

A Closer Look-Vayishlach

After their emotional reunion, Esau offers to have some of his men escort Jacob on his journey. Jacob politely declines.

The text:

Rabbi Yannai, when he traveled to the Imperial Court (on communal business), would first look into this Parsha (to learn from Jacob's example how to behave towards the hostile Romans); and he never accepted a Roman escort (just as Jacob rejected Esau's offer). Once Rabbi Yannai neglected to look at the Parsha, and accepted a Roman escort. They had not yet reached Akko when he had to sell his cloak (to bribe his way out of the Romans' clutches). [Midrash, as cited and interpreted by Ramban]

The Puzzle:

How could Rabbi Yannai make such an obvious mistake? He's faced this situation before, and done the right thing every time, just as Jacob showed us. Did Rabbi Yannai suddenly forget the Torah's explicit message?

The Answer:

"Don't associate with Esau and his kind." It's a simple principle, and Rabbi Yannai surely remembered it. Clearly, he thought this situation was different – and if we had been there, he could have explained why, and probably convinced us that he was right. But in reality, the situation was *not* different; what was different was *Rabbi Yannai*. By neglecting to re-read the Torah, he found himself a bit less in touch with its wisdom, and made a nearly fatal error in judgment.

The Message:

The Torah teaches us broad, general principles – honesty, kindness, faith, charity. These are basic concepts. "I know that already," we think. But life is full of confusing dilemmas: Should I be honest or tactful? Decisive or deliberate? Should I volunteer for the community, or does charity begin at home? Should I give to others or attend to my own needs? The Torah *does* have the answers; but we can't get it right without taking the time to study, analyze and reflect on the Torah's messages. By immersing ourselves in Torah wisdom, we can slowly begin to internalize its principles, so that they guide the decisions we make every day of our lives.