

GOOD AND ETERNAL COMPANY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The messengers returned to Ya'akov and told him, "We went to your brother Eisav; he himself is coming towards you with 400 men." (Bereishis 32:7)

This week's Haftarah is from the prophet Ovadiah, who happened to have been a convert from the people of Edom, and who later became a high-ranking official in the court of King Achab and his wife, Izevel. When the latter two decided to murder all the prophets of God, Ovadiah hid 150 of them, at great personal risk, allowing them to survive and thereby meriting this prophecy which has only one chapter, and 21 verses.

However, what a prophecy it was, for in it are the famous words regarding his original people, and the new people of which he became an honored member:

The house of Ya'akov will be fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav for straw; and they will ignite them and devour them. There will be no survivor to the house of Eisav, for God has spoken. (Ovadiah 1:18)

Ostensibly, the War of Gog and Magog is to help fulfill the last verse of the above statement. However, it is hard to imagine a world devoid of any descendants of Eisav whatsoever, when so many exist at this time, and not all of them are enemies of the Jewish people. Indeed, the Talmud recounts a conversation between Rebi Yehudah HaNassi and the Roman leader, Antoninus:

Every time he used to attend on Rebi and wait on him with food or drink. When Rebi wanted to get on his bed Antoninus crouched in front of it saying, "Get on to your bed by stepping on me."

Rebi, however, said, "It is not the proper thing to treat a king so lightly."

However, Antoninus told him, "Would that I served as a mattress for you in the World-to-Come!"

Once he asked him, "Will I enter the World-to-Come?"

"Yes!" Rebi answered him.

"But," said Antoninus, "is it not written, 'There will be no survivor to the house of Eisav' (Ovadiah 1:18)?"

"That," he replied, "applies only to those whose evil deeds are like those of Eisav. We have learnt likewise: 'There will be no survivor to the house of Eisav,' might have been taken to apply to all,

therefore it distinctly says, 'to the house of Eisav,' so as to make it apply only to those who act as Eisav did.

"But," said Antonius, "is it not also written: 'There is Edom, her kings, and all her princes' (Bereishis 33:29)?"

"There, too," Rebi explained, "[it says:] 'her kings', but it does not say all her kings; 'all her princes', but not all her officers!" (Avodah Zarah 10b)

Hence, only those of Eisav's descendants who persist in his evil ways towards God and Ya'akov will become extinct by the end of history. Righteous gentiles, of course, of all backgrounds will continue to survive into Yemos HaMoshiach, and will also be able to enjoy the utopian existence that will be all-pervasive at that time. As to how many that will amount to, that is known only to God, but for us, it remains to be seen.

Jews have to worry as well. Ya'akov was, is, the twin brother of Eisav, and can behave just like him, if not worse, at times. I ran into one such Ya'akov last week, who considers it hate-mongering to inspire Jews to yearn for redemption, to plan for aliyah, and to refuse to surrender any more parts of Eretz Yisroel. He considers it right-wing extremism to believe in the Jewish right to every square inch of our God-given land, and to not trust the Arabs when they say they really want peace.

He has friends in high places, too. There are some very famous and quite wealthy Jews conspiring against the Jewish State, giving the Obama Administration the confidence that they can push the Israeli government around. They are quite Left in their thinking, and care little about Jewish destiny as long as the world continues to find the Jewish State an international nuisance. They work with Eisav seamlessly, and if they do not do teshuvah quickly, which more than likely they will not, they too will suffer Edom's fate.

There is a concept that we apply to Jewish history, that "the actions of the Fathers are a sign for the children," which basically means that how the Avos acted not only teaches us how we should behave, but that we will tend to experience what they did as well. We may not be commanded to bind our sons and offer them on an altar as Avraham once was (though, many fathers today might actually volunteer to do so), but some aspect of the Akeidah, or anything else our Forefathers endured will be part of our lives on some level.

I have never actually seen this idea written regarding the non-Jewish world as well, but historically-speaking, there seems to be some level of connection between the events of the peoples of the world and their historical ancestors. As a result, what happened to their ancestors has meaning in terms of what has happened to them in the past, and what may happen to them in the future.

Regarding Eisav, the father of Edom, there is a Midrash that tells of how his infamous life came to an ignoble end. After Yitzchak died, Ya'akov made a deal with Eisav, buying his portion in the cave of Machpelah in exchange for the wealth left to him by his father. The sale was ratified by a document

which Ya'akov had left in an earthen vessel to preserve it from decaying.

However, when it came time to bury Ya'akov Avinu, Eisav showed up and tried to prevent the burial of Ya'akov, saying that there was only room for four pairs, and that Ya'akov had used his portion when he buried Leah there. This forced Naphtali to race back to Egypt to get the deed, while the body of Ya'akov Avinu remained outside the cave, and the burial party waited for the return of the proof of their complete ownership of the cave.

According to the Midrash, Chushim Ben Dan, who was deaf, could only see arguing going on, being unable to hear what was being said, and that his holy grandfather was being disgraced by Eisav's violent obstinance. It was more than he could take, so rather than wait for Naphtali to return from Egypt, he took a stick and knocked Eisav's head off, ending the stand-off for good. Lucky Eisav, though, because his head rolled into the cave, while his body was returned for burial in his own territory of Mt. Seir.

