

After 20 years of estrangement, Jakob and Esau are about to meet. The operative word in Jakob's encounter with his brother is appeasement, that fraught precipice between diplomacy and capitulation that usually negatively impacts third parties and seldom leads to peace. "Peace for all time," as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain called the 1938 Munich Agreement, is one of the most egregious examples of appeasement in recent history. But appeasement is hardly a new phenomenon. Shaped by his experiences in the land of his wily father-in-law, Jakob is ready to meet Esau, but not without justified apprehension. In preparation, he sends *melachim* to Esau. The word *melachim* can be translated as angels, but also simply as messengers. Whoever they are, Jakob commands them to announce his coming, and to stress not only the wealth he has acquired, but also the fact that he has only sojourned with their devious uncle Lavan, and is now coming home with gifts in order to "find favor in your eyes." (32:4-6) When the messengers return with the news that Esau, accompanied by 400 men, is on his way to meet him, he prepares for war. He divides his people into two camps, pleads with HaShem to protect him as promised, and arranges 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 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 admits, "I will appease (אֶכַפֵּרָה *acaprah*) 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 this word from our Yom Kippur services: כָּפַר *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, soon to acquire the added name *Yisrael* (literally, God-wrestler), arranges his family into three groups, a tactical move that also eloquently demonstrates how he regards them: Maidservants and their children first, then Leah and her children, 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 will be placated enough from killing the ones in front to spare those behind them. 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 have the decency and courage to go ahead of them to meet Esau face to face, and their encounter, contrary to his worst fears, is both peaceful and emotional. The wives and children bow in turn before Esau, with an interesting discrepancy that our sages noticed and explained: 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.'" He had never met Esau. He simply reacts to what he has likely been told and to how he sees his father behaving. Sadly, assumptions based on lack of information, misinterpreted information, or faulty information have all too often led to tragedy. 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 generosity, ulterior motives artfully concealed. Of course it is also typical Oriental bargaining, similar to how Abraham dealt with the Hittite Ephron to acquire the field and cave at Machpelah. Jakob initially calls the gift *mincha* (literally, a gift, and in Temple times denoting a grain offering), a cunning ploy to downplay his wealth and emphasize his humility. But when he finally presents it as "my blessing" (33:11), signaling his own culpability along with his goodwill, Esau accepts it. It is noteworthy that although Esau calls him "brother," Jakob continues to address him as "my lord," carefully maintaining his servile position. Still wary, he refuses Esau's offer to travel alongside him with the flimsy excuse of not wanting to overtax the slower moving members of his entourage; 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. ..." Both unwilling or unable to deal with their early lives, they never manage to reach true reconciliation and peace, even though they do reunite to bury Yitzchak. They are simply too opposite in nature. 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." Right now, this is more like a Sisyphean task, but arduous as it is, we dare not be satisfied with the false hope of appeasement, but instead, we must continue to work toward genuine peace.

Shabbat shalom!