



The Sudden Change

What happened this week in Syria is similar to the story of this week's parsha. What lesson does it hold for us?

My Uber Driver

This week, I got into an Uber, and as soon as I sat down, the driver smiled at me and said, "Congratulations!"

"Thanks?" I replied, confused. "What are you congratulating me for?"

"Assad is gone!" he practically shouted.

"Wait, are you Syrian?" I asked.

"No," he said, "I'm Lebanese."

Now I was even more curious. "So what's Assad got to do with you?"

He started telling me his story. He's from a city in Lebanon called Zahle. "What? You've never heard of Zahle?" he said, sounding offended. "That's where they make Zachlawi Arak!"

He explained that back in the day, Zahle was mostly a Christian city, but for thirty years, Syria ruled Lebanon. The Syrians didn't like the Lebanese Christians because they had connections with the IDF. That led to a lot of tension.

He remembered how, as a young man, the Syrians accused the Christians of hiding IDF soldiers in Zahle, and Syrians demanded that the Christians hand them over.

Apparently, some Christian Phalangists had been sent to Israel for training, and when they returned, their uniforms kind of looked like those of IDF soldiers. Naturally, the Syrians freaked out. They blockaded the city, set up checkpoints, and interrogated anyone who tried to enter or leave.

“They captured me three times and beat me up every time,” he said. “But you know what really made me mad?” When he was twenty, he had a fancy BMW, and one day, he was driving to pick up his girlfriend for a show when he got stopped at a checkpoint. The Syrian soldier told him to roll down the window, and asked if he knew this really popular Syrian song.

When he answered in the affirmative, the soldier asked if he had the singer’s CD in his car; he wanted to listen to the song. “I told him I really liked that song, but I didn’t have the CD,” the driver said.

The soldier wasn’t satisfied. “Do you know the singer’s name?” he asked.

“No,” the driver admitted.

The soldier made him get out of the car and stand in the blazing sun for over an hour. Finally, the soldier came back and said, “I’ll tell you the singer’s name, and this time, you’ll remember it forever.”

The driver laughed. “You know what the worst part is? He got the name wrong!”

When I told him that there’s no logical reason Assad’s regime collapsed so fast; it’s a pure miracle, he nodded and said, “Finally! Someone who understands. Only G-d could do something like this. We always wanted to have peace with Israel. Maybe now it can happen.”

Esau’s Change of Heart

In this week’s Torah portion, we find a similar story. Parshat Vayishlach tells us about Jacob’s return from Haran, where he had fled because his brother Esau wanted to kill him for stealing the blessings.

While he was in Haran, Jacob had met Rachel and Leah and married them, and later also married Bilhah and Zilpah. After twenty years and twelve children, G-d finally appears to him in a dream and says, “Return to the land of your birthplace.” Jacob gathered his family and waited for the moment when his father-in-law Laban would leave on a business trip. Then, Jacob made his move and escaped.

Why didn’t Jacob just say a proper goodbye to Laban? Because when Jacob tried to discuss leaving Haran, Laban sabotaged his plans. The only way Jacob could leave was by escaping.

Now Jacob was finally heading back to the Land of Israel, but he knew

Esau might still hate him. To prepare, Jacob sent messengers ahead to try to negotiate peace, but the messengers returned with troubling news: Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men.

Nobody welcomes their brother back from overseas after twenty years with a 400-man entourage. Clearly, Esau was bringing the militia to get rid of Jacob and his family.

Jacob was very worried, so he took three steps to prepare. First, he decided to divide his group into two camps. One camp held his wives and children, while the other camp consisted of his servants. That way, if Esau attacked one camp, at least the family might escape.

Then Jacob turned to G-d and prayed. He said, "I am unworthy of all the kindnesses that You've showed me." This wasn't just a prayer; it was a deep expression of gratitude for all the miracles G-d had shown him. The closer Jacob felt to G-d, the smaller and humbler he felt.

