

Parashat Vayishlach 5773, 2012:

How to Encounter Eisav

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Jacob sent angels ahead of him to his brother Esau, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom. And he commanded them, saying, “So shall you say to my master to Esau, ‘Thus said your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Laban, and I have tarried until now. And I have acquired oxen and donkeys, flocks, man-servants, and maidservants, and I have sent to tell [this] to my master, to find favor in your eyes.’” The angels returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother, to Esau, and he is also coming toward you, and four hundred men are with him.” (*Sefer Bereishit 32:4-7*, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These four *pasukim* (verses) begin our *parasha*. They are, perhaps, the best example of the old British idiom, “out of the frying pan into the fire,” that can be found in the annals of World History. Yaakov had just spent 20 long years with his reprehensible and duplicitous father-in-law, Lavan. The Haggadah of Passover clearly tells us that Lavan was far more than a liar and a cheat. Instead, he sought nothing less than the destruction of our nascent nation:

Go and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to our father Yaakov. In truth, Pharaoh issued a decree [of death] solely against the males. Lavan, however, desired to totally destroy everything [i.e. Yaakov’s entire family]. As it is stated: “The Aramean desired to destroy my father...”(Translation my own)

Thus, when Lavan declared in *Sefer Bereishit* 31:43: “The daughters are my daughters, and the sons are my sons, and the animals are my animals, and all that you see is mine...” he was giving far more than a review of family relationships and livestock ownership. Instead, he was denying the independent spiritual and physical existence of *B’nai Yaakov* (the children of Yaakov).

Now, in our *parasha*, Yaakov is about to meet his great and formidable nemesis – his biological brother, Eisav. What thoughts and feelings must have been racing through his mind on the cusp of this encounter? Beyond a reasonable doubt, Yaakov knew and keenly felt the famous words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: “It is a well-known fact that Esau hated Jacob...” (*Sifrei Bamidbar* 69) Therefore, the Torah tells us in no uncertain terms: “Jacob became very frightened and was distressed.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:8) Indeed, Rashi (1040-1105) notes that Yaakov’s fear was clear and direct: “He [Yaakov] was frightened lest he be killed [*Bereishit Rabbah* 75:2, *Midrash Tanchuma*, Vayishlach 4]...” Thus, in the following verse, Yaakov split his family into two camps, with the hope that at least one would survive. Once again, Rashi gives us “the story behind the story”:

the remaining camp will escape: Against his [Eisav] will, for I will wage war with him. He (Jacob) prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for war, and for prayer. For a gift, [as Scripture says] (verse 22): “So the gift passed on before him.” For prayer, [as Scripture says] (verse 10): “G-d of my father Abraham...” For war, [as Scripture says]: “the remaining camp will escape.” - [from *Midrash Tanchuma* Buber, Vayishlach 6]

Rashi’s famous, midrashically-based comment contains the essence of Yaakov’s three-part strategy for confronting Eisav: “*doron, milchamah, and tefilah*” (“gift, war, and prayer”). At first, he tried to propitiate Eisav through gifts of tribute and largesse. At the same time, Yaakov called upon Hashem in heartfelt and soul-wrenching prayer. Moreover, he prepared himself to physically wage war against Eisav in case these first two modalities were ineffective.

Our Sages have noted that the Yaakov-Eisav encounter has been a theme of each and every *Galut* (Diaspora) encounter between the Jewish people and the non-Jewish world. This has particularly been the case whenever “Eisav” has stood as a physical, spiritual,

and existential threat to our people. As our Sages so aptly stated: “*Maaseh Avot siman l’banim*” – the actions of the forefathers foreshadow those of future generations. We survive until this day solely because we have learned from Yaakov how to confront and overpower the countless “Eisavs” that have attempted to destroy us. As my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), stated so beautifully:

[In the case of Yaakov and Eisav,] The impossible and absurd had triumphed over the possible and logical: heroism, not logic, won the day. Is this merely the story of one individual’s experience? Is it not in fact the story of *Knesset Israel* [the Congregation of Israel], an entity which is engaged in an “absurd” struggle for survival thousands of years? (“Catharsis,” *Tradition*, Volume 17, Spring 1978, page 41)

Rabbi Isaiah ben Avraham Ha-Levi Horowitz *zatzal* (1565-1630), known as the *Shlah Hakodesh* after the name of one of his major works, has a fascinating and novel approach regarding the application of Yaakov’s tripartite strategy when dealing with our modern “Eisavs.” He notes that *doron*, *milchamah*, and *tefilah* are essential elements in our relationship to Hashem – particularly when we call upon Him to save us from “Eisav’s” swift sword. He reinterprets *doron* (gift) as *tzedaka* (charity), and *milchamah* (war) as doing *teshuvah* (returning to the proper path of observing the Torah), whereas *tefilah* (prayer) maintains its normative meaning:

Just like he [Yaakov] occupied himself with gifts, prayer, and war, so, too, should we comport ourselves with the sons of Eisav...In addition, in order to ensure a powerful foundation and the continued existence of Diaspora Jewry, we need to prepare ourselves via gifts, prayer, and war in the service of the Creator – May He be Blessed – so that He will save us. [In our time,] these three things represent *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedaka*. *Doron* refers to *tzedaka*, *tefilah* is understood in the standard manner, and *milchamah* is *teshuvah*...

In addition, the *Shlah Hakodesh* views *tzedaka*, *tefilah*, and *teshuvah* as being the *derech hachaim* (the most efficacious method) of dealing with the “sons of Eisav” in the pre-

Messianic era, so that our meritorious actions may bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one true righteous Messiah):

These approaches will remain in place until the verse “Now, let my master go ahead before his servant, and I will move [at] my own slow pace, according to the pace of the work that is before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my master, to Seir.” [33:14] This will take place in the time of the Messiah as it says: “And saviors shall ascend Mt. Zion to judge the mountain of Esau, and the L-rd shall have the kingdom.” [Sefer Ovadiah 1:21] The coming of the Messiah is the direct result of the merits that will accrue on behalf of these three actions [i.e. *tzedaka*, *tefilah*, and *teshuvah*]

With G-d’s help, may we have the courage, wisdom, and understanding to wrestle with the “Eisavs” of our time by employing the time-tested approaches of *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedaka*. May we ever have the spiritual strength and power to employ this *derech hachaim* in order to successfully navigate the many challenges of *Galut*, so that we may witness the arrival of the *Mashiach* soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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