

CONFRONTATION MANAGEMENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

This week's Torah portion, VaYishlach, opens with our forefather Yaakov's preparations to engage his evil brother Esav. After he received the report that Esav was coming to confront him with an army of 400 men, Yaakov took three steps: he divided his camp in half, prayed, and sent gifts to pacify Esav; in effect: prepared for war, related to G-d, and tried to preempt the war by creating an atmosphere of peace. According to Rashi (referring to Beraishis/Genesis 32:11) he utilized prayer as it was to be used: as an opportunity to reflect upon one's acts and deeds and contemplate his relationship with the Master of the Universe. It was not simply a chance to implore G-d for what he needs. Our forefather Yaakov was not the proverbial "atheist in the foxhole."

Why is the Jewish tradition one of forging a relationship with G-d in times of crisis? Why do we reflect on our service of our Creator in times of need?

The Jewish people are known as B'nai Yisrael, Yisrael being our forefather Yaakov. The western world is often identified as a remnant, a continuum of the Roman Empire, the grandfather of which was Yaakov's, brother Esav. Two weeks ago, in the portion of Toldos, we read about the blessings given to these brothers. After Yaakov took the primary blessing, Esav begged his father for a blessing, but Yitzchak (Isaac) told him there were none available. Further cajoled, Isaac formulated a blessing that seems to be the mirror of Yaakov's. What are the differences between the blessings? Even stranger, after that whole episode, before Yaakov's departure, he got an additional blessing. Why couldn't this blessing have gone to Esav?

There are two main differences. First, both received a blessing for prosperity - but they are reversed: Yaakov was blessed with the "dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth (27,28)," while Esav will get "fatness of the earth...and of the dew of the heavens from above (27,39)." Additionally, Yaakov was told he will be "a lord to your brothers (27,29)," contrasting Esav who was told he will be subservient but "when you will be aggrieved, you may remove his yoke from upon your neck (27,40)." Why was the reversal necessary on the blessing for prosperity? And when will Esav throw off his albatross named Yaakov?

Kli Yakar (R' Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz; Lemburg and Prague; 1550-1619; one of the leading Polish Rabbis of his era) explained the reversal: Yaakov's blessing started with the dew from the heaven because he was a man of faith in G-d and G-d's providence as provider of sustenance in the world; Esav's blessing focused on the fat of the land because Esav focused his faith on himself, not G-d; on

his ability to bring forth the fat of the land, ignoring G-d's role. When can Esav overpower Yaakov? Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel; Germany, Romania and Russia; 1809-1879; preeminent Bible commentator of modern times) explained there is a contingency: if Yaakov is involved in Torah study and the service of G-d, then Esav will subservient, but if Yaakov is lax in service of G-d then Esav will be the rod and the strap to smite and afflict him.

Esav's blessing also emphasized that Esav will live by the sword. Ha'amek Davar (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin; Rosh Yeshiva/dean of the Yeshiva in Volozhin, Russia; 1817-1893) explained the sword is not merely a source of livelihood. Rather, Esav's entire meaning in life, his entire essence is drawn from the sword. The essence of Yaakov, as noted above, is drawn from faith in G-d, service of G-d and Torah study. With these assets, Yaakov, and we, his children, are the dominant force; without them, we are where we have been for the last 2000 years, in exile, looking over our shoulders.

Furthermore, Yaakov's later blessing (28,3-4) was not on the table for Esav to take. Whereas the first blessings were for abundance in the physical realm, the later blessing was for greatness in the spiritual. Yitzchak not only conferred G-d's promise of a multitudinous nation in the land of Israel, but also extended the "Blessing of Avraham." Rashi elaborated this blessing of Avraham has the components of becoming a great nation, first promised when G-d told Avraham to travel to the land of Canaan (12,2), and the nations blessing themselves by his offspring, promised after the binding of Isaac (22,18) and reiterated to Isaac himself soon after he married (26,4). But this blessing, too, was qualified (26,5 and Rashi ibid.). The blessing was given to Avraham because of his commitment to the word of G-d and the way of the Torah. The Torah reiterated that a lack of commitment in these areas will spawn a Jewish nation devoid of blessing.

Yaakov was fully aware that his preparations for peace and war were necessary action steps, but his ultimate success was grounded in his relationship with G-d. Thus, Yaakov in his confrontation with Esav, revisited this bond, as Rashi (32:11) noted, concerned for the strength of his merits and the sully of his sins.

The Jewish World today finds itself challenged by the forces of evil generated by another of Avraham's progeny. Regardless of where you stand in your own observance, there are mitzvos to perform and Torah learning opportunities to take advantage of. The people of the book cannot allow itself to become the people of the checkbook. Yes, tzedaka is an essential mitzvah, but it does not fully discharge our obligation. Chessed, reaching out, doing for others is also important, but that is not all. Judaism is and always has been an issue of maintaining G-d consciousness, through Torah study, through mitzvos, through prayer.

The story is told of a man leaving the Synagogue one day, and as always the Rabbi was standing at the door shaking hands as the congregation departed. He grabbed the man by the hand and pulled him aside. The Rabbi said to him, "You need to join the Army of G-d!" The man replied, "I'm already in

the Army of G-d, Rabbi." The Rabbi questioned, "How come I don't see you, except for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?" He whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."

G-d wants us in the PUBLIC service. We have to join His army, His Campaign Enduring Freedom. Our success depends on it.

Have a good Shabbos!

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