

FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

This week's portion is the first from the book of Devarim, or Deuteronomy. The dictionary definition of Deuteronomy is "fifth book of the [Bible], derived from the Greek words deuterios ("second") and nomos ("law")...it is a repetition of previous laws with an urgent appeal to obey them." Before the Torah begins its review of the laws, it starts with Moshe's review of the history that brought the Jewish Nation to that point in history, their waning weeks in the wilderness. As they circumvented the lands of Mount Se'ir, the possessions of their cousins, the Children of Esav (Esau), G-d told them, "Enough of your circling this mountain; turn yourselves northward (in Hebrew: "tzafona")...You shall not provoke [the children of Esav] for I shall not give you of their land - even the right to set foot - for as an inheritance to the Children of Esav I have given Mount Se'ir." (2:3,5)

Yalkut Shimoni (most comprehensive Midrashic anthology, covering the entirety of the Tanach (Bible); attributed to Rabbi Shimon HaDarshan of Frankfurt of the thirteenth century) conveys the Oral Tradition of a deeper message embedded within G-d's words to Moshe. "If you see that [the Children of Esav] want to provoke you, hide ("hatzpinu") yourselves from them. To where do you flee? To the Torah, for there is no protection other than Torah, as stated, 'He has secured ("yitzpohn") the eternal Torah for the upright' (Mishlei/Proverbs 2:7)"

Ramban (Nachmanides, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman; 1135-1204; native of Gerona, Spain, he was one the leading scholars of the Middle Ages and successfully defended Judaism at the famed debate in Barcelona in 1263) expounds that the confrontations our forefather Yaakov (Jacob) had with Esav are the model for the destiny of the Children of Israel in our continuing conflict with our cousins, as the generations of the Jewish People will continually experience history repeating itself. Therefore, we must take hold of and follow the lesson of our righteous forebear and prepare ourselves with the same three tools he utilized: prayer for success, gifts of appeasement and preparations for war and escape.

Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities) notes that Ramban's guidance of 750 years ago is no less relevant today in our confrontation with our oppressors. Throughout Jewish history, our utilization of the armaments of our forefather - prayer and faith with a non-aggressive defensive posture - has led to our survival through millennia of persecution. Yet when we embraced the strategies of our enemies - reliance on the sword with conquest defining success - and abandoned the successful formula of our forefathers, we have met with misery and

great hardship. Rabbi Kagan closes with a simple prayer: May G-d have mercy on us and restore our Judges to their former positions (i.e. bring the Messiah speedily, thus restoring the religious institutions of old which inspired the masses to maintain their dedication to the Divine path).

One of the great miracles of Jewish history is that no nation has ever survived as an identifiable group after close to 2000 years of exile, dispersion and persecution. But the actualization of this impossibility should not surprise us. Just as the Torah warns us of exile and persecution as the consequence of our misdeeds - commemorated with this coming week's Tisha B'Av observance of the anniversary of the destruction of our Holy Temples in Jerusalem and most of the great tragedies that have befallen our people - the Torah comforts us that G-d will never forsake us. And to arouse the Divine mercy that will end this misery, the Torah offers further instruction: renew our faith in G-d and flee to the Torah.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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