



Rosh Hashanah 2010

**“RECONCILIATION”
by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

Every once in a while, the New York Times features what I like to describe as a reconciliation article. Sometimes they appear as an Op Ed on father’s day or mother’s day. Other times they are placed on the last page of the magazine section. The stories generally follow a predictable pattern and leave the reader with the hopeful idea that we can put behind us past injuries and make peace with those who have hurt us.

A woman tries to find some kind of closure with a dying father who had abandoned her dozens of years earlier. A man reaches out to an abusive alcoholic mother with whom he had severed ties. A brother and a sister finally make up after what seems like a lifetime of not speaking.

The Bible has one of these stories too. It tells about the reunion of Jacob and his brother Esau after living apart for twenty years. What set off their separation in the first place was that Jacob with the connivance of his mother, stole Esau’s blessing from their father Isaac who, ostensibly, was on his deathbed. This series of events of course infuriated Esau despite having sold his birthright to Jacob years earlier for a bowl of lentils. Jacob’s mother, Rebecca, feared that Esau would slay Jacob on the spot if he had the opportunity, so she then contrived to have Jacob escape to the land of Aramea when he could find shelter in her brother Laban’s house.

And so Jacob fled and not only found refuge but also romance. He became immediately smitten with his cousin Rachel who he proposed to marry. Laban assented, but switched Rachel’s older and less attractive sister, Leah, in under the chuppah at the last minute. Just as Jacob had tricked his brother, now he was being tricked himself. It all sounds like a plot line lifted from a soap opera.

Now perhaps the story could end there, justice having been done. But there is more to tell. After the birth of Jacob’s many children and after twenty years of working for his father-in-law, Jacob was ready, finally, to return to the land of Canaan and strike out on his own.

The only hitch in the plan was facing his brother Esau. Who knew if Esau had gotten over the injustice that was done to him? Would he bury the hatchet, as it were, and welcome Jacob back or give him a hard time and still want to exact vengeance? So what if twenty years had passed. That’s a brief moment in the lifespan of a grievance that is well-nursed.

The short version of the story is that Jacob first sends gifts ahead to his brother to placate him, or to show how wealthy and powerful he has become. Esau, in turn, shows up with three hundred of his own men to let Jacob know he won’t be a pushover. Both brothers are posturing. Both are

very nervous. If this were two cats, their backs would be arched, their hair standing up tall, ready to pounce on each other.

Finally, the moment of truth. The Bible tells us, ambiguously, that “he ran to him and kissed him.” But who kissed whom? And was it truly a kiss? Or, as some psychoanalysts like to say, a kiss is really “a tamed bite.”

In fact, that’s what the rabbis intuit. In the Hebrew text, there are all these little dots over the word “kissed.” The dots resemble teeth and the rabbis tell us that Esau really bit Jacob’s neck, or at least secretly harbored a wish to do just that.

It was a very fraught moment. Reconciliation is complicated. Never an easy matter of “kiss and make up.”

And then it was over just as quickly. Almost immediately, the two brothers parted. They didn’t stick around for chatting and catching up. This was not the beginning of a renewed warmth and togetherness that wasn’t really there in the first place. Instead, they went their separate ways. The only other time we hear about them getting together again is to bury their father Isaac who, surprise surprise, had not been on his death bed and was still living all these years.

When I started thinking about these remarks several months ago I anticipated telling you about one of these reconciliation experiences that I expected to have myself over the summer. For nearly thirty years I had been nursing my own grievance with my mother’s brother who never made a visit to her in the last year or so of her life when she was dying. She had been close to him, and so had I, but his absence had been painful and felt unpardonable. Over time, however, these feelings dissipated and were no longer an issue for me, but for other reasons I remained wary about re-connecting.

I finally took a chance to establish email contact last spring. To my relief, my overture was well-received. We started exchanging long messages and found common ground reviewing early family history particularly concerning my grandparents. Unlike Jacob and Esau, who never really re-connected, I felt I was building a new rapport with my uncle that I had remembered fondly from years earlier.

This might have been the end of it, but then I had to face the possibility of turning a virtual connection into a real one. Several months earlier I had accepted wonderful invitation to officiate at a wedding this past June in Rio de Janeiro. Despite the distances, that would place me, relatively speaking, a stone’s throw away from Santiago, Chile, which is where my uncle and several of my cousins live. How could I not add on a visit?

So I started to make plans. And then just as quickly my cousins, with whom I was now emailing as well, raised up a caution flag. It was entirely possible, they said, that I could arrive, but my uncle would not see me. I was told, in polite terms, that he had become reclusive. He did not see them regularly either, he barely had a relationship with his own grandchildren, and I was advised that he might be very reluctant to meet my son who was going to be traveling with me.

This came as a blow. Because my mother died well before Oren was born, my uncle would be the next best way to know her and I'm sure I thought with a sense of yearning that it would probably be a way to restore her to me too. At the same time, I did not want to subject ourselves to rejection and vacillated about whether to go at all. Perhaps it was a mistake to stir this all up. In the end, I finally decided to take my chances. Even if my uncle would not see me I would at least still see my cousins and meet their children.

After a few more rounds of emails it looked like everything was falling into place. My uncle even emailed to inquire about my food preferences for lunch and I became increasingly optimistic that the meeting would happen. I even got word that he would apparently meet Oren albeit briefly.

But then life took one of its unpredictable quirky turns. Just days before I arrived my uncle became seriously ill and suddenly needed an urgent medical procedure. Until he got through this crisis he wasn't taking any visitors or calls. And so, just like that, it was over. I went so far and I came so close, but we never saw each other or even talked.

It was hard to know how to react. I was disappointed. I was sad. I also felt some relief from the strain of anticipation and the emotions that were being stirred up. I also felt I deserved pretty good marks for having made the effort.

Now some might say, "Well, maybe it just wasn't meant to happen," as if there is some mysterious master plan that we're not privy to and operates independently of our free will. But I think this fatalistic attitude is not helpful and is inconsistent with our humanistic approach. I prefer to think that the only master plan that exists is the one that we help write. Of course it is not fully within our control and there are no guarantees, but we can take steps to alter the status quo, to make change, to repair hurts, to chart our own lives. We can also learn to accept what is, and not focus on what could be or what could have been. And so my uncle and I have resumed emailing and that is a good thing.

As I think about this experience it makes me appreciate the closest connections I do have and have had all along, as well as the new ones that present themselves all the time. I also realize how easy it is to injure these ties, to be neglectful, to cause hurt, and that it takes constant diligence and dedication to fix and safeguard them. In this sense, each day is an opportunity for repair and of renewal or what I like to think of as small moments of reconciliation.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we start the New Year, let us rejoice in the gift of life, the gift of friendship, and the gift of love, that have sustained us in life, strengthened us in life, secured us in life, and enabled us to reach this day of joy and celebration.