Parashat Vayeitsei sermon, 12/7/2024

Bard Cosman

We are here in the diaspora, with free will and predestination arguing like two rival brothers in our minds. G-d knows the future as if it had already happened, but our choices seem to affect our future. When we read the prophets in English over breakfast after minyan on Tuesdays, we encounter G-d's repeated promise that the exiles—us--will return to Zion. Yet one of the basic choices most of us make is to stay down in the United States rather than to go up to Israel. Our internal dialogue around that decision is like a debate between Jacob and Esau, the two rival twins. In our recent learning sessions, minyanaires expressed sympathy for the wronged Esau of the Torah story, and they expressed consternation at Esau's harsh treatment by the prophets. This started a chain of thought about Jacob and Esau, and the appointments they make to meet each other.

At the end of today's parashah, Jacob is on the road back to the Land of Israel, when he is pursued and confronted by his patron and nemesis Lavan. After 20 years together, these two tricksters have nothing but hatred and contempt for each other, but they gravely establish a boundary with markers. The men, at least, agree to save face on both sides. Who knows whether good fences might someday make good neighbors, and enmity might someday turn to amity. Meanwhile the uncompromising Rachel squats over the idols she has stolen from Lavan, threatening him with an intolerable exposure to menstrual blood, if he dares to search her saddle. As the frustrated Lavan rides off into the morning mist, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel prepare to confront another hostile relative. Jacob sends word to Se`ir, the mountain fortress where his warlike twin Esau holds court. Why he had to do that is not explained, but it is somehow required--predestined. We read the story of their successful meeting at Peniel next week, after which Esau graciously invites Jacob back to Se`ir. Jacob, who can't quite believe he is unscathed, takes leave of Esau with exaggerated deference: "Let my lord [Esau] go on ahead of his servant [Jacob], while I travel slowly, at the pace of my cattle and my children, until I come my lord Esau in Se`ir." The two appointments between the rival brothers, the actual meeting at Peniel and the notional Appointment at Se`ir, have fired the Jewish imagination over the centuries. Jacob's promise to meet Esau on Esau's turf, never fulfilled, creates a hole in the narrative, something destined but deferred. Midrash is about filling holes in scriptural narrative. So here's some midrash about unavoidable appointments.

The British writer Somerset Maugham retells a Babylonian folktale. A wealthy merchant of Baghdad sends his servant to the bazaar. In the crowded marketplace the servant meets Death, and she looks right at him and makes a sudden gesture. The frightened servant bolts back to his master, who lends him his best horse to escape Baghdad. The servant rides hell-for-leather 80 miles up the Tigris, to the safe city of Samarra. With his servant gone, the merchant himself ambles down to the bazaar, where he accosts Death. "Death," he says, "why did you make a threatening gesture at my servant?" "That was no threat," says Death. "I couldn't help myself. I was shocked to see him still in Baghdad, because I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

This spooky story about the inevitability of destiny serves as the epigraph for John O'Hara's 1934 novel *Appointment in Samarra*, a jazz-age tragedy in the same genre as *The Great Gatsby*, set in a Pennsylvania coal town. The central character is Julian or 'Ju' English, who impulsively sets up his own appointment with death. Aside from the looming disaster, it's a novel of manners, full of social subtlety, with disproportionate roles for the handful of Jews in town.

