

SINAI & SINA

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; two peoples will separate from inside of you. One nation will overpower the other; the greater one will serve the younger." (Bereishis 25:23)

It is an amazing thing, when you think about it. In Parashas Lech-Lecha, we learned about Yishmael's humble beginning, and how he almost didn't have one at all. Even more amazing is that his beginning was the direct result of the suggestion of Sarah for Avraham to take Hagar, the Egyptian princess, as a concubine. Later, in Parashas Vayaira, she had to be the one to demand that Hagar and her son, Yishmael, be sent away from the very house she had brought Hagar in to help build.

It's now 5764, 3,730 years since Yishmael was born, and he is one very large and powerful nation. He is also breathing fiercely down the neck of Yitzchak's descendants, still shooting deadly arrows at him after all these millennia.

In this week's parshah we bear witness to the birth of Eisav from Avraham's son, Yitzchak. Eisav, as the Torah will later specify, is the father of Edom. Edom is the father of Rome, from which came the largest religion in the world, if you include all the splinter and break-off groups as well. Like Yishmael, Eisav is a brother of ours, and like Yishmael, Eisav feels far more complete and happy when the Jewish people are no more. How much effort he continues to expend to this end! And, as if that wasn't enough, the most vicious enemy of the Jewish people, Amalek is also family, as the Torah says:

Timna was a concubine to Eliphaz, the son of Eisav; she gave birth to Amalek for Eliphaz. (Bereishis 36:12)

According to the Talmud, Timna had originally sought to be a concubine to Avraham, attaching herself to this great family even though she had been a princess in her own right (Sanhedrin 99b). However, Avraham rejected her, and she settled for a relative instead, Eliphaz, the great-grandson of Avraham Avinu! We seem to have a knack for producing our own worst enemies!

While this explains the great similarities of nations, it does little to explain the vast differences. Though Christianity may be, from a Torah point of view, questionable, it is far more monotheistic than the pagan religions that preceded it. And Islam, for all its disgust with anyone who is not Muslim, is completely monotheistic.

But what about the differences? What about the deep, intense hatred that once again is re-surfacing in Europe, with Europeans and Muslims working in tandem to castigate the small, unassuming Jewish inhabitants amongst them, and tiny little Israel in specific? Where does THAT come from? It must be more than just some form of sibling rivalry . . .

SHABBOS DAY:

"Is that why they called his name 'Ya'akov'? He has fooled me twice. He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing!" (Bereishis 27:36)

There are plenty of articles floating around these days about the "new" form of anti-Semitism. They show how the attitude towards Israel and her policies, as politically-motivated as the accusers want to appear, are really rooted in old-fashioned anti-Semitic sentiments (whether the accusers themselves realize it or not).

What's the difference here? Why is it that when people attack the Jewish state that others cry "Foul!" as if one is not allowed to disagree with Israeli policy? The truth is, there is plenty to disagree with when it comes to Israeli policy, as many members of the Knesset will personally tell you. However, when it comes to this whole peace issue thing, given the historical, political, financial, and military background to this particular Middle-East crisis, the demands and expectations just don't add up. Not even close, as anyone can see who takes the time and energy to research each one.

But most don't, as if the Jewish people aren't worth the time and effort. More anti-Semitic sentiment. Besides, who really cares? Even if the Jews are right and the Arabs are wrong, they still have to be appeased. True, it may cost the Israeli state many lives and national survival, but how does that compare to saving the world protracted aggravation over a seemingly unsolvable conflict? More anti-Semitism.

And, what's worst is that people who ought to know better, people who ought to be able to rise above such petty values, have dived in head first and deepest into the pool of Arab propaganda. Even as the Americans are getting a first hand taste of what it means to try and make peace with the Arabs, they see no connection, no resemblance to the Israeli-Arab conflict, even though they suffer similar fates and are forced to respond exactly as the Israelis do.

