



The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

## Introductory Reflection

In her 2007 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Vayishlach*, Carol Towarnicky compares the relationship between Jacob and Esau to various conflicts throughout history. While the brothers reached what Carol refers to as an “uneasy détente,” this was not enough to maintain peace between the generations of Esau and the generations of Jacob down the line.

One conflict is notably absent from Carol's piece—likely because it has gone unnoticed by the media. A war has simmered for the last 30 years in Senegal's Casamance region, with intermittent bursts of guerilla violence killing thousands of people and displacing tens of thousands more. This conflict has left many people—especially women—feeling powerless; but one woman, Seynabou Male Cisse, saw the potential for peace. In 1999, Seynabou founded USOFORAL, a grassroots organization that builds on the traditional role of Senegalese women as mediators and givers of life to forge a peace movement. An AJWS grantee since 2010, USOFORAL has set up peace committees, mediated conflicts, advocated for formal peace talks and engaged women as leaders in their communities. In doing so, USOFORAL is working towards the reconciliation that Esau and Jacob missed—an opportunity to heal the wounds of their disagreement and live together in peace.

Read more on AJWS's work in Senegal [here](#), and read Carol's piece below.

## Parashat Vayishlach 5776

By Carol Towarnicky

November 28, 2015

*(Reprinted from November 24, 2007)*

In *Parashat Vayishlach*, Jacob makes plans to return to the land he had fled 20 years before. Assuming that his twin brother Esau still wants revenge for being defrauded of their father's blessing, Jacob devises several contingency plans. Yet, when the two brothers finally meet, Esau runs to embrace him. Jacob declares, “When I see your face, it is like seeing the face of God.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bereshit 33:10

Many medieval commentators hold Jacob blameless in the betrayal of Esau and explain his use of obsequious language and flattery during their reunion as a clever ploy to protect his family rather than an acknowledgment of wrongdoing.<sup>2</sup> Some contemporary readers see the story as one of genuine forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> Jacob wrestles with an angel—that is, his conscience—and is changed. Esau finds it in himself to respond to his brother with love.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of the interpretation we ascribe to this event, however, the brothers do not live together happily ever after. Almost immediately after their reunion, they separate again—Esau goes to Seir, Jacob heads to Succoth. They come together only once more, to bury their father Isaac. This is not a true reconciliation, but rather an uneasy détente like that between the former Soviet Union and the United States in the final years of the Cold War. For two countries separated by oceans, like the two brothers divided by long distances, this may have been the most reasonable first step.

In today's world, however, most significant conflicts happen within countries—for all parties, there is no option to “go their separate ways.” Even in the case of atrocity crimes, survivors must inhabit the same land as those who have perpetrated horrific violence against them. In many of these cases, however, victims and perpetrators are seeking ways to transcend cycles of violence and to achieve reconciliation. Since 1973, more than 20 reconciliation commissions have been established in countries across the world—from Argentina to Zimbabwe, from Rwanda to Sierra Leone. Not surprisingly, after a conflict ends, each side has its own version of “what really happened.”<sup>5</sup> By providing a forum for survivors and perpetrators to tell, record and acknowledge their stories, these commissions can provide the means for people to move toward sustainable relationships.

If only this had happened with Jacob and Esau. If only we heard from Esau, “You betrayed me and robbed me of my future. Despite that, I promise not to take revenge.” And from Jacob, “What I did was wrong. I promise not to do it again.” Then, possibly, the emotional moment of reunion could have pointed the way to a true reconciliation. Instead, Esau's descendants became the people of Edom who aided in the slaughter of Jews when Nebuchadnezzar plundered Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Détente was not enough.

In our time, in the former Yugoslavia, myths, resentments and distortions that festered for centuries burst into ethnic cleansing and slaughter. When the Serbs attacked Muslim Albanians in Kosovo in 1989, they invoked as justification the violence perpetrated against Serbs by Muslims at Kosovo in 1389. In the Balkan wars, the unresolved past so poisoned the present that reporters were uncertain whether the people they spoke to were referencing crimes that had happened the day before, in 1941, in 1841 or in 1441.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Culi (1689-1732) in *The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez*: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1977, p. 111-151

<sup>3</sup> D.G. Myers, “Jacob and Esau after Two Decades: The Miracle of Forgiveness,” 1977.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hir.org/torah/rabbi/5761/vayishlach61.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Avruch and Beatrice Vejarano, “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography.” *Social Justice: Anthropology, Peace and Human Rights*. Volume 2 (1-2): 47-108, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ovadyah 1:11-14

<sup>7</sup> Ignatieff, Michael, “Articles of Faith,” abridged from *Index on Censorship*, September, 1996.

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“How do you keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner?” asks Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman.<sup>8</sup> In national reconciliation efforts, perpetrators of crimes must acknowledge the pain they have caused and promise to cease. The survivors must be given a space to tell their stories and must promise not to seek retribution.

The most famous model for this process is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995. The TRC spent years hearing public testimony and provided an imperfect but effective path to establishing a civil society. “Nowhere in the history of atrocities have we seen victims and perpetrators sharing a common idiom of humanity in the way that was sometimes observed [here],” said Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a member of the Commission.<sup>9</sup> The expectation was neither for “encyclopedic truth” nor for “total reconciliation,” says Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Commission’s co-chairman. Rather, the hope was to provide critical first steps and a “beacon of hope” for other nations trying to come to terms with past conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

The missed opportunity in the story of Esau and Jacob reminds us that the path to true reconciliation must begin with a way to visit the past, the courage to remember one’s own pain and the willingness to hear the other.



**Carol Towarnicky** is a freelance writer in Philadelphia who recently retired after 31 years as an editorial writer and columnist with the Philadelphia Daily News. She is a founding member and former president of Mishkan Shalom, an activist Reconstructionist synagogue with a mission to integrate prayer, study and action for social justice. In a regular column she continues to write for the Daily News called “Common Good,” she tries to “pray with the news,” to apply progressive religious values to current events. Carol can be reached at [towarnicky@aol.com](mailto:towarnicky@aol.com).

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<sup>8</sup> Dorfman, Ariel, “Death and the Maiden,” quoted in *Post Conflict Reconstruction & the Media: Discussion Points*, Media Diversity Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Gobodo-Madikizela, Pamela. “Beyond Truth and Reconciliation: Forgiveness.” *Peacework Magazine*, May, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, CNN.com, October 4, 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/10/04/talkasia.tutu>

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