

SUFFERING FROM SUCCESS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov all suffered from success-induced jealous reactions from the local populations where they lived. Avraham is recognized as the prince of God in our midst and yet is begrudged a grave plot to bury Sarah. Yitzchak is sent away from the kingdom of Avimelech because you have grown too great from us. And in this weeks parsha, Yaakov is told by Lavan that everything that Yaakov owns is really the property of Lavan. The blessings of God and the promise that He made to protect the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel save them from their neighbors, relatives and enemies. However, this very success and achievements of this small family, as per Gods promise and against all odds and opposition, raises the hatred and jealousy of their neighbors. No matter that the neighbors themselves, such as Avimelech and Lavan benefit mightily from the achievements of Yitzchak and Yaakov. The rabbis of the Talmud taught us that hatred destroys rational thought and behavior. So, instead of gratitude and friendship, the accomplishments of the patriarchs and matriarchs only bring forth greed, jealousy, persecution and always the threat of violence hovers in the background. All efforts to maintain a low profile and to mollify Lavan result only in increased bigotry and hatred. It is not for naught that the Pesach hagada makes Lavan a greater enemy to the survival of the Jewish people than even the Pharaoh of Egypt. But almost all of the enemies of the Jews over the centuries suffer from the same basic moral faults regarding the Jews: ingratitude, jealousy and greed. These are all revealed to us in this weeks parsha.

Someone mentioned to me that perhaps if we maintained a lower profile in the world, didnt receive so many Nobel prize awards, and were less influential in the fields of finance and the media, anti-Semitism would decrease. What if is a difficult field of thought to pursue intelligently. There is no question that the world and all humankind would be by far the poorer if the Jews purposely withheld their energy, creativity and intelligence from contributing to human civilization. And there certainly is no guarantee that the world would like us any more than it does now if we were less successful and prominent. The mere fact that God blessed the patriarchs with the blessings of success and influence indicates that this is His desire for us. The Torah specifically states that all of the nations and families of the earth will benefit and be blessed through us. So in our case less would not necessarily be more. Yet we were enjoined from flouting our success in the faces of those less fortunate than us. Modesty in behavior and deportment is an important partner to success. This is also a lesson that our father Yaakov intended to teach us. We are not allowed to rein in our talents and achievements. But we are certainly bidden to rein in our egos and bluster. That is also an important Jewish trait that should be a foundation in our lives.

Shabat shalom.

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