

THE ULTIMATE ANTIDOTE FOR EISAV

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 124, The Seven Noachide Laws. Good Shabbos!

'Yosef' is the Antidote for 'Eisav'

The Ramba"n writes in his introduction to Parshas VaYishlach that this parsha is the prime example of a theme that recurs throughout the book of Bereishis: Everything that happened to the Patriarchs foreshadows that which will happen to their children (ma'aseh Avos siman l'banim). In particular, this portion gives us guidance how to deal with Eisav, the classic soneh Yisrael (hater of Israel).

Ramba"n cites a Medrash that before Rabbi Yannai would meet with the Roman authorities, he would read Parshas VaYishlach. This parsha instructs us how to deal with Eisav on two levels-- on a spiritual level and on a physical level.

How do we deal with Eisav on a spiritual level? In last week's parsha, after Yosef was born, Yaakov tells his wife Rachel that this was the opportune moment to return to Eretz Yisrael and face Eisav. Rash"i comments on the implication that until Yosef was born, Yaakov could not face Eisav, but with Yosef's birth, he was able to face Eisav.

He relates this insight to a verse in our Haftorah: "And the House of Yaakov will be a (spark of) fire and the House of Yosef will be a flame and the House of Eisav will be as straw (that will be consumed by this flame)..." [Ovadia 1:18]. Rash"i comments that Yaakov is only a spark, he is unable to deal with Eisav by himself. But when Yosef, the flame, is born then Yaakov can deal with him.

There is a famous Chazal: The descendants of Eisav will only be given over to the descendants of Rachel.

What is it about Yosef that can overcome the peril of Eisav? The Shem MiShmuel answers by pointing out that names in Tanach are meaningful. They are not arbitrary labels. Names define the essence of the person. Eisav, he says, comes from the word 'asui' (fully done). When Eisav was born, he didn't look like an infant; he was like a complete individual.

The spiritual threat that Eisav provides is a threat called 'asui' -- I'm finished. One who feels that he is perfect and has no room to improve -- that is what an Eisav is about. "I am fine. My Midos are fine. My character is fine. There is no room for improvement. I am OK. I am more than OK -- I'm perfect."

This is the spiritual danger that Eisav provides, the complacency that one is totally fine, with no need to improve.

The opposite end of that spectrum is Yosef. He represents the constant need to add on to (mosif) and grow from where one is today.

Any person who thinks he can remain still and stagnant will eventually descend. The antidote to the philosophy of being an 'asui' (complete) is Yosef -- one must always add on. There is no such thing in this world as standing still. One either ascends, or he automatically descends.

I once heard the following example: Life is like trying to go 'up' a 'down' escalator. If one tries to stay the same, he will go down. The only way to go up is to exert oneself. Recognizing the need to put out a maximum effort to get anyplace, is the only way to ascend.

This is the spiritual antidote to the philosophy of Eisav. The descendants of Eisav will only be given over to the descendants of Rachel.

The Galus Mentality: A Tradition That Goes Back to Yaakov

Throughout the generations, Eisav has always provided a physical threat to the existence of Klal Yisroel (The Jews). This is the parsha that tells us how to deal with haters of Israel.

On the verse "Let my Master go before his servant, and I will go at my own pace" [Bereishis 33:14], the Medrash tells us of a dialogue between the two brothers. They were not just talking about the speed at which Yaakov should travel. They were talking philosophy and strategy.

Eisav asks, "Aren't you afraid of the marauders and bandits and pirates -- why do you suggest that you can travel at a leisurely pace? Is this the correct approach -- to go quietly and to turn the other cheek?"

Yaakov answers, "I will go at my own pace. I will not start up with the haters of Israel. I will not flaunt myself in front of the non- Jew and give him a motive to be jealous of me."

Rav Henoch Leibowitz says this Medrash is discussing an old dispute of how to deal with the haters of Israel: Do we fight him, take him 'head on', and make public demonstrations? Or do we go quietly, try diplomacy, even run away sometimes. This is the dispute the Medrash portrays between Eisav and Yaakov.

What Yaakov is telling us is that the way to deal with the Soneh Yisrael is not always with strong-arm

tactics.

Rav Schwab [zt"l] wrote the following in an article:

Others who do not know how to learn Chumash and some who might have forgotten, ridicule us for our so-called 'galus mentality'. But when dealing with the sworn enemies of Jewry there is one approach: Do not provoke them; do not anger them; do not embarrass them. Eisav never forgets and only harm can come from antagonizing him.

