

Jacob's message to his brother Esau is very cryptic. He tells his messengers the following:

<p>כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֲדֹנִי לְעֹשׂוֹ: כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב עָם לָבָן גֵּרְתִּי וְאַחֲרָי עַד עַתָּה.</p>	<p>Thus shall you say: 'To my lord Esau: thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now...' (Gen. 32:5)</p>
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Of course, we notice the language that he is using: **my lord, your servant**, language that either demonstrates respect for Esau or ingratiates Jacob to him. But why does he start his message talking about Laban? Couldn't he have just come out and say the truth? Something like, **My dear lord Esau: I have a family now and I would like to come back home, to the land. I want to make peace with you.** Why couldn't he have just said something like that? Something that was honest, forthright, and true? Perhaps there is a deeper message in Jacob's message. We recall that Esau is a wild, hairy man. Like other giants, strongmen, and ogres in the Bible, folklore, and elsewhere,¹ Esau is fond of terse expressions and wordplay. We recall that when he asks for the lentil stew, he says **pray give me some of that red red stew**, using the wonderfully evocative and rare word, **הִלְעִיטֵנִי-pour it down my throat please!** (Gen. 25:30). His interactions with Isaac in the blessing story are poetic: **Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may give me your innermost blessing** (Gen. 27:31). By sending Esau a cryptic message, he is inviting his riddle loving brother Esau, (and us) to decode it.

I stayed with Laban. We presume that Esau knows who Laban was. We also assume that Esau knows the "official" stated reason why Jacob went to Laban in the first place, namely, to find a wife from his mother's kinfolk.² Jacob's short message can be easily decoded: **I stayed with Laban in order to get married and build a family because that's what Ma and Pa told me to do.** Now it is plausible, that news of the marriages would have gotten back to Canaan. We have seen examples of this kind of communication before.³ If that was the case, this part of Jacob's message would simply have been a confirmation of what was

already known. However, the second part of the message, **and I remained until now** is a riddle. Would Esau have known the other reason, that is, the real reason why Jacob left? That he was running away from his brother, at his mother's behest, in order to save his life? What does he mean when he says **I remained until now**? The word he uses for **I remained** is **וָאָחַר-va-eihar**. It does not occur frequently, but whenever it does it is always in a situation where immediate, urgent action is to be taken and there is to be no delay.⁴ Thus, when Jacob says **and I remained until now** he is saying **I had no urgent desire to come back, I hesitated, and I had good reason to hesitate, because I was afraid you were going to kill me. Until now that is. I need to come back now.** This would have raised a question for Esau, why **now**? Why at this minute? What has happened that you have suddenly decided to return now? Would Esau have known about God's promise to Abraham and Isaac about the land? Quite plausibly, yes. And since Jacob had the birthright and the blessing, Esau would have reasoned to himself that it was only a matter of time before Jacob would return to the land to take possession of it. **Now** means, **I'm ready.** And Esau takes **I'm ready** as a signal saying as it were: **I'm ready to see you, to reconcile with you, to make peace with you.** Then there's this important detail:

<p>וַיְהִי לִי שׁוֹר וַחֲמֹר צֹאן וְעַבְד וְשִׁפְחָה</p>	<p>I have acquired ox and donkey, sheep and servant and maid. (32:6a)</p>
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Hmm...there's a riddle in this detail. **שׁוֹר וַחֲמֹר-ox and donkey** is a familiar phrase. Oxen always go together with asses.⁵ Similarly, **וְעַבְד וְשִׁפְחָה-servant and maid** also always go together.⁶ And **צֹאן-sheep** always is paired with.... **בְּקָר-cattle!**⁷ But in this message, there's no cattle! As the famous Wendy's commercial stated,

¹ Samson, Og, Jack, in *Jack in the Beanstalk*, Fezzik in *The Princess Bride*, *Shrek* and others. A folklore motif.

² **So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.** (Gen. 28:2)

³ **Some time later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor..."** (Gen. 22:20-24).

⁴ When Abraham's servant stresses his intent to bring Rebeka to Canaan he says, **אַל תִּאָּחֲרֵנִי- "Do not delay me, now that the LORD has made my errand successful.**

Give me leave that I may go to my master" (Gen.24:56).

He is in a rush to go back. Later in this parasha when Shechem indicates his desire to marry Dina it says, **וְלֹא אָחַר- he did not hesitate to do the thing**, ie. to get circumcised.

⁵ For example, in the 10th commandment: **לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ- You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass** (Exod. 20:14).

⁶ Abraham receives **וְשִׁפְחָת וְעַבְדִּים-servants and maids** from Pharaoh. (Ge. 12:16).

⁷ Lots of examples: Gen. 21:17, 24:35, 45:10, 46:32, 47:1, 50:8 in Genesis alone. Dozens more.

