

DON'T BOTHER ASKING FOR ITS NAME

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayishlach

Don't Bother Asking For Its Name

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 747 - Is Self-Defense a Defense? Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha contains Yaakov's battle with the "Angel of Eisav". Throughout the ages, Chumash commentaries have seen this battle between Yaakov and Eisav as an epic battle, the prototype of the ongoing battle between the Jewish nation and the nations of the world that has gone on through the millennium.

The commentaries have drawn differing symbolisms from this battle. One of those symbolisms is that our Sages tell us "It is a well known reality that Eisav hates Yaakov." This phenomenon of "Sinat haYehudim" that we all know by its English name of "anti-Semitism" is part of the battle between Yaakov and Eisav. The fact is that Eisav and his descendants -- at least some of them -- hate us. Chazal tell us that HaShem gave the Torah on a mountain called Sinai because from there 'Sinah' [hatred] descended to the world. This has been a constant theme throughout the millennia.

Perhaps then, at least homiletically, we can understand the dialogue between Yaakov and the Angel of Eisav. Yaakov asked the Angel of Eisav what his name was. The Angel responded, "Why do you ask my name?" Rashi explains the comment to mean, "I have no exact name. My name changes from circumstance to circumstance depending on my mission."

I once heard from Rav Chaim Dov Keller that Yaakov asked the Angel to define himself (by specifying his name). If we can superimpose this interpretation on our understanding of this battle -- namely the ongoing battle of the anti-Semites against the Jewish people -- then Yaakov is asking the Angel of Eisav, "Define for me the essence of anti-Semitism. What is the essence of your hatred towards the Jewish people?" In that vein, the response of the Angel is that there is no one definition of anti-Semitism. "Anti-Semitism takes on different guises, different forms, and different ways. Therefore, it is futile to tell you exactly what anti-Semitism is, because it always changes."

I was inspired to speak about this because of an article that appeared on the front page of a recent

issue of the New York Times (2003). The article begins "Attacks by Arabs on Jews in France revive old fears." The article continues...

The boys hide their skullcaps under baseball caps. The girls stick their Star of David necklaces under their sweaters. Their school, which is located in the middle class suburb east of Paris, has been scorched by fire. One early Saturday morning in November, unidentified vandals set fire to the new two story wing of the Mercaz HaTorah school for Orthodox Jews that was set to open an elementary school in January. The fire prompted Jaques Chirac, the President of France, to call an emergency cabinet meeting and declare that 'an attack on a Jew is an attack against France'. It also intensified an agonizing debate over the definition and the extent of anti-Semitism today in France and indeed over all of Europe, and forced the French government to redouble its efforts to combat it.

This is not a revival of the old anti-Jewish hatred of the right that infused Europe before the Vatican reconciled with the Jews in the 1960s, but a playing out of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the streets and the salons of France. France is home to around 600,000 Jews the world's largest Jewish population except for that of Israel and the United States, but also has as many as 10 times that number of Muslims of Arab origin the largest such population in Europe, many of them young, poor and unemployed.

Complicating matters, public opinion throughout Europe is broadly critical of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. A recent public opinion poll of European Union countries found that most citizens believe that the greatest threat to world peace is Israel, followed by Iran, North Korea, and the United States.

For allegedly rational people to think that the greatest threat to world peace is the State of Israel -- ahead of North Korea and Iran -- is truly irrational! There are those who want to say that this has nothing to do with anti-Semitism, it is strictly a function of the Israeli - Palestinian situation. "I love you as a Jew, I just hate your politics."

Listen to the words of the education minister of France: "France is facing a new form of anti-Semitism. It was no longer an anti-Semitism of the extreme right but one of Islamic origin." By contrast, the interior minister recently said in a television debate, "All those who explain the resurgence of anti-Semitism by the conflict in the Middle East are saying something that is false. Anti-Semitism existed before the existence of the State of Israel."

He is saying that anti-Semitism has nothing to do with Eretz Yisrael, it has nothing to do with what they told Disraeli ("It's your nose I don't like.") Rather, it is about Eisav's eternal hatred of Yaakov.

This is the dialog between Yaakov and Eisav's angel. "Tell me your name. What is it? How is anti-Semitism going to manifest itself in future generations?" The Angel pushes off the question and tells Yaakov that it does not pay to ask for his "name" (i.e. -- the essence of non-Jewish hatred of Jews). Anti-Semitism will take differing forms throughout the millennia. One time it will be because we are not an Aryan nation; once will be race based. Now it is because of Zionism. It really has nothing to do

with any of this. It is because Eisav hates Yaakov.

Mortimer Zuckerman, who is the publisher of U.S. News and World Report, quoted someone who said a profound truth. Over the millennia, the world has known different "isms". Eventually all "isms" fall by the wayside. Hellenism, Socialism, Communism, and Humanism, have all had their day in the sun. Each one plays on the world stage and then falls by the wayside. There is only one "ism" that was, is, and will always be. That is anti-Semitism.

"The 'man' struggled with him until day break" -- until the "morning comes" [Bereishis 32:25]. This epic battle will persist until the End of Days.

Rav Yonasan Eibshitz's Acerbic Comment

I will end with a very acerbic comment from Rav Yonasan Eibshitz. We learn at the end of the parsha that Shchem, son of Chamor, violated Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov. Shchem fell in love with Dinah and did not want to give her up. Shchem came to Yaakov and said let us make a deal -- you will marry us and we will marry you, we will become one nation -- just let me keep Dinah. The sons of Yaakov came up with a ruse. They agreed to the deal but they stipulated that the nation of Shchem had to circumcise themselves first. Three days after the milah, the men were all bed-ridden. Shimon and Levi went and wiped out the city.

Rav Yonasan Eibshitz asks -- why did they need to make this a Jewish thing? Why did they need to tell them "circumcise yourselves"? Why couldn't they have used some other kind of ruse? Why didn't they make the condition that the people must fast for 3 days to purge themselves of the impurities they may have consumed -- or something of that nature -- that would have served the same purpose of weakening the population?

Rav Yonasan Eibshitz answers that Shimon and Levy had a great idea. They anticipated Yaakov's concern (that the surrounding nations would retaliate against them) and precisely chose a way to destroy the nation of Shchem without affecting world opinion. They planned everything specifically so that the nations of the world would not "get up in the UN to condemn them". How did they do this? They first made Shchem into Jews. Once the people of Shchem were Jews, no one would get upset if they were massacred.

This, as we say in Yiddish, is a "bitere gelechter" [a bitter joke]. It is a pathetic truth, but is true nevertheless. Jews can be slaughtered without anyone objecting in the slightest. It is a well-known part of history and international relations: "Eisav hates Yaakov." This phenomenon has been around from the time of the epic battle described in this week's parsha and it will end only "with the coming of day break" -- when the Exile comes to an end and all the nations will recognize the Almighty and the rightful place of the Jewish nation in His plan for the world.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayishlach are provided below:

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