Thus, the rabbis summed it up this way:

It is a well-known halachah that Eisav hates Ya'akov. (Midrash HaGadol 28:1)

This doesn't mean that Eisav's descendants are aware of this, and are bent on validating it. On the contrary, it was written for the Jewish people, particularly the Jew who feels compelled to say, "But maybe this generation of Edom is different. Maybe they're more compassionate, more accepting of the Jewish people, more reliable." The rabbis shook their heads a long time ago and said, "Not likely. We're talking about natures, not attitudes."

And talking about natures, look at what the Torah says about Yishmael:

And the angel of G-d said to her, "You are pregnant, and you will give birth to a son. You will call him "Yishmael," because G-d has heard [shammal] your affliction. (Bereishis 16:11)

And who caused Hagar affliction? The truth is that Hagar caused her own, because she behaved improperly to Sarah. But, Hagar didn't look at it that way. Instead, she felt in the right, and instead saw a mistress who mistreated her and afflicted her. She may have gone back home again to her, but you can be sure that Hagar never looked at Sarah positively again. And, it was that pain and anger that was infused into her son, Yishmael.

And, when Ya'akov bought the birthright from Eisav, because Eisav had proven himself unworthy to be the leader of the future Jewish people, did Eisav forgive Ya'akov? And later, when Ya'akov dressed up as Eisav, at his mother's bidding, to take the blessing that had, originally at least, been meant for his twin brother, what did Eisav say then?

"Is that why they called his name 'Ya'akov'? He has fooled me twice. He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing!" (Bereishis 27:36)

Fine, the blessing we can hear. But the birthright? Ya'akov bought that and Eisav because sold it, and quite willingly. And, the truth is that the one who has the birthright is the one who gets the blessing, so it was a package deal. Yet, as far as Eisav was concerned, Ya'akov was worthy of deadly revenge, and so, Eisav has been chasing Ya'akov now for millennia.

Thus, in the end, the clothing changes, but the people remain the same. The date is different, but the conflicts are ancient. The causes seem recent, but they belie the real undercurrents of emotion that has the world moving in on the Jewish people once again, AND, it's not what you think.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

G-d came from Sinai, and shone forth from Seir to them; He appeared from Mount Paran, and brought some of His holy myriads; in His right hand fire became law. Although there is love for the nations, it is the holy ones that are in Your hand. They place themselves at Your feet, and bear Your word. Moshe commanded us in the Torah, an inheritance for the congregation of Ya'akov. (Devarim 33:2-4)

The Midrash, on this posuk, says that before offering Torah to the Jewish people, G-d went to the nations of the world and offered it to them. Each one promptly refused to accept it, not wanting to accept mitzvos that meant changing their natures and approach to life. The Jewish people, says the Midrash, not only accepted Torah but did so sight unseen, promising to live by mitzvos even before understanding them.

Why does the posuk state that G-d went to them from Har Sinai? If anything, G-d went to them from Heaven; Sinai was just the place where G-d happened to rendezvous with the Jewish people to give them the Torah they had accepted, but is it so part-and-parcel with Torah itself? From the following

it would seem so:

Rav Chisda and Rabbah, the son of Rav Huna, both said: Why is it called "Sinai"? Because it is the mountain from which hatred (Hebrew: sina) came down to the Nations-of-the-World. (Shabbos 89a)

What? Sinai is the source of sina - hatred? You mean when we accepted Torah we also accepted anti-Semitism as well? Was that explained to us in advance? And what does that mean anyhow?

Rashi explains:

Because they didn't receive Torah on it. (Rashi)

Wait a second, wait just one second: I thought we just finished saying that they didn't WANT to receive Torah, that G-d had offered it to them and they had flatly refused it? Did they have second thoughts? Did they feel they had made an error? Now that the Jewish people had accepted it, did they become jealous?

