

THE INEVITABLE STRUGGLE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The frightening thing about the struggle between Eisav and Yaakov is its apparently doomed inevitability. While yet in the womb of their mother Rivkah, they already find themselves opposed to one another. They are not only two different personalities, physically, emotionally and intellectually, but they represent two diametrically opposed worldviews. The only question that remains is therefore one of accommodating one another.

If the Lord created them so differently, their freedom of choice in life is centered on how they will deal one with another. And in that respect, the question of accommodation - of the relationship between the Jewish people and the broader, more numerous and powerful non-Jewish world - remains alive and relevant until our very day.

Eisav varies and wavers in his attitude towards Yaakov. Hatred, jealousy, scapegoating frustration are all present in certain aspects of his behavior patterns towards Yaakov. And yet there is also a grudging admiration and attempts at reconciliation on the part of Eisav. Yaakov is portrayed as reactive towards Eisav, of a more passive nature, of patiently attempting to wait out the situation and hope that Eisav will calm down and reconcile himself to Yaakov's right of existence - in what Eisav considers to be his exclusive world.

And, therefore, the question arises - in reality the question of all of the ages - is there room in the world, especially our rapidly shrinking world, for Yaakov and Eisav to coexist peacefully. One would hope so, though history belies this optimistic view of the rivalry between the brothers.

The Torah itself is pretty much noncommittal about the causes for the true source of Eisav's hatred of Yaakov. Even though Yaakov's purchase of the birthright and his subsequent preempting of his father's blessings are ostensibly the cause of Eisav's displeasure with Yaakov, these are only superfluities. For the hatred was there from the beginning, from the moment of their conception, even though no incidents between them had as yet occurred.

The Torah just seems to take it for granted that this is the way it is going to be. And this accounts to a great degree for the almost traditional Jewish attitude of fatalism regarding the behavior of the non-Jewish world towards the Jews. Rabi Shimon ben Yochai stated in the Talmud that it is a given rule that Eisav hates Yaakov. However, there are other opinions there in the Talmud that take a different tack and belie this inevitability of hatred and violence.

After the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed, Jews felt that perhaps Eisav had finally reformed

and had seen the evil of the ways of hatred and bigotry. Almost seventy years later we are not so certain about this hopefully sanguine view of Eisav's reconciliation with Yaakov. Though we are certainly less accepting and passive about the situation now than we were a century ago, nevertheless there are relatively few options left to us as how to deal with the matter.

We should minimize whatever frictions possible but realize that we are dealing with a millennia-old problem that cannot be just wished away or papered over. Faith and fortitude in our own self-worth are the strongest weapons in our arsenal to bring Eisav to reconciliation and harmony.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com