If anti-Semites in Austria want to elect one of their ilk, a former Nazi as their president, let them do so! Do not meddle. It is not our concern. If a foreign leader chooses to embrace Arafat or Waldheim, let him do so! He has demonstrated his inner feelings. We cannot afford to forget that whatever statements we make and whatever actions we take can antagonize them and may harm our brethren, the children of Israel.

Quiet diplomacy entails its own Mesiras Nefesh [self sacrifice] -- avoiding the reassurance of headlines. But the purpose of discreet activity is not to show that we also have a voice. Slogans which are currently popular may sound beautiful to the ear and saying them or hearing them can make one's chest swell with pride. But in the final analysis, is this good or no good for Klal Yisrael [the Jews]?

How many times do we ask ourselves, "Why don't the Gedolim [Great Rabbis] do something? Why don't they tell us to demonstrate? Why don't we take them on?"

The answer is because that is not our way. We have a Chumash. We have a Parshas VaYishlach. We have a Yaakov that tells us how to deal with Eisav. Unfortunately others do not have a Mesorah. But this is our way.

The Remaining Camp Shall Escape

There is another teaching in Parshas VaYishlach. The Ramba"n writes on the verse "And the remaining camp will be able to escape" [Bereishis 32:9] that these are prophetic words which enabled Klal Yisrael to survive despite the greatest persecutions. Yaakov testified that Eisav would never be successful in wiping out the entire Jewish people.

The acts of the Patriarchs foreshadow the fate of their offspring. When Yaakov uttered these words, it became part of G-d's plan -- there will always be a remaining camp that will escape destruction. The Ramba"n cites a Medrash: 'If Eisav comes to the camp and smites them' -- this refers to our brethren in the south -- '... and the remaining camp will be spared' -- this refers to our brethren in the exile.

One of the Roshei Yeshivos in Radin went to the Chofetz Chaim in 1933 after the Nazis, yimach

shemam, had taken power. He asked the Chofetz Chaim, "What will be with Klal Yisrael [the Jews]?" (This was at a time when the Nazis were already openly saying what they had in mind for the Jews).

(Parenthetically, I once heard from the Rosh Yeshiva, zt"l, that at this stage in the Chofetz Chaim's life, many of his utterances were said with Ruach HaKodesh - Divine Inspiration.)

The Chofetz Chaim told him, "They may wipe out Jews in Europe but there will always be 'the camp that remains, for escape'. They will never succeed in wiping us all out."

This person, upon hearing that, asked the Chofetz Chaim where the 'remaining camp' (peleita) would be. In 1933, the Chofetz Chaim quoted the verse from this week's Haftarah, "And on the Mountain of Zion there will be escape (peleita) and it will be holy and the House of Yaakov will inherit their inheritance" [Ovadia 1:17].

This is what the Ramba"n is talking about. This parsha is the parsha that establishes for us hope and assurance. It is also the parsha that puts upon us responsibilities that we may not always like. We may not always want to take the passive mode and to be submissive. It is not easy to be told "You have a Galus Mentality." But this is what the Torah established.

Just like this parsha is our hope, it is our guidance. This is how we have to conduct ourselves, as Rav Schwab wrote. We have to go, "Chumash in hand." Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes we suffer ridicule. But this is how we have to conduct ourselves. This is what the Grandfather Yisroel (Yaakov) taught us. It is with his tradition that we will go, and with no one else!

Personalities & Sources:

Ramba"n -- Rav Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270); Gerona, Spain; Jerusalem.

Rash"i -- Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105); Worms, Troyes, France.

Shem MiShmuel -- Rav Shmuel of Sochachov (1856-1920); son of Avnei Nezer [Rav Avrohom of Sochachov]; Chassidic discourses; Poland.

Rav Henoah Leibowitz -- Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim, Forest Hills, NY.

Rav Shimon Schwab -- (1908-1995) for many years a Rav in Baltimore at the Shearith Israel Congregation; later became the Rav of Khal Adath Yeshurun in Washington Heights, New York.

Chofetz Chaim -- (1838-1933) Rav Yisrael Meir HaKohen of Radin; author of basic works in Jewish law, thought, and ethics.

Glossary

Galus -- Exile (Galus mentality is docile and submissive)

Mesiras Nefesh -- self sacrifice

Gedolim -- Great (Rabbinic) Leaders
Ruach HaKodesh -- Holy Spirit (Divine Inspiration)
yemach shemam -- their name should be blotted out
Chumash -- Pentateuch
Klal Yisrael -- Nation of Israel

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand: In Print

and is available through Project Genesis On-Line Bookstore: <http://books.torah.org/>
