish revolutions, for worse but also for better. Is it too much to hope for another, revivifying, one in the 21st?

## Obama and Israel: What Now?

By Benjamin Kerstein

Since the Obama administration’s major defeat in the American midterm elections, commentators have been wondering how the new constellation of forces in Washington will affect the president’s Middle East

peace initiative. Among hopeful partisans of the administration’s efforts, the favored position is that little is likely to change. They point out that the executive branch, not the legislature, makes foreign policy, and that the party holding Congress, whether Republican or Democratic, tends to have little say in such matters. In support of this point, they cite the lessons of history, especially the experience of Bill Clinton af-

ter the GOP sweep in 1994.

Here, for instance, is *Newsweek*’s take on the matter:

[E]xperience has shown that the composition of Congress does not necessarily determine Washington’s approach to the Middle East. The most relevant example would be President Clinton’s dealings with Israel during his second term. Though Republicans had a majority in

both the House and the Senate, Clinton managed to force a recalcitrant Israeli leader into withdrawing from parts of the West Bank under an interim deal with the Palestinians. That leader's name: Benjamin Netanyahu.

And here, in a similar vein, is the Israeli pundit Akiva Eldar:

During Netanyahu's first term as prime minister, the tense relations between the liberal U.S. president and the conservative Congress did not help [the Israeli leader] push his agenda. After Netanyahu authorized the controversial opening of a tunnel near the Western Wall . . . Clinton dragged him to Washington for a *sulha*, or reconciliation meeting, with Yasir Arafat.

Both *Newsweek's* writer and Eldar conclude that, as the former puts it, "when the dust clears, [Netanyahu] can expect renewed pressure to resume the settlement freeze in the West Bank and get serious in talks with the Palestinians."

The latest news headlines, heralding a possible new settlement freeze, would seem to confirm this analysis, which is hardly without merit. When it comes to foreign policy, the leeway enjoyed by an American president is indeed considerable. And there are, of course, limits to how much Israel can afford to alienate any administration. But the argument also misses several significant differences between 1994 and today, differences that make any medium- or long-term predictions problematic at best.

The most important difference is also the most obvious: Barack Obama is not Bill Clinton. Indeed, where Israel is concerned, the contrast between the two men could not be more striking. Put simply, Israelis loved

and trusted Clinton—and still do—in a way that they do not and probably never will love or trust Obama. Large numbers consider the current president to be openly hostile to Israel, and even those who feel otherwise have expressed little affection for the man or admiration for his abilities. Moreover, while Clinton worked hard to win the confidence of the Israeli people, Obama has made little effort to do so; quite the opposite, in fact.

Equally significant is the difference between the Israel dealt with by Clinton and the Israel that Obama faces now. In 1994, a left-wing government was in power in Jerusalem, and large sectors of the Israeli populace and establishment were committed, both politically and emotionally, to the Oslo peace process. Even after Netanyahu won office in 1996, Oslo was too entrenched to be openly repudiated. If anything, it had been sanctified by the recent martyrdom of Yitzhak Rabin. In addition, the pro-Oslo camp was more or less united behind Ehud Barak, a figure of considerable credibility on the security front. Opposition to Oslo from the Israeli Right, although it may have struck a sympathetic chord with some in Washington, could be easily triangulated, especially by a politician of Clinton's talent.

The reality in Israel is now completely different. Arafat's betrayal of Clinton at Camp David in 2000, the collapse of Oslo in the carnage of the second intifada, and the all but total lack of sympathy with or support

for Israel displayed by the international community throughout the upheavals of the past decade have fundamentally changed the country's domestic consensus. However Israelis may feel about specific issues like settlements and borders, the overwhelming majority are unwilling to take the same risks they took in 1994, or for that matter in 1996. Moreover, they feel they should not be asked to do so.

As long as Netanyahu keeps himself in sync with this consensus, and does not swing *too* far to the Left or the Right, he is likely to be relatively safe from American attempts at triangulation. Indeed, he may be in a position to indulge in a little triangulation of his own, pleasing the center-Right in Israel and the U.S. by reacting sharply to Obama's criticism of building in Jerusalem ("Jerusalem is not a settlement; Jerusalem is the capital of the State of Israel") while pleasing the center-Left by acquiescing in another temporary settlement freeze.

