

Good Shabbos... This week's parasha is Vayishlach. It contains the story of Yaacov's meeting with his twin brother Esav. The account of this fateful meeting includes an odd and troubling line in which Yaacov says to Esav --

"I have seen your face which is like seeing the face of God." Given Esav's generally unsavory nature, this is indeed an odd and troubling reference to the face of God. This line clearly echoes another reference to the face of God only 10 psukim earlier in the parasha. The night before his meeting with Esav, Yaacov wrestles with an angel, presumably the angel of Esav. After wrestling with the angel until daybreak, Yaacov names the place Peniel --

"for I have seen the Divine face to face." Yaacov sees God's face in the face of his twin brother Esav and also in the face of Esav's angel because Esav does in fact represent a part of God's nature. Two of God's names -- Adonoi and Elokim -- refer to two of God's opposing attributes -- mercy and justice. The twin brothers, Yaakov and Esav reflect these twin, but opposing, attributes of God. Yaacov can be seen as representing Adonoi, the attribute of mercy and moderation. Esav can be seen as representing Elokim, the opposing attribute of justice. These two opposing sides of God's nature are directly reflected not only in the opposing nature of Yaakov and Esav, but also in the two central events of this parasha. The first event -- the meeting of Yaacov and Esav -- is immediately followed in the parasha by the second event -- the story of Yaacov's sons' response to the rape of Dinah. Juxtaposed so closely in the text, these two central events of the parasha further reinforce the existence of these two very different, but inseparable, attributes of God. Ironically, in pursuing vengeance for the assault on Dinah, Yaacov's sons demonstrate Elokim, the divine attribute not of their father, but of their uncle, Esav. Both Yaacov in his meeting with Esav and Yaacov's sons in their response to Dinah's rape believe their approach is necessary to advance the long-term interests of their families, soon to be nations. Yaacov has had to wrestle with both Esav and Esav's angel and has seen God's face in both. As much as we may hope or pray that God's face is solely one of mercy and moderation, it is not. God's face is more complicated, more shaded, more ambiguous. Esav is in fact the twin brother of Yaacov, the undeniable product of the very same act of creation. In parashas Ki Tisa, Moses, Israel's greatest prophet, is not allowed to see God's face, only his back. In wrestling with God's angel, Yaakov, the patriarch of truth, does get to see God's face. But the result is still not clear or satisfying. In wrestling with God's angel,

Yaacov is at least partially victorious and renamed Israel. But he is also partially disabled and spiritually humbled. For Yaacov to twice glimpse the face of God in this parasha is for him to know what America's greatest prophet, Abraham Lincoln, also knew. In wrestling with God's nature to try to understand the holocaust of the American Civil War, Lincoln also clearly saw both faces of God. In his haunting Second Inaugural Address, delivered just a month before his death, Lincoln speaks eloquently of mercy in his famous line, "with malice toward none, with charity for all." But Lincoln didn't shrink from speaking even more eloquently of God's opposing attribute of stern justice. In the same speech, Lincoln is forced to conclude that if God "gives to both North and South this terrible war... shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?... If God wills that [this war] continue... until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" As both Yaakov and Lincoln understand, seeing in God's face only either Adonoi or Elokim -- mercy or justice -- is incomplete and untrue. As Yaacov moves from patriarch of a family to Israel, patriarch of a nation, he will continue to wrestle with the same problem that Lincoln did. The God of Israel is also the God of Esav. The face of mercy is inseparable from the face of justice, and the face of God is in fact something both greater and far less discernable than either. Good Shabbos.