

Life's Illusions
By Bruce Ruben

I have always loved Joni Mitchell's 1967 song "Both Sides Now." I first heard it sung by Judy Collins in her album "Wildflowers." It still brings back a warm flood of nostalgic memories for a time long-gone. In the last verse she sings:

I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all.

At holiday times the issue of illusions presents itself forcefully. Many of us are drawn to the Hallmark card illusion of the holidays as a time of idealized family gathering. Coming home to the simplicity and warmth of childhood memories in the safe embrace of family is a powerful wish. Others have a very different set of fantasies concerning this homecoming. Filled with sad and angry memories, our trepidations around holiday family reunions can be fraught and unsettling. Some of us anticipate the worst from these visits.

Our patriarch Jacob was in the second camp. After stealing his brother's birthright and father's blessing, Jacob had to run from Esau's wrath back to the ancestral home in Haran. In this week's Torah portion, Vayishlach, it is now twenty years later. Jacob is a wealthy man, with two wives, concubines, many children and a multitude of flocks. God has told him to return to Canaan, reassuring him that he will be ok. But Jacob is terrified at the prospect of encountering his brother, who had vowed to kill him. He sent servants ahead with many animals as gifts to Esau and, still anticipating the worst, divided his camp into two, in hope that if Esau attacked, at least some of his clan would survive. Then he was left alone. All night he wrestled with a mysterious stranger. Who is this person? Is it Esau? Is it God or an angel? Is it his own tortured conscience, finally forced to confront the enormity of his duplicity against his brother? In any case,

that wrestling changed him. He acquired a new name, Israel – the one who wrestles with God. He is injured and walks with a limp from the encounter, yet he is also transformed.

So, after a sleepless night, he hobbles out to meet his brother. He doesn't know what to expect. Esau approaches accompanied by 400 men - - not a reassuring sign. Jacob, no longer the cunning trickster, bows low to the ground seven times as he approaches his brother. To his great relief Esau runs to greet him, embraces him and kisses him. They weep together. After meeting Jacob's family, Esau asks about the many flocks that were sent ahead as presents. Jacob replies honestly, "to gain my lord's favor, please accept this gift." Now we see how they have both changed when Esau replies, " I have enough, my brother; let what you have remain yours." Gone is the young man, bereft after the loss of his father's blessing who cried out in impotent rage and vowed vengeance. He had matured and was satisfied with his lot. Jacob replies with one of the most beautifully human phrases in the Torah: "No, I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you received me favorably." Jacob perceived in Esau's act of forgiveness the face of God, manifest through his brother's humanity. What a powerful image, what a moving reconciliation.

The Torah is nothing if not realistic. Jacob remains wary of his brother, and rejects Esau's offer to accompany him the rest of the way to Canaan. The two will remain cordial but distant. Still, the long-delayed reunion went better than Jacob had feared.

Judy Collins sang:

But now old friends are acting strange
They shake their heads, they say I've changed
But something's lost, but something's gained
In living every day.

Like Jacob, we have to try to conquer our fears. Like Esau, we have to try to let go of old hurts. It is not easy. As we continue through this holiday season, fraught with

both the promises and the dangers of family gatherings, may we realize that our illusions, both positive and negative, shouldn't rule us. We can change and grow; so can our families. May our holiday gatherings bring us shalom bayit, peace in our homes. May we see in our loved ones the face of God.

Amein