Barring unforeseen events, then, it is highly questionable that Obama will be able to match Clinton's effectiveness in pushing his dream of a breakthrough agreement in the Middle East on a skeptical Israeli public, or for that matter on an American public whose sympathies are running strongly in Israel's direction. Again barring unforeseen events, Obama may find himself wishing for the kind of congressional support that Clinton never needed.



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17

## Kadima in the Wings

By Elliot Jager

Whether or not Benjamin Netanyahu accedes to American pressure for a renewal of the construction freeze in West Bank settlements, the prospect has created roiling dissonance within the prime minister's Likud party and raised the possibility of a split—or, to be more accurate, another split.

The previous Likud schism occurred in November 2005 when Likud members rejected Ariel Sharon's plan for a unilateral Israeli pullout from Gaza and Sharon founded

the Kadima party as a political workaround. After Sharon became incapacitated by a stroke, Kadima under Ehud Olmert won its 2006 election bid by campaigning for a second unilateral separation, this time from the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Subsequent aggression from both Gaza and Lebanon—where, in 2000, Israel had unilaterally withdrawn from its security zone—undermined the attraction of unilateralism to the point where the policy was silently discarded. And yet, despite having lost not only its charismatic founder in Sharon but also its philosophical underpinning, Kadima succeeded in consolidating itself as a viable "third-way" alignment of pragmatists. As such, it has con-

tinued to attract political candidates away from Likud, Labor, and beyond; its current Knesset lineup includes a West Bank settler and a Peace Now proponent.

The party's reputation for pragmatism—in the *New York Times*, it has been variously described as "center-Right" and "center-Left"—no doubt accounts for its foreign appeal as well. It is widely understood that President Barack Obama would have preferred Israel's 2009 elections to have yielded a Kadima-led government, with Tzipi Livni, formerly of Likud, at the helm. Washington is reportedly now pressing Netanyahu to jettison his right-wing coalition partners (Yisrael Beiteinu and Habayit Hayehudi) and

replace them with Kadima. Presumably, the purpose is to make Israel's negotiating stance more malleable—though the previous Kadima government, led by Olmert and Livni, failed conspicuously to close a deal with Mahmoud Abbas, who pronounced its unprecedented territorial concessions to be still insufficient.

Other contradictions may be noted. For one thing, Kadima is hardly a bastion of good-government reformists. Although Livni's personal integrity is not at issue, Sharon was investigated for wrongdoing on multiple occasions; Olmert is now on trial for corruption; policy chairman Haim Ramon was convicted of indecent behavior; Avraham Hirschson, a

finance minister, went to prison for corruption; and in the latest incident, Tzahi Hanegbi, a party powerbroker, was forced to quit the Knesset on morals charges.



Tzipi Livni.

Nor is that the end of the party's leadership problems. Livni, though photogenic, has not emerged as a strong presence in her role of opposition leader, furthering a long-established reputation for indecisiveness. Last year, even though Kadima won one more Knesset seat than Likud, she failed to form a government. Livni is now being challenged by Shaul Mofaz, a former top general, whom she barely defeated for the party leadership in 2008.

In spite of all this, and in spite of its failure to articulate a coherent platform to re-

place unilateralism, Kadima continues to run neck and neck with Likud in public-opinion surveys. Unlike other third-way parties that have come and gone, it has demonstrated remarkable staying power. Partly, no doubt, this is because its arrival on the scene coincided with the evolution of a post-intifada domestic consensus that ending the conflict with the Palestinian Arabs was a vital national interest even if it resulted in the establishment of a "Palestine" alongside Israel. Partly it is also because its leaders are no political novices.