Finally, Jacob sent a gift (ransom) to Esau. The gift included goats, camels, cows, and bulls—essentially everything he could spare—to try to appease Esau.

That night, Jacob wrestled with an angel until dawn. The angel couldn't overpower Jacob, and at the end of their struggle, the angel blessed him with a new name: Israel. "For you have struggled with G-d and with men, and you have prevailed."

But the moment of truth came the next morning.

The next morning, Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming toward him with 400 men. Jacob braced himself for the encounter, expecting the worst. Then, the unimaginable happened: Much like we witnessed in Syria, everything turned around in an instant. Esau, who had fought Jacob even in the womb and hated him for taking the birthright and blessings, came with an entourage that clearly looked like an attack force. And yet, in the single moment Esau saw Jacob, he had a complete change of heart. He ran to Jacob, hugged him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and they both wept.

What Did Esau See?

This is the only place in the Torah where a meeting is described with so many expressions of affection: a hug, falling on the neck, a kiss, and crying. What changed in Esau? Why was he so overcome?

Perhaps Esau saw a different Jacob, not the one he remembered from

their youth. Jacob had changed. When Jacob first arrived in Haran, he came alone, intending to stay seven years, marry Rachel, and return home. But Laban tricked him, keeping him in Haran for fourteen years. In that time, Jacob's children were born, and he faced the challenge of raising a Jewish family in a place full of idolatry.

Haran was no place to raise a Jewish family. Abraham raised his children in the Land of Israel, and Isaac raised his in Be'er Sheva. But Jacob had to raise his near Laban, a man steeped in idolatry. For twenty years, Jacob fought to keep his family's values intact, knowing that Laban's influence was dangerous.

Even when Joseph was born and Jacob tried to leave, Laban convinced him to stay another six years. Jacob finally escaped—and Laban chased him, refusing to let go. Laban claimed that Jacob's wives and children belonged to him. As we say in the Passover Haggadah: "Pharaoh decreed only against the males, but Laban sought to uproot everything."

This was the Jacob Esau now saw: a man who had fought for twenty years to protect the Yiddishkeit of his family, a man transformed by struggle, faith, and resilience. Jacob sacrificed for the future of the Jewish people. That's the Jacob Esau embraced.

Jacob's Success

Jacob was the first Jew who was forced to raise a family in a hostile environment—a place where people didn't recognize or even want to recognize the existence of a Creator; they preferred idolatry.

And yet, Jacob succeeded. Of all the patriarchs, only Jacob's legacy is described as "complete." He had a large family, and he succeeded in raising all his children to believe in G-d. It was he who established the twelve tribes of Israel. Those twenty years of self-sacrifice completely transformed Jacob.

When Esau met Jacob, he encountered a different man. This was not the same Jacob who had fled to Haran. He saw a Jacob who had devoted twenty years of his life to raising a Jewish family. Perhaps, Esau saw a divine light shining on Jacob's face, and he was completely humbled.

Something similar happened with Moses when he descended Mount Sinai on Yom Kippur carrying the second set of tablets. The Torah mentions that his face shone with a radiant glow, which made Aaron and the Israelites hesitant to approach him (Exodus 34:30).

Why did Moses' face shine only after receiving the second tablets? Why not after the first? The commentators explain that something pivotal happened in between: the sin of the Golden Calf. G-d told Moses that He intended to destroy the Jewish people and start anew with Moses alone.

But Moses didn't give up. He begged G-d to forgive the people, even telling Him, "If You won't forgive them, then erase me from Your book." Moses was ready to give up everything for the sake of the Jewish people, and because of this, he was rewarded with a glowing, radiant face.

In the same way, Jacob's twenty years of hard work and sacrifice to build the "House of Israel" gave him that same kind of divine glow. When Esau saw Jacob, he was overwhelmed and completely humbled.

The message is simple: when a Jew puts in the effort and sacrifices for others or for the future of the Jewish people, the world itself steps aside in respect. Even an "Esau" won't stand in the way—in fact, he'll want to help.