Well, take a look, take a long historical look. It's about religion, always has been and always will be. Eisav became Edom who became Roman Catholicism, the largest religion ever known to mankind, and for a long time one of the most vicious, at least as far as the Jewish people have been concerned. Yishmael became the Arabs who became the Muslims, poised to become the largest religion ever known to mankind, if they aren't already, and bent on picking up where the Catholic church left off in terms of greatly reducing the numbers and the influence of the Jewish people.

So, you see, it is not only about Torah, as history has proven. The Christians have their laws, and the Arabs have plenty of their own. They even pray two times more per day than the average Jewish male does. Rather, it was something about the Sinai experience itself that is responsible for the world breathing down our necks, generation after generation, and Sinai, apparently, is the answer.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"I have separated you from the peoples that you should be Mine." (Vayikra 20:26)

One of the saddest stories in the Talmud has to be the following one:

Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai was once riding on a donkey outside of Jerusalem, and his disciples followed him. He saw a young woman picking barley out of the dung from the cow of an Arab. As soon as she saw him, she covered herself with her hair, stood up and said to him, "Rebi! Help me!"

He asked, "Whose daughter are you?"

She said, "I am the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion."

"My daughter!" he said, "What has become of your father's house?"

"Is there not a saying in Jerusalem, 'The salt of wealth (i.e., that which preserves it) is its diminution (i.e., charitable deeds) and some say through benevolence?' was her answer.

"And what about your father-in-law's house?" he further asked.

"Ah," she answered, "one destroyed the other." Then she asked him, "Rebi, do you remember signing my marriage contract?"

"I remember," he said, turning to his students, "When I signed her marriage contract, I read in it that her father gave her a dowry of one million golden denars in addition to that which she got from her father-in-law!"

Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai then burst into tears, and said, "Happy are you, Israel. As long as you perform the will of G-d, no nation or people can rule over you. But when you fail to perform the will of G-d, you are delivered into the hands of a humiliating nation; and not only the hands of a humiliating nation, but also into the hands of the beasts of the humiliating nation." (Kesuvos 66b)

In other words, Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai was saying, our relationship with the nations of the world is not only a direct result of our relationship with G-d, it is an accurate measure of it.

Why? Because the word, "Because they didn't receive Torah on it" means that, because they did not share in the Sinai Experience, they have never been able to share in the view of G-d, man, the world, and history, that the Jewish people gained when they encountered G-d at Sinai. The Sinai Experience was not only about receiving Torah, it was about a meeting between G-d and man, and about the transformation of one's world outlook that results from such an encounter, which can't be mimicked.

It can't be mimicked, but it can be taught, and that is what the Jewish nation was to have brought to the world, as the "light unto nations" we were slated to become. And if we don't? Then the family of mankind becomes dysfunctional as each member of that family resorts to its most basic nature. Anti-Semitism is not a natural phenomenon, but the reality of mankind that results when the "light" of the Jewish people ceases to illuminate the minds of the nations, as Rashi indicates elsewhere:

"I have separated you from the peoples that you should be Mine." (Vayikra 20:26)

If you hold yourselves apart from them, then you will be Mine, but if not, you will become subject to Nebuchadnetzar and others like him. (Rashi)

Because, as history has proven, only by recalling the Sinai Experience, and by living it and re-living it; only by living apart to we actually unify mankind under the banner of Torah and mitzvos, and logic. Divine logic prevails. If not, mankind simply, tragically, and dangerously becomes the nations of the world, individual nations of the world. It becomes every nation for itself, and instinctive natures prevail.

It's not too late to stop the slide, as advanced as it is, and it is QUITE advanced. The situation today is not only a threat to Jewish safety and security, but a Divine invitation to do something about it. And, we can do something about it: kiruv - outreach. For, as the Talmud has said, "One who comes to

purify himself, Heaven helps him" (Shabbos 104a) - a lot. And, the Midrash has told us, we need only make a pin hole, and then G-d opens it wide enough to drive the wagon through.

Some have already started. It's time for others to join in.

Have a great Shabbos,

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Text

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