

DECEMBER 8, 2008

Parashat Vayishlach

Struggling with Blessings

Vay'avek ish imo – “And a man (angel) wrestled with him” (Genesis 32:25)

Jacob found himself alone at night forced to wage battle with an angel – one which the Midrash interprets as the spiritual protector of his brother Esau. Maimonides, in his Guide to the Perplexed, suggests that because angels are immaterial that the entire story was a prophetic vision of Jacob's and not reflective of actual events in the real world. Yet, if Jacob's wrestling was a prophetic vision then what was the prophecy? The answer may be found in Jacob's frequent desire for reassurances from God. Our tradition teaches that as Jacob set off on his journey from Canaan he dreamt of ladders leading up to God who was reassuring Jacob that he would always enjoy divine protection. However, Jacob's path was not easy and was marred with difficulties. Thus, this prophetic episode of Jacob wrestling with the angel reminds Jacob that despite periods of adversity, he will always be blessed.

This concept of struggling with enormous events while not allowing yourself to forget your blessings is not limited to Jacob. In fact, the Jewish people and the State of Israel recently found themselves facing a similar struggle: coping with the tragic and senseless murders that took place in Mumbai, India. Yet, just as Jacob's struggle ended with a blessing, and the changing of his name to Israel, so too must we search for the blessing in this recent tragedy.

When Islamic extremists attacked ten separate targets in Mumbai, killing more than 180 people including six people at the local Chabad House, Israel immediately denounced the futile violence. At the state funeral for the Israeli victims of the attack, Israeli President Shimon Peres said, “We, the Jewish people, have known sadness and martyrdom. We never lost our humanity and we never supported murder. Terror is not just a problem for the Jewish people or for the State of Israel; it is a problem and a danger for the entire world. From this point must emanate a clear cry to stop the insanity, to stop the terror and to provide a clear answer to Moishe (the son of the murdered Chabad Rabbi and his wife). The answer to Moishe needs to be given by the whole world, because if not, we will not be able to live in a world of peace and security.”

In the wake of this heinous crime we must remind the international community that terrorism is not just an act against Jews or Israelis, but an indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. As this terrible attack reminds us, like Jacob's vision, Jewish survival demands a struggle which can sometimes leave us scarred. While it's difficult at times to see any positive outcome, that struggle did transform Jacob into Israel, and hopefully a blessing will emerge in Mumbai as the world takes note that terrorism is not just a Jewish or Israeli problem, but a global challenge to freedom. ■

It's the Economy...

Miknehem v'kinyanam...halo hem lanu – “Shall not their cattle and substance...be ours?” (Genesis 34:23)

Jacob's sons, before they could allow Shechem to marry Dinah, demanded that that he and his entire city submit themselves to circumcision. While Hamor and Shechem were willing to be circumcised in order to win Dinah's marriage, Hamor needed to find a way to convince the people of his city to undergo the procedure as well. Ultimately he was able to persuade them by using economic incentives. Hamor explained the advantages of marrying into the

family of Jacob, “Shall not their cattle and their substance and all their beasts be ours? Only let us consent unto them, and they will dwell with us.” (34:23) The Midrash (Lekach Tov) derives from this verse that the people of Shechem underwent circumcision only for the prospect of monetary gain.

Clearly money speaks to Shechem and Hamor, and sometimes it talks so loudly that an entire city will undergo circumcision for the expectation of profit. Today, just as Shechem and Hamor used a vision of financial prosperity to convince the men of their city to be circumcised, so too can the international community use the prospect of an improved economy as a powerful incentive to sway Iran away from nuclear weapons.

One of Iran's main opposition parties accused Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of squandering record oil revenues and severely mismanaging his country's economy, Reuters reported. “His main campaign slogan was to share oil wealth fairly,” said Mohsen Mirdamadi, secretary-general of the Islamic Iran Participation Front. “But instead, his economic policies have caused major problems for Iranians.” Ahmadinejad’s policies, coupled with international sanctions, have significantly hindered Iran's economy and have been a frequent topic of domestic criticism. Global financial institutions have cut business dealings with Iran as a way of pressuring the Islamic Republic to halt its illicit nuclear activity, and the Islamic Republic faces further international pressure as a result of its continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.

The economic sanctions imposed by the international community on Iran are clearly having a profound effect. The United States must press its friends and allies to continue this path of economic isolation before Iran can achieve its goal of producing a nuclear weapon. After all, as the people of Shechem remind us, the prospect of economic growth is often an extremely enticing incentive. ■

Profiting from Kindness

Vayelech el eretz mipnei Ya’akov achiv – “and went into a land away from his brother Jacob” (Genesis 36:6)

As Jacob returns to his hometown of Hebron he and Esau quickly realized that the small city could not possibly contain the two brothers’ growing flocks: “For their substance was too great for them to dwell together; and the land of their sojourning could not bear them because of their cattle.” (Verse 37) Esau quietly yielded to the wishes of Jacob to remain with his father and uprooted his entire family and business, moving eastward to the Land of Seir. Yalkut Meam Loez (page 650) notes that, “in the merit of the fact that he forsook Jacob and went [himself], and did not exile [Jacob] and remain in his place, he merited to receive one hundred cities from Seir to Gadiel.”

Esau’s gesture to his brother began with an act of kindness which ultimately brought Esau great benefit as well. In leaving Hebron Esau arrived in a country with the resources which helped him develop into a powerful family, and ultimately a country. While his act originated in kindness it turned into an investment that yielded great dividends. This kindness of Esau was ultimately an investment, a model of economic cooperation which continues to this day.

Three years ago a founding member of America's top construction law firm, Robert S. Peckar from Peckar & Abramson, organized a trip to Israel, the website Israel21c reported. He brought 10 of America's most powerful construction business CEOs and leaders, who were all non-Jewish, to Israel. At the very most Peckar was hoping to break some stereotypes and educate his non-Jewish peers on the complicated cultural, political and business realities that Israelis working in the same industry face. What he couldn't have predicted is that one of the group participants, Marvin Suomi, the president of KUD International in Los Angeles would enter into a \$250 million construction deal to develop a new technology park with Israeli partners at Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheva. When completed, the project is expected to introduce at least 10,000 new jobs to the city.

Esau’s financial collaboration serves as an example of the type of relationship which can still be seen today. Often motivated by a desire to support Israel, business leaders have discovered, just as Esau did, that investing in Israel can bring great economic benefits. ■