

# “Looking into the Face of the Other”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

After a long, painful estrangement, the brothers Jacob and Esau are to meet. Years before, Jacob tricked his father into giving him the birthright, and Esau pledged to kill his brother. As Esau advances with 400 men, we assume he will carry out his threat. Instead there is a tearful embrace. Why?

My father, Rabbi Gerald Wolpe, once offered a striking and beautiful insight into this story. He explained that in ancient times self-image was not constantly conditioned as it is today. We see ourselves reflected in mirrors at home, in cars, in stores. In the ancient world one rarely looked at oneself — Narcissus gazing in the pool and falling in love with his own reflection is therefore so powerful. For most of human history people were largely unacquainted with their own appearance.

Jacob and Esau were twins; not identical, to be sure, but they were of the same age. So looking at each other, my father pointed out, they were in some sense looking at themselves. Each must have been struck by how the other had aged. Suddenly they understood the passing of time in their own lives. There was so much waste and loss in the years of hating. Now appreciating the lost years, Esau and Jacob were overcome by grief.

Often the messages of the Torah are implicit. We must tease them from the story to understand what the Torah is trying to teach. But once we see underneath the story, the lesson is clear. For parents and siblings the Torah's lesson speak to us from the embrace of the brothers: look at one another, for in doing so, you are also looking at yourself.