

CONTINUITY CRISIS?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Please save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I am afraid of him, lest he come and strike me, mother upon children." [32:12]

The language of this verse appears repetitive. Yaakov had only one brother, Esav. He could have said "please save me from the hand of my brother," or "please save me from the hand of Esav," or even "please save me from the hand of my brother, Esav." Why was it necessary to refer to both "the hand of my brother" and also "the hand of Esav," as if they were two different things?

The Ohr HaChaim addresses this question. He says that Esav can approach Yaakov in two ways: with love, as a brother should -- or as the wicked Esav. If Esav attacks as a wicked enemy, then it is obvious that Yaakov needs protection and help. But Yaakov, in his wisdom, perceived that Esav's love can be equally dangerous -- and he prayed for Divine assistance to deal with that facet of Esav as well.

Several hundred years ago, we could ask: "what's so dangerous about Esav's love? Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone loved the Jews?" Today, the associated dangers are apparent to everyone. In 1999, Harvard Professor Alan Dershowitz wrote the following in his book, "The Vanishing American Jew" (Oxmoor House, 2000): "We may be experiencing something unique in Jewish history -- what I call the post-persecution era of Jewish life -- where we can't count on tsuris (grief), on external persecutions, and on people hating us to death, to keep us together. The world loves us to death. And we don't have the answers."

Professor Dershowitz is mistaken. "Maasei Avos Siman L'Banim" -- "the deeds of the fathers are signposts for the children." Yaakov our father had "been there, done that." He knew the answers. But the professor is certainly right to worry -- not knowing the answers has tragic consequences.

After many delays, the latest National Jewish Population Survey has emerged. Despite the desperate efforts of the United Jewish Communities to spin the data ("American Jewish Community Remains Strong, Committed" reads the headline of its official press release), even a cursory look at the data paints a different picture -- one of a "declining, graying population" (Northern California Jewish Bulletin) which is "older, fewer, and less fruitful" (Jerusalem Post).

In ten years, the median age of a Jew in America rose from 37 to 41, the percentage of the population below age 18 fell from 21 to 19%, and the percentage over age 65 shot from 15 to 19%. By comparison, within the overall US population the percentage below age 18 is 26%, and above 65 is

merely 12%.

Not only are Jews aging and having fewer children, but roughly half of those children are marrying out. A large majority of intermarried families do not raise their children as Jews, and at adulthood even a smaller segment of children from these families self-identify as Jews. This is what the federations call the "continuity crisis" -- and, as Alan Dershowitz says, "we don't have the answers."

Except we do.

At the end of Parshas Vayigash, which we will read in several weeks, Yaakov must go into exile again -- down to Egypt, where he will die, passing the baton to the next generation of Jews. What does Yaakov do? "And he sent Yehudah on in front of him to Yosef, to guide the way to Goshen, and they came to the land of Goshen." [Gen 46:28]

Why does Yaakov need to send an advance team to go scout out the location? As Rashi points out, the word "to guide," "l'horos," also means "to instruct." It comes from the same word as "Torah." Yehudah went on ahead to build a house of learning, from which teaching and instruction would emerge.

When Yaakov went down to Egypt, he did not start by building a symphony hall. He did not found a JCC. He did not even construct a hospital -- for none of these would maintain the heartbeat of the Jewish people. He built a House of Study. He built a school.

To claim that "we don't have the answers" is to proclaim oneself ignorant of the solution we were given thousands of years ago. Go into any Jewish high school and find out how many of their graduates intermarry -- and, on the other hand, how many children per family those graduates tend to have. There's no continuity crisis. It's a myth.

The problem is that most Jewish children are not graduates of Jewish high schools. The leader of the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly the UAHC), Reform Rabbi Eric Yoffie, has called ours "the most Jewishly ignorant generation in history." It is also an age of unprecedented intermarriage and decline in Jewish affiliation.

What sort of fool would treat these as two unrelated issues? Who would imagine that "Jewish identity development" and "Jewish learning" should be considered separate topics? They are one and the same. Jewish learning is the only credible and proven path to Jewish identity and affiliation, bar none.

Yaakov provided the answer. All we need to do is listen!

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken

[This week's Dvar Torah was excerpted from a longer talk delivered by Rabbi Menken on the topic of

Jewish continuity. To inquire regarding having this talk given in your community, please [email us](#) or call our office at 410-602-1350.

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