But there's a reason I'm telling you this in synagogue, and it's not just because Julian English is called 'Ju.' That folktale about meeting Death in the Baghdad bazaar reads like it's from the Arabian Nights, but in fact it originates with those other Babylonians, the Aramaic-speaking diaspora Jews who wrote the Talmud Bavli (Sukkah 53a). There was something odd, wasn't there, about the calm and confident way the merchant approached the angel of death: "Hey Death, why did you scare my servant?" In the Talmud it makes more sense, because that's no ordinary merchant: it's Shlomo haMelech, King Solomon the confidant of angels and demons. Solomon is on familiar terms with the Malach haMavet, the Angel of Death, and the wisest of kings also has supernatural djinns and ifrits on his payroll. So here's the Talmud version of the story:

It starts with a simple tale about the sage Hillel. While attending a festival in the Temple, Hillel remarks "my feet take me to the place that I love." Rabbi Yochanan thereby derives a principle: "The feet of a person are responsible for him: they take him to the place where he is required." Now the Gemara launches into the story, to illustrate Rabbi Yochanan's principle of self-driving feet: King Solomon, hanging out in Jerusalem with the Angel of Death, sees that his supernatural buddy is unhappy and asks him why. The Angel says I'm sad because I'm supposed to take the lives of your two scribes over there. Solomon, who loves his scribes and values their work, springs into action, calls up his djinns and ifrits, and they whisk the scribes at the speed of thought 20 miles away to Luz—the place also called Beth El—where the two men feel safe for about 5 minutes,

and then drop dead. Solomon doesn't hear about this, so the next day the king is having his morning coffee with the Angel of Death, who is now all chipper, and Solomon asks why the change of mood. The Malach haMavet says you know, I told you I was supposed to take the lives of your two scribes, but there we were all together in Jerusalem, and I was scheduled to meet them at Luz. I didn't see how they could possibly get to Luz, but then you did it, you got them there right on time--thank you, sir! King Solomon sighs, breaks the 4th wall, faces the audience, and repeats the words of Rabbi Yochanan: "The feet of a person are responsible for him: they take him to the place where he is required."

In all three "Appointments in Samarra," you can't outrun death, and fast travel is key to each story. In Maugham's tale, the wealthy merchant lends his servant a fast horse, something Lady Death didn't think a mere servant had access to. In the Talmud, Solomon lends the two scribes his djinn-ifrit express, delivering them to their appointment with death at superhuman speed. A central element of the John O'Hara novel, which brings the Appointment in Samarra to 1930s America, is of course the fast motorcar: Ju English is a car dealer, cars appear in every scene, and a car is the agent of Ju's ultimate demise. O'Hara seems to update Rabbi Yochanan: "The car of a person is responsible for him: it drives him to the place where he is required."

Back to Jacob and Esau, and their two appointments. Jacob is en route to Canaan, with his big, vulnerable caravan of family and flocks. Esau, now a warrior chieftain, is galloping towards them with 400 armed men. It's the first time they'll meet since Jacob robbed Esau of birthright and blessing and then ran for his life. Jacob, understandably petrified, spends a sleepless night wrestling with G-d in his dreams, or maybe not in his dreams, and he limps forth next morning with a new name, Israel, and a strange kind of prophetic confidence. Esau and his army show up; then there's the high drama of their confrontation (Gen 33:4): "Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him…he kissed him, and they wept."

Then Esau gets to meet the missus, and the other missus, and their kids, and the goats and their kids, and he takes Jacob's gifts and says "you done well, little brother. Come visit me at my mountain fastness in Se`ir." And Jacob agrees, making his first promise as the freshly named patriarch Israel (Gen 33:14). "Go on ahead, my lord," Jacob says, "I'll make my way to Se`ir." Then, with a final kind word, Esau rides off into the morning mist.

And the promise remains unfulfilled. We don't exactly know Jacob was lying, but as soon as he arrived in Canaan, life got in the way, and was allowed to stay there. And Jacob *was* capable of travel—he eventually went to Egypt, farther away than Se`ir—so his promise to visit Esau looks insinSe`ir, so to speak.

The long-deferred "Appointment at Se`ir" looms large for the Prophets and Rabbis. Esau's kingdom, Edom, became an enemy of Israelites in subsequent generations. The prophets routinely prophesy again Edom, with dire predictions of an appointment with an angry G-d or an avenging army. These prophetic versions of the destimed Appointment at Se`ir take a promised friendly visit and turn it into a terrible vengeance: In the prophets' imagination, Jacob's farewell to Esau sounds more like this: "Go on ahead, my lordly brother. I may get there slowly, but someday I will come to you in Se'ir with fire and sword, and I shall put an end to your arrogance forever."