Mostly, however, Kadima's success reflects the diminished expectations Israelis have of their elected officials. Ideological consistency, adherence to solemn campaign pledges, upstanding ethical behavior, even leadership excellence is no longer paramount. What seems to matter most is what Kadima purports to offer: "pragmatism," whatever that may mean to any particular bloc of disgruntled voters at any particular time.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 18

## Summoned Home

By Allan Nadler

In June 1934, the celebrated American Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein (a/k/a Yankev Glatshteyn, 1896-1971) received an urgent summons to return to his native Lublin, Poland, where his mother lay at death's door. After almost two decades in the United States, during which he had earned acclaim for the linguistic virtuosity of his modernist verse—verse notably devoid of almost any hint of nostalgia—Glatstein found himself on an unanticipated and almost certainly unwanted return home, at the precise moment when so many Jews were desperately trying to make the reverse journey.

His record of that transformational trip, in the form of a fictional travelogue by the eponymous Yash (a nickname for Yankev), was published in two volumes, *Venn Yash iz Geforn* (literally, "When Yash Set Out," 1937) and *Venn Yash iz Gekumen* ("When Yash Arrived," 1940). In English translations skillfully edited by Ruth R. Wisse of Harvard, the two have now been re-issued in a single volume as *The Glatstein Chronicles*. Their appearance recalls one of modern Yiddish literature's richest and most original voices, whose work is today almost entirely unknown.

Fully aware of the terrible situation of Germany's Jews under Hitler, and of the decade-

long war of attrition being waged by Poland on its Jewish citizens, Glatstein was setting out to confront not only his personal grief but the national anguish of his people. The latter he had determinedly avoided in his early poetry—even as he had increasingly been forced to deal with it in his journalistic work for the Yiddish daily *Morgen Journal*. No wonder, then, that upon embarking on a British ship filled with Gentile passengers, his initial feelings were of a great liberation:

Only one and a half days out to sea, and already I feel released from obligations to family, society, even from the political credos with which I had found it necessary to stock my brain. . . . I feel aboard this ship as Jonah must have felt in that first moment when he thought he had escaped God's wrath. Maybe here I will be able to scrape off the scabby crust of what has accrued to me as a writer for hire, a Jew in a bloody world that—*pace* Shakespeare—only demands my pound of flesh.

This same sense of liberation had attended Glatstein's beginnings as a passionate young American Yiddish poet. In 1920, he was among the founders of a daring group, the *Inzikhistn* (Introspectivists), whose manifesto proclaimed their independence from virtually every aspect of prior Yiddish writing. Rejecting the idea that Yiddish had to limit itself to parochial Jewish concerns or themes, to the traditional cadences of Jewish writing, or even to the use of Hebrew orthography for words borrowed from the sacred tongue, the

*Inzikhistn* demanded instead a literature attuned to the universal themes and language of modernism and prepared thereby to gain an equal footing with all other world writing.

In the ensuing years, this hope would meet, unsurprisingly, with constant frustration on all fronts. A bizarre anecdote recorded by Glatstein with bitter humor in the July 1923 issue of the group's journal, *In Zikh* ("Inside the Self"), captures their frustration:

That Yiddish literature is still an unknown and almost outlandish thing among the Gentiles is well known. . . . Recently, [t]he American journal, *Poetry*, got hold of an issue of *In Zikh*. And here is what its editors wrote us: "Unfortunately we cannot read your journal. We would however like to know what language it is printed in. Is it Chinese?"

*Poetry* is published in Chicago. Several daily Yiddish newspapers are printed in Chicago. Yiddish periodicals, collections, books are published there. There are certainly also Chinese laundries in Chicago, and the lady-editors of *Poetry* have probably seen more than one Chinese laundry ticket in their lives. And after all that . . . to ask whether a Yiddish journal is Chinese!

Alas, not only were the universal hopes harbored by Glatstein and his Introspectivist colleagues never realized; in the end, they were literally reduced to ashes. Although literary scholars debate the extent of the transformation wrought in him by his voyage home, there can be little doubt that he

returned a changed man. In the *Chronicles*, Yash undergoes scores of disillusioning, often brutal, encounters with both Gentiles and Jews.

