

YAAKOV DID NOT RELY SOLELY ON PRAYER

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah teaches us, according to Rashi and the words of the rabbis, that our father Yaakov prepared for his encounter with Eisav by adopting three possible strategies. They were mollifying Eisav with gifts, praying to God for deliverance and engaging in physical battle against him. The first strategy proved to be successful, though the Torah records for us Yaakov implementing his second strategy as well, with his heartfelt prayer to the Lord that he be spared from the murderous hands of Eisav.

The question arises why Yaakov had to have alternate strategies in the first place. Was it not sufficient to rely on the power of prayer and God's original commitment to him that He would be with him and safeguard him from all harm? In the simplicity of faith, is that not sufficient for Yaakov, the chosen one of our forefathers?

I have often been challenged by problems that arise in life. I always prayed for God's help and succor. Sometimes my prayers were accepted and matters developed as I hoped for. There were other times that this did not occur. But I always had an alternate strategy - a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant, an advisor - that I followed in tandem with my prayers.

Someone once asked me if there was a lack of faith on my part when I insisted that the faculty members of my yeshiva own life insurance policies. Why not rely on prayer and Heaven alone? I replied that I was only following in the methods of my father Yaakov who also adopted alternate strategies and apparently did not rely on prayer alone. My critic thought my answer to be heretical. I thought that he was misrepresenting the Torah value of faith and wise living.

There is a common adage that God helps those that help themselves. To accomplish things in life, both spiritually and materially, effort and planning, devotion and industry must be expended. Once, in my yeshiva days long ago, I had great difficulty in understanding a difficult concept that was raised by one of the commentators to the Talmud. I asked my teacher whether prayer to Heaven would help me understand that concept. He answered that it would help only if one has truly exhausted one's own abilities to understand the matter.

I then realized that prayer was Yaakov's second strategy and that he felt it would help only if at first he employed it together with prayer - first the attempt to soothe Eisav's anger with gifts. Relying on prayer alone without the expenditure of one's own talents and resources is a way of getting away cheaply in the matter.

The famous rebbe of Sanz, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam stated: "First one must be prepared to tear out one's own rib before one can expect Heaven to intervene in one's stead!" Yaakov is prepared to risk all of his hard earned wealth, and in fact his life itself, when forced to deal with Eisav. Because of this, Heaven intervenes and Eisav conciliates with Yaakov. There is a lesson here for all of us.

Shabat shalom,

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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