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Friends From Afar?

Parshat Vayishlach sets the stage for one of the most anticipated and terrifying family reunions in biblical history. For twenty years, Yakov has been living in exile, looking over his shoulder. Now, Yakov is finally returning home, but he receives word that Eisav is marching toward him with an army of four hundred men. Yakov goes into full crisis mode. He divides his camp to prepare for war, he sends waves of extravagant gifts to appease his brother, and he prays desperately. Everything points to an explosive, violent confrontation. But then, they finally see each other, and the tension simply vanishes. Seemingly out of nowhere, the narrative flips:

וַיָּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ, וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ; וַיִּבְכּוּ

"And Eisav ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept" (Bereishit 33:4).

It is a beautiful, cinematic moment. But if you look at this verse in a traditional Torah scroll, there is something highly unusual: there are distinct scribal dots placed over every single letter of the word *vayishakehu* (and he kissed him).



Chazal tell us that dots above a word signal an anomaly—a moment that defies normal reality and demands a deeper look. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (quoted by Rashi) explains that we need these dots because, logically, we shouldn't believe this kiss. The history is too dark, the betrayal too deep. Because of that intense baggage, we would naturally assume this embrace was fake or staged.

The dots are there to reassure us of the exact opposite. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai teaches that in this specific, fleeting moment, the dots tell us that despite the bitter history, the kiss was 100 percent genuine. Normal reality was suspended, and for one second, they were just two brothers who missed each other.

But what happens next is the true secret of their relationship. Swept up in the emotion of the reunion, Eisav wants to keep the magic going. He says to Yakov:

נִסְעָה וְנֵלֵכָה וְאֵלְכָה לְנֶגְדֶּךָ

"Let us travel and move on, and I will go alongside you" (Bereishit 33:12).

Eisav essentially says, *"This is amazing! Let's move our camps together. Let's do life side-by-side from now on."* Yakov responds

with a polite but firm decline. He points out that his camp moves at a different pace. He tells Eisav to go on ahead, and says, *"Etnahalah l'iti"*—**"I will lead on slowly"** (Bereishit 33:14). The brothers permanently separate, living as good neighbors from afar.

Why did Yakov walk away? The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, addresses this in his commentary, the *Ha'amek Davar*. He explains that while the brotherly love awakened during that embrace was completely genuine and reciprocal, Yakov knew their core natures and daily missions were fundamentally different. To force them to live in the same space would inevitably reignite their historical friction. Yakov realized a profound truth: you don't need to share the same physical space every day for a connection to be authentic. They needed to return to their own paths, but that distance doesn't erase the kiss. The "dotted" moment of pure love remains entirely real, even from afar.

There is a powerful lesson here about the magic of camp friendships that can be taken from a piece of this lesson. Sometimes, we pack our bags at the end of the summer and wonder: *Are these friendships real if we only see each other in the summer? If we go back to our different schools and different cities, was this just a camp bubble?*

Parshat Vayishlach answers with a resounding yes: the relationships formed in camp are absolutely real. Camp is the "dotted word" of our year. It is a sacred, elevated space where the normal barriers drop, the baggage falls away, and we connect soul-to-soul. When camp ends, just like Yakov, we all have to say *"Etnahalah l'iti"*—we have to go back to our own places, our own schools, and our own communities. We build a bit of distance over the winter. But that distance doesn't mean the friendship was an illusion. We don't need to be in the same bunk 365 days a year for the bond to be genuine. The dots prove that the connection is real, giving us the fuel to walk our separate paths until the next time we run to greet each other. ■

Rabbi Kenny Pollack is the Managing Director, Camp Dror & Strategic Integration of OU Israel Summer. If you want more information about Camp Dror, OU Israel's premier English speaking summer camp, check out our website: www.campdror.com



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