Aboard ship, the initial sense of liberation lasts barely twenty-four hours. By the second morning, after receiving news of Hitler's consolidation of power in Germany in the "Night of the Long Knives," and discovering the utter indifference to this news on the part of his Gentile shipmates, Yash finds himself in search of fellow Jews. From that point on, while he still consorts amiably with others, these are the voices he listens to most closely. The persona of Yash himself almost disappears—except for the ears that hear and the pen that records his impressions first of the outbound travelers and then, in the second volume of the *Chronicles*, of the guests at an unnamed Polish Jewish resort where he goes to rest after grieving for his mother and in preparation for his return to America.

The two Yash volumes were published in 1937 and 1940. In between, in April 1938, Glatstein composed what was to become his most famous poem, "Good Night World." Responding to increasing anti-Jewish violence in Poland, this powerful work possesses all the defiant boldness of the 1920 manifesto of the *Inzikhistn* but moves in precisely the opposite ideological direction. The Glatstein who in 1920 was dreaming of a fresh and entirely subjective American Yiddish poetry equaling if not surpassing that of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and the rest here angrily slams the door on Gentiles themselves and every aspect of a merciless Gentile culture.

Not since Haim Nahman Bialik's turn-of-the-century "In the City of Slaughter," published in both Yiddish and Hebrew versions,

had a poem made such a powerful impact upon the Jewish public or engendered such heated political discussions. In the Jewish periodical press, hundreds of essays appeared on this stunning work. But where Bialik's



Jacob Glatstein.

response to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 had served as a Zionist wake-up call, a manifesto for Jewish national empowerment and autonomy, Glatstein's response to the events of 1938 was its antithesis. Remaining true to his subjective, introspective mode, it called for no political awakening, no national uprising, but, to the contrary, a resigned but fiercely proud return to the constraints of the Jewish world,

the world of shtetls and ghettos.

Later, after the Holocaust, Glatstein also began for the first time to engage in theological musings, recording—still in the introspective voice that he never abandoned—his anguished struggle to maintain some remnant of faith in a God who had so totally and cruelly abandoned His "chosen people." In these late poems, God is often portrayed as a powerless child or, even more strikingly, as a dissipating pillar of smoke: a radically diminished, pathetic former deity.

#### My Wander Brother

I love my sad God,  
My wander brother  
I like to sit with him on a stone  
And silence him to all my words.

. . . . .

The God of my unbelief is beautiful  
How nice is my feeble God  
Now, when he is human and unjust.  
How graceful is he in his proud downfall,  
When the smallest child revolts  
Against his command. . . .

. . . . .

My God sleeps and I watch over him

My tired brother dreams the dream of my  
people.  
He dwindles, grows small as a baby,  
And I rock him into the dream of my  
people.

Sleep, my god, my wander-brother,  
Sleep into the dream of my people.

(Translated by Barbara & Benjamin Harshav)

But if, for Glatstein, the Jewish God ineluctably shrank to powerlessness and ultimate non-existence—terminally asleep, in his wicked poetic subversion of the Psalmist's "The Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps"—and if the formerly broad universe devolved into an ever diminishing, eventually suffocating space, his inner voice never lost an iota of its pride and dignity; nor was his undying love for Yiddish ever compromised:

#### My Tent

Embrace me with choking devotion,  
language mine, like a jealous wife;  
confine me to my tent.

. . . . .

Let no one coax me from your arms  
Take my word, I don't want to be "universal."  
When I take my leave,  
I will become a pillar of cloud,  
A gleam of light,  
Above our tiny Sanctuary.

(Translated by Richard Fine)

Heart-wrenching but stubbornly defiant words. To the end, this faithful, unbroken husband of a language that choked the breath from his own life's work and consigned it to obscurity, never compromised his innermost, Yiddish self, insisting on its dignity and integrity no less after the Holocaust than during the heady days of his youthful rebellion. As Ruth Wisse pithily observes in her introduction to the *Chronicles*, "Glatstein came to understand that his fate as a Yiddish poet, in a Jewish language, was indivisible from that of its speakers."

## THE WEEKLY PORTION

### Vayishlah: Face to Face

Genesis 32:8–36:43

By Moshe Sokolow

The Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon is said to have compared reading a text in translation to kissing a bride through her veil. This

week's Torah portion affords a good opportunity to look at some of what we may be missing through the veil of translation.

