

YAAKOV VS EISAV THROUGHOUT HISTORY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Many commentators over the ages have seen in the two confrontations between Yaakov and Eisav - first the struggle with Eisav's angel and then the meeting with Eisav in the flesh - the two-front war that Judaism and the Jewish people have been forced to fight over millennia in order to simply survive.

The struggle with Eisav's angel, as described in the parsha, represents a spiritual and intellectual fight, a contest of ideas, beliefs and debate. The meeting with the physical Eisav in turn represents the struggle of the Jewish people to simply stay alive in a bigoted, cruel, and nearly fatal environment.

Yaakov does not escape unscathed from either confrontation. He is crippled physically and somewhat impoverished financially. Eisav's "evil eye" gazes upon his children and Yaakov is relieved to escape alive, even if damaged in body and purse, separating himself from Eisav physically and from his civilization and worldview.

The scenario is pretty much set for the long dance of Jewish history, with the Jews always attempting to survive in a constantly challenging and brutal society governed by Eisav. The rabbis of Midrash discussed the possibilities of coexistence and even cooperation with Eisav.

Though this debate did not result in any permanent or convincing conclusion, the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai that Eisav's hatred of Yaakov is completely irrational and implacable seems to be borne out by history, past and present. The anti-Semitism in today's seemingly enlightened world is so pervasive as to be frightening. And we seem to be powerless to do anything about it.

As is painfully obvious to all, these struggles for continued Jewish existence are ongoing and seemingly unending. All of the foreign ideas and current fads of Western society stand almost unanimously opposed to Torah values and traditional lifestyle. The angel of Eisav changes his program from time to time, but he is always opposed to Torah and moral behavior.

He wavers from totalitarian extreme conservatism to wild liberalism but always is able to wound the Jewish psyche and body no matter what philosophy or culture he now advocates. We limp today from this attack on Jewish values and Torah study and practice.

Jewish parents in America sue school boards for anti-Semitic attitudes, policies and behavior. Yet they would not dream of sending their children to a Jewish school or giving them an intensive

Jewish education. The lawsuit is the indicator of the limp inflicted upon us by Eisav's cultural angel.

All agree that Europe is currently a lost continent as far as Jews are concerned. The question most asked of travel agents by Jews today is "Can I wear a kippah on the street there?" Billions of dollars of Jewish treasure pillaged during World War II and immediately thereafter still lie in the hands of Eisav.

And yet we certainly would be satisfied if the world just let us alone but that seems to be a forlorn hope. So our struggle continues but the Lord's promise to us that we will somehow prevail remains valid and true. And that is our hope for continuing on as loyal and steadfast Jews.

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