There is obviously a lot of significance to this story, and it also must have historical ramifications and be a message to Eisav's descendants, and us as well. If only Eisav from the neck up merited to be buried with the Forefathers, then apparently, Eisav from the neck up—those who live intelligently with respect to God and His plan for Creation—will merit to be saved with their descendants.

For example, there is this recent speech by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, excerpted below, who once again has gone out on a political limb on behalf of the Jewish people, a rare act today indeed.

"History teaches us that anti-Semitism is a tenacious and particularly dangerous form of hatred. And recent events are demonstrating that this hatred is now in resurgence throughout the world. That is why the work of the Inter-parliamentary Coalition for Combating Antisemitism has never been so important or timely as it is now ... Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, two weeks ago I visited Ukraine for the first time. In Kiev I laid a wreath at Babi Yar, the site of one of the numerous atrocities of the Holocaust. I was left there with much the same impression as I had in Auschwitz in 2008—that such horrors defy all comprehension. At the killing grounds of Babi Yar, I knew I was standing in a place where evil—evil at its most cruel, obscene, and grotesque—had been unleashed. But while evil of this magnitude may be unfathomable, it is nonetheless a fact. It is a fact of history. And it is a fact of our nature—that humans can choose to be inhuman. This is the paradox of freedom. That awesome power, that grave responsibility—to choose between good and evil. Let us not forget that even in the darkest hours of the Holocaust, men were free to choose good. And some did. That is the eternal witness of the Righteous Among the Nations. And let us not forget that even now, there are those who would choose evil and would launch another Holocaust, if left unchecked. That is the challenge before us today. The horror of the Holocaust is unique, but it is just one chapter in the long and unbroken history of anti-Semitism. Yet, in contemporary debates that influence

the fate of the Jewish homeland, unfortunately, there are those who reject the language of good and evil. They say that the situation is not black and white, that we mustn't choose sides. In response to this resurgence of moral ambivalence on these issues, we must speak clearly. Remembering the Holocaust is not merely an act of historical recognition. It must also be an understanding and an undertaking. An understanding that the same threats exist today. And an undertaking of a solemn responsibility to fight those threats. Jews today in many parts of the world and many different settings are increasingly subjected to vandalism, threats, slurs, and just plain, old-fashioned lies. Let me draw your attention to some particularly disturbing trends. Anti-Semitism has gained a place at our universities, where at times it is not the mob who are removed, but the Jewish students under attack. And, under the shadow of a hateful ideology with global ambitions, one which targets the Jewish homeland as a scapegoat, Jews are savagely attacked around the world, such as, most appallingly, in Mumbai in 2008. One ruthless champion of that ideology brazenly threatens to 'wipe Israel off the map,' and time and again flouts the obligations that his country has taken under international treaties. I could go on, but I know that you will agree on one point: that this is all too familiar ... But of course we must also combat anti-Semitism beyond our borders, an evolving, global phenomenon. And we must recognize, that while its substance is as crude as ever, its method is now more sophisticated. Harnessing disparate anti-Semitic, anti-American and anti-Western ideologies, it targets the Jewish people by targeting the Jewish homeland, Israel, as the source of injustice and conflict in the world, and uses, perversely, the language of human rights to do so. We must be relentless in exposing this new anti-Semitism for what it is. Of course, like any country, Israel may be subjected to fair criticism. And like any free country, Israel subjects itself to such criticism—healthy, necessary, democratic debate. But when Israel, the only country in the world whose very existence is under attack—is consistently and conspicuously singled out for condemnation, I believe we are morally obligated to take a stand. Demonization, double standards, delegitimization, the three D's, it is the responsibility of us all to stand up to them. And I know, by the way, because I have the bruises to show for it, that whether it is at the United Nations, or any other international forum, the easy thing to do is simply to just get along and go along with this anti-Israeli rhetoric, to pretend it is just being even-handed, and to excuse oneself with the label of 'honest broker.' There are, after all, a lot more votes, a lot more, in being anti-Israeli than in taking a stand. But, as long as I am Prime Minister, whether it is at the UN or the Francophonie or anywhere else, Canada will take that stand, whatever the cost. And friends, I say this not just because it is the right thing to do, but because history shows us, and the ideology of the anti-Israeli mob tells us all too well if we listen to it, that those who threaten the existence of the Jewish people are a threat to all of us ... As the specter of anti-Semitism spreads, our responsibility becomes increasingly clear. We are citizens of free countries. We have the right, and therefore the obligation, to speak out and to act. We are free citizens, but also the elected representatives of free peoples. We have a solemn duty to defend the vulnerable, to challenge the aggressor, to protect and promote human rights,

human dignity, at home and abroad. None of us really knows whether we would choose to do good, in the extreme circumstances of the Righteous. But we do know there are those today who would choose to do evil, if they are so permitted. Thus, we must use our freedom now, and confront them and their anti-Semitism at every turn ... As I said on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, Israel appeared as a light, in a world emerging from deep darkness. Against all odds, that light has not been extinguished. It burns bright, upheld by the universal principles of all civilized nations—freedom, democracy and justice ..."

Perhaps if Antoninus were alive today, he would befriend Prime Minister Harper. For, in a world that chooses to live more like the body of Eisav, ignoring intellectual truths in favor of emotional conveniences, there are few with whom the more intellectual descendants of Eisav can converse. Theirs may be a lonelier existence now, but when the dust of history finally comes to settle, they will remain, and find themselves in very good, and eternal company.

Text

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