

SYNCHRONIZING MISSIONS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

[Esav] said, "Travel on and let us go, and I will go alongside you." But he [Yaakov] said to him... "Let my lord go ahead... I will go on at my slow pace according to the work/cattle that is before me and according to the children before me until I come to my lord at Seir."^[1]

The animal kingdom knows no philosopher kings. Might is right – the only right. Mankind distinguishes itself in that the spirit can be more important than brute strength and cunning. The wise – or the diabolically ingenious – individual can win the support of the many.

This very human responsiveness holds true in the relationship of nations as well. At times, all that matters is military power. Yet there are also times when a smaller nation can wield influence when others look to it for its wisdom, its creative gifts, and its historical experience.

Klal Yisrael is destined to remain a small nation among many large ones. It can only dwell in tranquility among those who value wisdom, and elevate it above brute force. The Jewish mission demands that we teach and instruct the rest of humanity. When we perform as expected, others seek our guidance. "All the earth sought Shlomo, to hear the wisdom which G-d put in his heart."^[2] Our mission is put on hold when all would-be listeners turn deaf.

We were exiled from our homeland because of our own sins and misdeeds. It would be a mistake, however, to see our interminably long exile and diaspora as a function of our *aveiros* alone. The unwillingness and inability of our host nations to listen to the Word of G-d contributes to the length of our exile, and its geographic extensiveness. Societies revert to simple equations of strength and power. When nations lose all interest in their own wise men, they will certainly not listen to us.

"Therefore my nation is exiled, for want of *da'as*."^[3] *Da'as* here should be understood as the comprehension of the other nations. When they are deadened to truth and principle, our *galus* deepens. In time – or at least at the end of time – they will seek truth once more. "They will not do evilly or destructively on all of My holy mountain. The earth will be full of *de'ah*, as the waters cover the seas."^[4]

Esav asked Yaakov to alter his travel plans, to take a more direct route than the slow, arduous one he had chosen. "Let us go, and I will go alongside you." We can put aside the differences that have plagued us, and march forward together to the finish line of human destiny.

Yaakov demurred. "Let my lord go ahead." We have not yet arrived at a point where we can live together in respect, tranquility, and genuine partnership. You go first. "I will go on at my slow pace." I bear an even greater burden than you. Behold the work, the children who slow me down. This work is the role of *navi* to the nations; the children are the disciples I must attract from all the nations of the earth. I must proceed very slowly towards my goals.

Yaakov does not speak of an impossible dream. He will proceed slowly, but he will make progress. Yaakov pledged to meet up with Esav again: "[when] I come to my lord at Seir." When did this happen? It didn't. Chazal^[6] observe: "We reviewed all of Scripture, and did not find that Yaakov ever went to Se'ir. When will he go? In the future, as it is stated, 'Saviors will go up on Har Tziyon to judge the mountain of Esav.'^[7]" The time will come when we will get to Se'ir, i.e when our mission will succeed at penetrating and influencing the world of Esav. Only then will we live within it in peaceful coexistence.

The gemara^[8] relates R. Yehoshua ben Chananyah's success in besting heretics in debate. As he approached death, his students asked him, "What will become of us in the attacks of the heretics?"

He responded, "'Counsel has been lost from the children; their wisdom is soured.'^[9] Since counsel is lost from the children, the wisdom of the nations soured. If we find that our abilities to give counsel have diminished, do not worry. It is certainly because the wisdom of those to whom we should relate has soured. There is no point in winning debates, unless people are wise enough to take it to heart, and are willing to change. That is no longer true."

R. Yehoshua ben Chananyah then added a second proof-text. "Travel on and let us go. I will proceed alongside you." He does not explain what he meant. Our discussion makes his intentions clear. It is possible that his students were in the thrall of his successes in debate. They began to believe that their teacher might soon turn around all the opponents of Judaism. His impending loss shattered their hopes. He told them about the exchange between Esav and Yaakov, of how difficult Yaakov's journey would be, and how slowly Yaakov would travel on his lonely road. His intention was that the students were premature in predicting the end of *galus*. It would take more than their *rebbe* trouncing a few of his opponents. Much more work remained to be done.

His message, however, was not pessimistic. He told them as well that Yaakov would one day reach Se'ir, where there would be no more scoffers and doubters to reject Hashem's pure message. The victory was not immediate, but it would come.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'Ha-Maaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz .
2. Bereishis 33:12-14 .
3. Melachim1 10:24 .
4. Yeshaya 5:13 .

5. Yeshaya 11:9
6. Bereishis Rabbah 78:14
7. Ovadiah 1:21
8. Chagigah 5B
9. Yirmiya 49:7