

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT VAYISHLACH - Antisemitism, Jewish Destiny & The Long View of History

The Irrationality of Antisemitism

The Ramban (d.1270), in his introduction to *Parshat Vayishlach*, writes that the message of this parshah is twofold. On the one hand, we learn how Hashem stood by his servant, Yaakov, and saved him from the intimidation of his brother Eisav. On the other hand, we learn how Yaakov prepared himself for their encounter. He did not rely on his own righteousness but worked hard to achieve salvation through his own efforts. When the Jewish people face antagonism from the nations of the world, they should imitate Yaakov's reactions: prayer, appeasement and preparation for war.

According to the Ramban, the pivotal moment of Yaakov's encounter with Eisav should not be understood solely in its own context. It is played out through successive generations whenever we interact with those who seek to harm us.

In a similar vein, Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993) learns a powerful message from the cryptic account of Yaakov's nighttime battle immediately preceding his meeting with Eisav. The *parshah* describes how Yaakov was left alone in the middle of the night on the riverbank, where he meets a man who attacks him. They spend the entire night wrestling with all their might, and when day breaks, Yaakov asks his assailant for his name. The man responds by blessing Yaakov but insists that he cannot reveal his identity.

The refusal of the anonymous attacker to identify himself represents the most insidious characteristic of antisemitism: the Jew never knows who will attack him. Over the course of our history, we have

been attacked by the rich, the poor, the capitalists, the socialists and many other groups of people with seemingly very little in common.

A second characteristic of this confrontation was that upon defeat, the anonymous antagonist did not promise Yaakov peace. Instead, his silence gave the impression that they would meet again at a future date. These two characteristics, anonymity and permanence, constitute the fundamental nature of the scourge of antisemitism. According to Rav Soloveitchik, *Parshat Vayishlach* teaches that there is no way of rationalising hatred of the Jewish people. No matter who stands against us, the mission is always the same: to oppose who the Jewish people are and what we stand for.

The Prayer & The Seashore

Studying Yaakov's prayer (32:10-13), in which he beseeches Hashem to save him from Eisav, we sense both his distress at the prospect of catastrophe and also his confidence in Hashem's promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. The question that arises is why Yaakov did not compare the Jewish people to the stars in the sky, which would seem to be a superlative metaphor? The Kli Yakar (d.1619) explains that although throughout our long history we have endured times where we have been like the stars in the sky or, in dramatic contrast, like the earth underfoot, the most apt metaphor historically has been a comparison to the sand by the seashore. The grains of sand are too numerous to be counted, but the waves still ceaselessly attempt to swamp them. So too, the Jewish people are



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

under constant threat from our enemies who seek to oppose us. But just as the sand forms a barrier that repels the waves, so our adversaries are unable to destroy us. In the face of the impending battle, Yaakov entreats Hashem not to forget His promise that like the sand by the shore, we will never be swept away.

Hanna Szenes's beautiful poem, *Eli Eli* (1942), takes on a new meaning in light of this idea: "*My God, my God/may it never end — /the sand and the sea,/the rustle of the water,/the lightning of the sky,/the prayer of man.*" The Jewish people, despite all our adversaries, are eternal. This is our constant prayer.

Yaakov's Silence

A striking interpretation by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky (d.1986) later in the parshah links closely to these ideas. We are told how Dinah is captured by the Hittite prince, Shechem, who violates her. When Yaakov hears about this, he remains silent and waits for his sons to return home. When they do return, they are incensed, and they devise a plan to persuade the entire city to weaken themselves through circumcision. While the Hittites are recovering, Shimon and Levi massacre them and rescue their sister. At this point, Yaakov speaks out and reprimands them severely for their actions, but when they reply, 'Should our sister be made a harlot?' Yaakov is again silent. What is going on here? Does Yaakov approve of what they did or is he opposed?

It is remarkable to note that, when Yaakov dispenses his blessings to his sons before his death, he punishes Shimon and Levi

by not giving them a unified portion in *Eretz Yisrael* (49:7). On the other hand, Rashi teaches that this dispersion gave them the responsibility of becoming teachers of Torah to the rest of the nation. Were Shimon and Levi spurned for what they did or were they rewarded for their actions? According to Rabbi Kamenetzky, Yaakov saw that these two brothers felt the pain of their sister at their very core, and he appreciated that the passion they had demonstrated made them fitting for the lofty role of Jewish education – something which requires immense commitment and passion to carry out properly. But he disapproved of their methods. While he was in favour of the operation to rescue her, he maintained that it should have been of a more limited scope.

Perhaps Yaakov at this moment recalled his earlier struggle with the angel. His response was pragmatic in nature, recognising that there are reasons beyond our understanding as to why the nations oppose us. He further knew that the episodes that had befallen him were harbingers of the spectre of antisemitism that would threaten Jews in future generations. Thus, his message to his sons was that although they were correct to be incensed, the massacre of an entire town was the wrong response. Instead, he told them to defend themselves wherever necessary, but instead of being consumed by pain and anger, to channel their energy into educating their children in staying true to their eternal values.

Next week: Parshat Vayeishev -
Fractured Perspectives, Fractured
Visions