The story: Jacob and Esau are reunited after an interval that is approximated at fully 22 years in the Torah (further expanded by the Midrash to 36 years so as to allow an additional 14-year interval for study). Although he has grown in number and stature and is now accompanied by an extended

family and retinue, Jacob is still fearful of the upcoming encounter with his estranged brother. He adopts a three-part strategy: gifts for Esau, prayers to God, and, in a worst-case scenario, a plan to split his forces and cut his losses: "If Esau should come and destroy one camp, the remaining camp can escape" (32:8).

Dispatching his gifts, Jacob reveals his rationale to his servants (Genesis 32:21). Here

is the Jewish Publication Society translation (1962):

I shall *propitiate* him with presents in *advance*, and then face him; perhaps he will show me *favor*.

The three italicized words, although accurately conveying the meaning of the original, obscure the fact that in each case the Torah uses a form of the Hebrew word *panim*, face. This is an instance of what the philosopher

and Bible commentator Martin Buber called a “*leitwort*,” German for a leading or thematic word. In their own German translation of the Torah, Buber and Franz Rosenzweig took pains to conserve such “leading words,” and their example was followed in the English translation by Everett Fox (Schocken, 1983):

I will wipe [the anger from] his *face* with the gift that goes ahead of my *face*; afterward, when I see his *face*, perhaps he will lift up my *face*!

The appearance of the same word four times in a single verse is provocative enough, but that is not the end of it; *panim* reverberates throughout the entire reading. The very next verse (32:22) tells us that “The gift went on ahead” (literally: ahead of his face), “and he spent the night in camp.” During that night, Jacob wrestles with “a man” (32:25) and, in the morning, coins the name of Peniel (literally: face of God) for the site of their struggle, declaring: “For I have seen God, face to face, and my life has been spared” (32:30). Later that same day, he is reunited with Esau. They embrace, kiss, and weep. Esau initially declines Jacob’s presents, prompting Jacob to respond: “If I have found favor in your eyes, then take this present from my hand, for, after all, I have seen your face as one sees the face of God, and you have been gracious to me” (33:10).

So the face of Jacob’s nocturnal opponent is a “face of God,” and Esau’s is likewise “a face of God.” What does this mean? That the otherwise anonymous opponent could have been Esau? The Midrash indeed identifies Jacob’s opponent as Esau’s angelic patron. But perhaps there is an alternative explanation.

Jacob and Esau were twins—most likely fraternal although a compelling argument

can be made for identical. Thus, when his mother Rebecca suggests to Jacob that he impersonate his brother in order to wrest from Isaac the blessing (Hebrew: *berakhah*) owed to the elder son, Jacob worries aloud: “My brother Esau is a hairy man while I am smooth-skinned” (27:11). If this is the only physical difference that occurs to him, could it be that no other existed between the two boys? If so, one might speculate that Jacob’s struggle that night (which according to Maimonides transpired only in a prophetic vision) was not with his identical twin Esau but with his own guilty conscience—as he himself would come finally to recognize the next day in his dramatic and long-postponed “faceoff” with his brother.

In that faceoff, Jacob suddenly utters what, to all appearances, amounts to a Freudian slip, albeit one that is undistinguishable in translation. Thus far, his gifts to Esau have been referred to five different times as a *minhah* (an offering); but now a significant change occurs, with the gifts becoming “my *berakhah* that has been brought to you” (33:11). Here, surely, the repressed voice of scruple is speaking. It is tantamount to Jacob declaring: “If you still harbor any grudge toward me on account of the blessing procured by chicanery—then, by all means, it is yours, take it back.”

Having struggled with cunning Esau at birth, with his treacherous uncle Laban in Haran, and, lastly, with his own demons, Jacob may at last be ready to assume the burden of the name he had won scant hours earlier from his dream-adversary. No longer is he *Yaakov* the crooked but *Yisrael* the upright wrestler with God—the name borne by his people ever since.

## So ... what am I thinking?



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