Shabbat Vayishlach 5787
Thanksgiving Weekend, 2026

If you had a family Thanksgiving dinner last night, no matter what the dynamics it was probably less dramatic than those in this week's parasha, which opens with two estranged brothers approaching one another with what seems to be an army, wrestling in the middle of the night, giving gifts to appease the other, embracing, crying, and even kissing to make up. This beautiful reunion between Jacob and Esau is read on two levels in our tradition. Many Rabbinic sources are harsh on Esau, reading him as a wicked stand-in for the future Roman Empire, and they even go so far as to say that the kiss was really a bite on the neck. But in the *peshat* or surface reading of the Torah text, Esau is remarkably gracious, generous, and forgiving. You might remember that Jacob used trickery to steal Esau's birthright and blessing, after which Esau vowed to kill him. Jacob escaped to his uncle Laban's land where he married Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah, had twelve children, and acquired large flocks of goats and sheep. He is now returning to Canaan where the first order of business is a confrontation with his brother, about which he is terrified. He learns that Esau is coming toward him with 400 men, and in response sends droves of animals ahead as gifts.

But when they meet, Esau is not angry. He has every reason to be aggrieved, but instead he is a man who knows that despite the fact that his birthright and blessing were taken from him, he has enough. When Jacob tries to ply him with gifts, he refuses, saying:

יֶשׁ־לִי רָב אָחִי יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ׃

"I have enough, my brother; let what you have remain yours."
Yesh li rav. I have so much. I have plenty.

It would be understandable if Esau was walking through the world bitterly aware that he had been wronged, with the injustice done to him front and center in his life. It would be understandable if the story he was telling himself was about lack, about the birthright he deserved but didn't receive. That's certainly what Jacob expected to find at their reunion, but to Jacob's surprise and ours, that is not Esau's story. Esau's story is "Yesh li rav. I have so much."

Nonetheless, Jacob urges Esau to accept his gifts. He needs to do some kind of reparation, make at least a gesture toward repair. He says to his brother

קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּרְכָתִי אֲשֶׁר הֻבָאת לָךְ כִּי־חַנַנִי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יֶשׁ־לִי־כֹל׃

“Please take my gifts that have been brought to you, for G-d has been gracious to me and Yesh li kol. I have everything.”

Esau says Yesh li rav, I have so much. Jacob responds yesh li kol, I have everything.

Commenting on this exchange, Kli Yakar, an early 17th century Torah commentary, contrasts Esau’s language of “I have so much” with Jacob’s language of “I have everything” to teach a lesson. The commentary says that sometimes even if we have a lot, it can still appear to us that there’s something lacking. Kli Yakar teaches that for such a person, “Even though in truth he lacks nothing that his soul desires and has enough for his needs, he nevertheless constantly craves that God should give him more.” Whereas the ideal would be that, “even if they have little in their possession, they are content with it and happy with their portion, and it appears as if they have everything.”

Kli Yakar sees the exchange between Esau and Jacob as an opportunity to teach this valuable point that might be resonant for many of us on this Black Friday. That even when we have enough, even when we have astounding abundance, we can still crave more. That craving is unnecessary and has no end – in other words it is unrelated to how much we have. We can acquire and acquire and acquire and will never have relief from wanting more unless and until we decide to be happy with what we have. That is a worthwhile lesson in America in 2026.

Though Kli Yakar is using the contrast between their language to make a point, what I see here in the Torah text is two brothers, each of whom has chosen, despite hardship, to be happy with what they have.

The Jewish people have two names. One we receive in this week’s Torah portion and the other we receive in last week’s Torah portion. This week, our forefather Jacob is renamed Yisrael/Israel – which means G-d wrestler – as his sparring partner says, “for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” Ever after that moment, we, as his children, are Yisrael, we are the people of Israel. Our inherited legacy is to be G-d wrestlers – meaning, to not accept the world as it is as good enough, but to strive for something better. To be like Abraham, who challenged G-d, demanding mercy and justice for the innocent. To be like Moses, who confronted Pharaoh, challenging human tyranny and standing for universal freedom. To be like Isaiah, who decried corruption and the abuse of the poor, and imagined a future in which war is such a distant memory that swords are beaten into plowshares. We, the people of Israel, are not to be satisfied with the world as it is; the world we live in is not good enough until it is defined by justice and mercy, freedom and peace.

Our other name, “Jew”, pulls us in the opposite direction. It comes from our foremother Leah, who in last week’s portion named her fourth child Yehuda, or Judah, which later became the name of the area around Jersualem and eventually the name that the Roman Empire called the land and its people. That’s how we are now “Jews”. Yehuda comes from the verb *l'hodot,* להודות. In my Thanksgiving message to the congregation yesterday, I wrote about the meaning of להודות as not only to give thanks but also to acknowledge or to admit. Unlike the passive construct in English of “being grateful,” להודות is active, and the action is to acknowledge and admit to the blessings that fill our lives. I was suggesting yesterday that the way to do that is to focus on the details of what we have, and to trace each thing back to its source. To consider where the things we have come from. When we do, we realize that almost everything we have – whether material or immaterial – comes from beyond us. We did not create it, we are not ultimately the cause of it being in our lives.

Leah lived her life acutely aware that she was not loved by her husband Jacob, but that he loved her sister Rachel instead. She named her first three children after her feelings of lack and yearning – that G-d would see her affliction and her husband would love her – that’s how she named Reuven, her first child –, that G-d heard that she was unloved – that’s how she named Shimon, her second child –, that maybe her husband would become attached to her – that’s the hope she poured into her third child’s name, Levi. Upon giving birth to her fourth child, however, Leah has to admit and acknowledge that she is blessed. “This time I will praise, acknowledge, give thanks to G-d,” – hence the name Yehuda. The name “Jew” calls upon us to give thanks for what we have. To acknowledge the blessings that fill our lives and let what we have be enough.
As Ben Zoma famously said in Pirkei Avot, the Wisdom of our Sages, אֵיזֶהוּ עָשִׁיר, הַשָּׂמֵחַ בְּחֶלְקוֹ Who is rich, the one who is happy with their portion.

So, which is it? Are we to see what’s missing or what’s here? Are we to continually agitate for a better world or be happy with our portion? Yes. Both. This is the paradox we are to inhabit as Jews, as the people Israel. To be satisfied with what we have, but never to be satisfied with the state of the world. Striving to make it more just, more loving, more peaceful; and also acknowledging and giving thanks for the immeasurable blessings that fill our lives.

These are two very different postures that are not easy to hold simultaneously, so we’re actually given a rhythm to move back and forth between these two ways of being. Six days a week, we work to repair what’s broken, to heal what needs healing, to push our society to care more for whoever’s hurting, to include the outcast, to honor everyone’s dignity, to reach for equity, to preserve life. And then one day a week, this day –

Shabbat – we put down the work of the world and give ourselves over to 25 hours of appreciation for all that is beautiful and good just as it is. All of the ways that our world is enough. We take 25 hours every week to say Thank You.

Leah, Esau, and Jacob all had reasons to focus on what was unfair or not good enough in their lives. Esau's birthright was stolen; Jacob spent decades entrapped by his uncle and limped from his wrestling match for the rest of his life; Leah lived her life knowing that her husband did not love her. However, all three people decide that they are going to focus on the abundance in their lives, on the blessings they do have, and to be satisfied with their portion, acknowledging what they have and saying thank you. That, Jewish wisdom tells us, is what it means to be rich. That, Jewish wisdom tells us, is how to be happy.

Happy Thanksgiving.
Shabbat Shalom.