Where's the beef?! We know from later on in the story that Jacob has plenty of cattle because it says so specifically⁸ and he also gives a gift of cattle to Esau!⁹ Why doesn't he mention cattle here? None of the commentaries deal with this question, but here are a few speculations. **1. He wants to play down his wealth because while it's one thing to have a lot of sheep, it's another to have a lot of cattle. He wants to portray himself as a simple shepherd but not a wealthy rancher. 2. He wants to differentiate himself from Abraham and Isaac who indeed possessed cattle. 3. He is manipulating Esau, trying to bait him and make him wonder what is going on. Perhaps Esau would know what a careful reader of the story would already know, that צאן-sheep in Jacob's case is always paired with Laban's daughters and grandchildren.¹⁰ If that's the case then the omission of cattle is to draw Esau's attention (and ours) to the concealed message that he was trying to convey: *I'm a family man.*** Then he says:

וְאִשְׁלָחָה לְהַגִּיד לְאָדֹנִי לְמִצָּא חֵן בְּעֵינָיו.	So I have sent to tell my lord to find favor in your eyes. (32:6b)
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This is also a cryptic statement. In effect it is saying: **to tell my lord** - What?! What does he want to tell him?! Esau has to fill in the blank, but he learns from the end of the message that Jacob wants to **find favor in his eyes**. This is like getting a text message from someone saying, **I have to speak to you...** and the recipient is left wondering what it's about. **Jacob's gesture is plaintive but also, at the same time, manipulative.** And that's Jacob's character. He is trying to sound plaintive to Esau, but he is also being manipulative at the same time. So what should Esau have concluded from this message? **My brother has been away for a long time and has built a family. He has substantial means but is not mega-wealthy. He needs to come back to Canaan now because of the birthright and the blessing that he has acquired from me, and he wants to take possession of the land, as God promised father and grandfather. He wants to reconcile with me but maybe he's also being the same as he's always been.** Esau perceives the plaintive tone in Jacob's message, but does he perceive the manipulative part of it? Maybe. Maybe not.

Today is day 435 of the war and the captivity of the hostages. We pray for them and their families. May God shield Israel from terror and protect the IDF from all harm in Gaza and Lebanon.

⁸ Gen. 32:8.

⁹ Gen. 32:16.

¹⁰ See for example, Gen. 29:10, **אֶת רָחֵל בַּת לָבָן אָחִי אִמּוֹ וְאֵת צֹאן לָבָן אָחִי אִמּוֹ** - **And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban.**

and especially Gen. 31:43 **וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל יַעֲקֹב הִבְנוֹת בְּנֹתַי וַיֵּעַן לָבָן וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנֵי וְהָצֵאן צֹאנִי** - **Then Laban spoke up and said to**

The messengers report back to Jacob:

וַיָּשׁוּבוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים אֶל יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר בָּאוּ אֵל אָחִיךָ אֶל עֶשָׂו וְגַם הָלַךְ לִקְרֹאתָךְ וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ.	The messengers returned to Jacob, saying: We came to your brother, to Esau — but he is already coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him! (32:7)
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We have a lot of questions about this. Did they actually meet Esau and speak with him or turn away once

they saw the men? If that's the case then the messengers' report is only speculative. But if they did in fact see Esau and meet with him, then the very fact that they met with him and returned unscathed should have been interpreted by Jacob as a good thing! Notice that Jacob doesn't interrogate the messengers, nor do they volunteer any more information. Jacob should have been able to interpret from this that **Esau is also coming to meet you as he also wants to reconcile.**¹¹ But he doesn't. The **400 men** scares him. Now we know that 400 men could be the size of a garrison, **but as some commentators point out, it could also be Esau's way of demonstrating power and wealth, and also honor. To Jacob!** This was Esau's way of proving to his shady younger twin that while he, Jacob, was off as a farmhand to Laban, he became a political force to be reckoned with and has organized a substantial community around himself. Not to mention his own wives and children. He became, in other words, an honorable man, an honorable leader, with honor to give to others. Therefore, this band of 400 men, far from being a gang of thugs is rather a delegation of honor, not uncommon in moments of reunion like this. But Jacob doesn't interpret it that way. Jumping to malevolent conclusions because of his own guilt, he doesn't query the messengers. And evidently, they let him be. They chose not to persuade him. Thus, when the text tells us in a few verses **וַיֵּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוֹ** - **And Yaakov was left alone** it's not only because he sent everybody off for safety. It's because he is literally alone, with himself! With no-one to counsel or advise him! Not even his messengers, who by now, had their own intuition about their boss' tortured past. Jacob has nothing but his own awareness of his past transgressions and his present attempt to avoid confronting himself. **Some would say that the mysterious assailant who arrives to wrestle with him is there to help him come to terms with himself. And others might say that the assailant came to prevent him from running away!** The fact that he emerged from the encounter with a limp is all we need to know. **Shabbat Shalom!**

Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine".

¹¹ The specific expression **וַיֵּצֵא לִקְרֹאתָךְ** occurs in numerous other places connected to re-union. See for example, Exod. 4:14, 27, with Aaron coming to reunite with Moses.