

HUMAN EFFORT AND SUPERNATURAL HELP

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha, our father Yaakov, fresh from his successful escape from Lavan, prepares to encounter his brother and sworn enemy, Eisav. He sends malachim to deal with Eisav before he will actually meet with him face to face. The word malachim signifies two different meanings. One is that it means agents, messengers, human beings who were sent on a particular mission to do Yaakov's bidding. The other meaning is that the word malachim signifies angels, supernatural messengers of God who were sent to Yaakov to help him in his fateful encounter with his brother.

Rashi cites both possible interpretations in his commentary. When Rashi does so, he is teaching us that both interpretations are correct at differing levels of understanding the verse involved. The message here is that the encounter with Eisav, in order to be successful from Yaakov's vantage point and situation, has to have both human and supernatural help.

Eisav is a formidable foe, physically, militarily, culturally and intellectually speaking. He cannot be ignored nor wished away. He has accompanied us from the time of Yaakov till this very day. At times he threatens our very existence and at times he appears to have a more benevolent attitude towards us.

Yet at all times he is there, hovering over and around us, and he has never relinquished any of his demands upon us to either convert, assimilate or just plain disappear. While it is Yishmael that currently occupies the bulk of our attention, it would be foolish of us to ignore the continuing presence of Eisav in our world and affairs.

Yaakov's strategy is to employ both possibilities of malachim in his defense. He prepares himself for soothing Eisav by gifts and wealth, pointing out to Eisav that it is beneficial to him to have Yaakov around and being productive. He also strengthens himself spiritually in prayer and in appeal to God to deliver him from Eisav. And finally as a last resort he is prepared to fight Eisav with his own weapons, the sword and war.

Two of these strategies - gifts to Eisav and war against Eisav - require human endeavor, talent and sacrifice. They are the representative of the interpretation of malachim as being human agents and messengers. The third strategy, prayer and reliance upon heavenly intervention to thwart Eisav's evil designs, follows the idea that Yaakov's malachim were heavenly, supernatural creatures.

In the long history of our encounter with Eisav we have always relied upon both interpretations of malachim. Neither interpretation by itself will suffice to defeat Eisav. Without human endeavor and

sacrifice, heavenly aid is often denied or diminished.

According to the labor is the reward. But it is foolish to believe that a small and beleaguered people can by itself weather all storms and defeat Eisav's intentions solely by its own efforts.

Without the Lord in our help, in vain do we attempt to build our national home. Thus the double meaning of malachim in this week's parsha has great relevance to ourselves and our situation.

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