



Sermon Tidbits

NOVEMBER 30, 2009

Parshat Vayishlach

A Window of Opportunity

Vayishlach Ya'akov malachim – “And Jacob sent messengers” (Genesis 32:4)

While we know that Jacob sent messengers to Esau to apprise his brother of his pending return to Canaan, simple geography leaves us puzzled. Esau had already settled the Land of Se'ir, current day southern Jordan. Jacob intended to travel southwest from Haran (Eastern Syria today) through Canaan with his ultimate destination of Beersheba. Jacob could simply have not contacted Esau and avoided a confrontation entirely. Why did he go out of his way to contact his brother? The Zohar (1, 166) explained that Jacob could not pass up a golden opportunity. Jacob realized that despite Esau's many negative qualities, he excelled at honoring his father. Esau would never act against his brother while his father was alive. “Now,” Jacob said, “while father still lives, I must come to terms with him.” He immediately sent the angels ahead to contact Esau and sue for peace.

Realizing that a unique, but brief window, for resolution with Esau remained open to him, Jacob extended himself to his brother and took concrete steps to bring about reconciliation. The government of Israel has followed in Jacob's footsteps by taking concrete steps to reach a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians.

Last week, the Israeli cabinet took the bold step of freezing all new construction in Judea and Samaria for a period of ten months. Prime Minister Netanyahu explained that the government authorized the effort, “because of our deep desire for peace. We hope that this decision will help launch meaningful peace negotiations to reach a historic peace agreement that will finally end the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel.” During the past year, Israel has taken many additional steps towards building a constructive relationship with the Palestinian leadership including the dismantling of hundreds of roadblocks in the territories and the bolstering of Palestinian economic development. These efforts have led to a recent boom in the Palestinian economy in the West Bank.

Over the past number of months, PA President Mahmud Abbas has rebuffed repeated U.S. and Israeli calls to immediately return to the negotiating table. In his statement Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “I want to say clearly to the Palestinians: Now is the time to begin negotiations. Now is the time to move the peace process forward. There is no more time to waste. Israel has taken a far reaching step for peace. It's time for the Palestinians to do the same.”

Jacob took advantage of a small window of opportunity to bring long-sought peace to his family. Seeing a similar opening Israel has taken concrete steps towards peace. The Palestinian leadership must follow in Esau's footsteps and reciprocate by commencing direct negotiations with Israel, with the goal of ending the conflict once and for all. ■

A Very Real Threat

Im yavo Eisav el hamachaneh ha'achat – “Should Eisau approach one camp...” (Genesis 32:9)

In preparing for a possible battle with his brother Esau, Jacob split his camp in half saying, “Should Esau come to the one camp and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape.” Commentators struggle with a simple question: if Esau and his men had enough strength to overcome and destroy half of Jacob's camp, what would then prevent them

from pursuing and decimating the other half as well? What guarantee did Jacob have that the second half could survive? Ramban (on verse 9) explained that in fact Jacob had no such assurance and indeed feared the complete destruction of his family. “According to the plain meaning [Jacob] said, “*Perhaps* the other camp will be saved.”” While he did everything he could, Jacob had no real way of knowing whether any of his family members would survive the encounter with Esau and his armed men.

Like Jacob, who wondered whether his family would survive an encounter with Esau, the people of Israel face a similar threat of a nuclear armed Iran. As Iran grows closer to procuring nuclear weapons, Israelis face the frightening prospect of pondering their total annihilation.

Following extensive meetings with IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen said that, “a nuclear Iran would pose an existential threat to Israel,” the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz reported. Mullen echoed sentiments long expressed by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. “There is no doubt in my mind that’s how the Israelis feel,” Mullen added. At a recent ceremony honoring Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, Israeli President Shimon Peres warned of the evil represented by Iran’s president. “Ahmadinejad wants to destroy a nation and he denies the Holocaust. His ambition is to rule the Muslim world with unmitigated force and terror,” Peres said. Time is clearly running short for the United Nations’ to impose sanctions that could effectively propel Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

While Jacob took concrete steps to save his family, he had no real way to determine whether splitting the camp would ultimately prove beneficial. While Israel can also take steps to protect itself, should Iran attain nuclear weapons, Israel cannot know whether Iran might ultimately attempt to make good on its threats to wipe Israel, “off the map.” ■

The Strength of Jacob

Vayei’aveik ish imo – “And a man wrestled with him...” (Genesis 32:25)

Caught on the “wrong side of the river” in the middle of the night, Jacob found himself in a desperate physical fight with a strange, unidentified man. The Midrash (Pirkei D’rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 37) identified him as an angel, sent by God to fight with Jacob. Why would God send an angel to fight Jacob? “When God saw that Jacob was afraid of Esau, he sent him [the angel] Michael [to fight against him]...[After the fight] Michael said to him, if you could beat me – one of the celestial angels, why do you fear Esau?” In essence, God sent the angel to fight against Jacob to remind him of his own inner strength.

Like Jacob, who found his confidence and pride boosted by his bout with angel, the people of Israel took pride as a descendant of Jacob also vanquished his opponent in a recent championship fight.

On November 14th, Israeli boxer Yuri Foreman overcame titleholder Daniel Santos to win the super welterweight world championship. Foreman brought Israelis and Jews around the world a sense of pride as he displayed the blue and white Israeli flag after his victory. Identified as an Israeli boxing champion, Foreman told Heeb Magazine that, “my love of Israel keeps growing. I’m an Israeli citizen and my dad lives there, a lot of friends. I’m very connected to the country and to the people. I have a lot of support from Israel and from Jewish people around the world.” When asked whether he would use his title to represent Israel he answered that, “I always come into the fight with the Israeli flag. My hope is to inspire people in Israel that you can be spiritual and still pursue other things in life. Not necessarily that if you’re spiritual, you have to give up on your dreams.”

Like the angel who fought Jacob, Yuri Foreman’s historic victory reminded us that while we might at times feel threatened and weak, surrounded by enemies focused on our destruction, we must always remember the great inner strength that our forefather Jacob passed on to his descendants. ■

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