With such prophecies in mind, commentators look back at the meeting at Peniel, and they say that can't be right. Esau cannot have been sympathetic, generous, and moved by love to forgiveness, as is the plain meaning, or pshat, of the text. It must have been all an act. When Esau fell on Jacob's neck to kiss him, he must have really been trying to bite his younger brother. In the rabbinic vocabulary, Esau and Edom became the name for enemies and oppressors long after the actual kingdom of Edom was a distant memory: they called the Roman Empire Edom, and then when Christendom replaced the Empire, they called the Christian kingdoms Edom as well. There arose a prophetic-rabbinic consensus that the long-awaited Appointment at Se`ir will happen in the Messianic Era, a final and perfect retribution that establishes the kingdom of Jacob's G-d.

There are of course dissenters from that consensus, this being a Jewish discussion. And there's alternative midrash, which I'd like to elaborate here, that has the bad blood between Jacob and Esau eventually fade, with a slow transition from enmity to amity.

Differing views on the Appointment at Se`ir follow the two parallel tracks of the Jewish people: on the one hand, there is the Jewish people for whom the Appointment remains unfulfilled: they have followed Jacob across the Jordan and have possessed and repossessed Canaan: these are our brothers and sisters in Israel. On the other hand, there is the Jewish people who seem to have kept the Appointment, following Esau to Se'ir; hence to Rome; thence to London, New York, Cape Town, Buenos Aires, Melbourne, and the city named after the Catholic saint Diego. These are ourselves, Jews of the diaspora. Our hearts are in the east, but we have chosen and we are here, in the uttermost west! Both sections of the Jewish people face occasional horrors in their

respective places, so each section remains indispensable to the other. We of the diaspora venerate our Hebrew-speaking siblings in Israel: they are, in so many ways, better than us. But here in the lands to which we have followed Esau, we should be no more ashamed of our English, Spanish, or other adopted tongues than our Talmudic sages were of their non-Hebrew vernacular. “Ju English” is a name to savor, an artifact of a fraternal culture that recognizes us, and has, to some extent, been shaped by us. And, because we kept that Appointment at Se`ir, our story of Esau must be according to pshat: by expressing genuine love and generosity, Esau showed the way for his descendants in their treatment of the children of Jacob.

You all know this story, which starts as alternative midrash and ends as modern history: when Edom conquered and colonized the world, the children of Jacob followed and even thrived alongside the children of Esau. In plainer English, Jews followed Christian civilization around the world, contributing to its efforts, and suffering occasional horrors. Not only did Jacob and Esau come to a cold understanding over centuries: the children of Esau eventually founded a unique federation based on—to quote our Siddur Lev Shalem--liberty, justice, and equality: the most *heimische* place in the world for the children of Jacob. This land of laws—we are here--is a nation of Edomites who speak with Israelite accents, a fusion of the ideas of Jacob and the vigor of Esau, the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau—a composite founding patriarch conceived by our founding mother, Rivkah, and then blessed by Isaac in the prophetic wisdom of his blindness.

Predestination and free will coexist in tension in Judaism: two rival brothers, each with a lot to say. Like the Appointment in Samarra, the Appointment at Se`ir is predestined: it must happen. But how we interpret that is up to us, the children of Israel, in both our fellowships. Our feet and our cars, even the self-driving ones, are not responsible for us, as we move towards places where G-d seems to require us. And it is our free will which says whether the Appointment at Se`ir is fulfilled or unfulfilled, friendly or vengeful, in the Messianic future or the historical past. As mother Rivkah said, in a moment of prophecy, “what couldn’t my boys do, if they would only get together?”

We are here.