

The operative word in Jakob's encounter with his brother Esau is appeasement, that troublesome borderline term at the juncture of diplomacy and capitulation that often carries negative consequences for third parties and seldom leads to peace. "Peace for all time," British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's confident assessment of the 1938 Munich Agreement, is one of the most egregious examples of appeasement in recent history, but appeasement has impacted politics and religion since the dawn of humanity. Having matured during his long sojourn in the land of his wily father-in-law, Jakob is ready to meet his estranged brother, albeit with understandably great apprehension. He prepares as for war, dividing his people into two camps, pleading with HaShem to protect him as promised, and arranging an elaborate gift of livestock to placate Esau. He sends his servants ahead with herds of five different species, telling them to allow space between each herd. Rashi, citing Midrash Genesis Rabbah comments, "One herd before the next within the distance the eye can see, in order to satisfy the eye of the wicked man and bewilder him with the enormity of the gift." Indeed, Jakob thinks, "I will appease his anger with the gift that is going before me, and afterwards I will see his face, perhaps he will favor me." (32:21) We recognize the word translated here as appease: *acaprah* – from our Yom Kippur services: כפר atone, a word with connotations of covering up, wiping away. The term here is *acaprah panav* – literally, to cover his face, i.e., to make him unable to see any further cause for anger. After his nocturnal wrestling match with the mysterious *ish*, Jakob, now with the added name *Yisrael* (literally, one who struggles with God), arranges his family into three groups, a tactical move that poignantly and eloquently illustrates how he regards them: Maidservants and their children first, Leah and her children after, and Rachel with her son Joseph last. Unsure of how he will be received and fearing the worst, Jakob exposes those he values least to the greatest danger, hoping that Esau's anger will be placated enough from killing the ones in front, to allow him to spare those behind them. The parallels to the blood-soaked first half of the 20th century are obvious. Appeasement is all too often a dirty compromise that runs roughshod over the lives of the least valued. Along with everything else they hold against him, Joseph's brothers undoubtedly resent having been used as human shields to protect those whom Jakob obviously loves most. Still, Jakob does possess the decency and courage to go ahead of them to meet Esau face to face, and the encounter, contrary to his worst fears, is both peaceful and emotional. The wives and children bow in turn before Esau, with another one of the Torah's discrepancies that our sages noticed and interpreted: The first two groups are led by the mothers with their sons behind them, but Joseph precedes Rachel. Midrash Pesikta Rabbathi teaches, "... but in Rachel's case Joseph preceded her. He said, 'My mother has a pretty figure. Perhaps that scoundrel will set his eyes on her. I will stand in front of her and prevent him from gazing upon her.' Because of this deed Joseph merited the blessing (49:22) *over the eye*, meaning that he stood up in front of Esau's eyes." The brothers' dance of diplomacy around the gifts is a prime example of appeasement negotiations, with each trying to outdo the other in acts of magnanimity, ulterior motives artfully concealed. In addition to fitting the mode of Oriental bargaining, as does Abraham's dealing with the Hittite Ephron to acquire the field and cave at Machpelah, it becomes a watershed moment in the relationship between the two brothers, when appeasement gives way to a modicum of peace. Jakob no longer calls the gift *mincha*; he now presents it as "my blessing" (33:11), perhaps tacitly acknowledging his own culpability, but definitely offering it as a gesture of goodwill. It is noteworthy that although Esau calls him "brother," Jakob continues to use the honorific "my lord," never once diverting from his servile position. Still wary, he demurs with the rather weak excuse of deference toward the slower moving members of his entourage when Esau offers to accompany him, and he outright declines Esau's offer to leave some of his people with him, choosing instead to maintain a safe distance. Midrash Tanchuma, Vayishlach 4 sees in their teary reunion the stalemate from which they cannot emerge: "Why did they weep? This may be compared to a situation in which a wolf attacks a ram. The ram gores the wolf with his horns, while the wolf sinks his teeth into the ram's horn until they both cry out. The wolf cries out because he is unable to do any harm to the ram, and the ram cries out because he is fearful that the wolf might attack him once again and kill him. Esau and Jakob cried out for the same reason. ..." Neither of them has engaged in the *teshuvah* necessary for true reconciliation and peace. They are simply too opposite in nature to develop the necessary trust. Esau's effusive greeting and offer to share his land is belied by the 400 men who accompany him, and Jakob couches his fear and distrust in bribery, flattery, excuses, and ultimate separation. Their dilemma is reflected in countless ways all over the world today as peace becomes increasingly elusive. In the words of Hubert Humphrey, "Peace is not passive, it is active. Peace is not appeasement, it is strength. Peace does not 'happen,' it requires work. And work we must, toward genuine peace, not the false hope of appeasement.

Shabbat shalom!