



Sermon Tidbits

DECEMBER 12, 2016

Parashat Vayishlach

Every Possible Preparation

And Jacob sent messengers (Genesis 32:4)

וישלח יעקב מלאכים (בראשית לב:ד)

The thirteenth century sage Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, (b. 1194) known as Ramban or Nachmanides, served as a rabbi in Gerona, Spain and later a chief rabbi of Catalonia. He was widely recognized as a communal leader, scholar, philosopher and biblical commentator. In 1263, a Jewish convert named Pablo Christiani challenged Ramban to a famous disputation which he claimed would prove from Jewish texts the truth of the Christian faith. Ramban faithfully defended his faith, and felt compelled to publish his arguments to prove that he had not lost the debate. Ramban was then brought up on capitol charges for publishing blasphemy, and although King James I of Aragon sympathized with the Jewish sage, Ramban was ultimately exiled from Spain permanently. This painful episode in his personal history in which he was confronted with a hostile external threat, helps us to better understand Ramban's introduction to Parashat Vayishlach and his explanation for why the biblical text describes in such great detail Jacob's preparations for his confrontation with Esau. He writes, "This section was written...in order to teach us that Jacob did not place his trust in his righteousness and that he strove for delivery with all his might. There is yet in this section a hint for future generations, for everything that happened to our father with his brother Esau will constantly occur to us with Esau's children, and it is proper for us to adhere to the way of the righteous by preparing ourselves in the three things for which he prepared himself: for prayer, for giving him a present, and for rescue by methods of warfare, to flee and to be saved." Ramban viewed the events of Jacob's life as a blueprint for all future Jewish generations to follow should they confront a threat to their well-being and security.

Rashi (on verse 9) explains that Jacob prepared for his confrontation with Esau in three ways; "Through the sending of gifts to Esau, through prayer and by preparing for war." Today, the state of Israel must also deal with its adversaries using the same tools that Jacob employed against Esau. First and foremost, as a people of faith, we turn to God to protect and defend the people of Israel both in Israel and around the world. We can never allow our efforts—important as they are—to supersede our faith and appreciation for God's hand in the great success and thriving of the Jewish state over the past sixty years. Yet, like Jacob, rather than preventing us from acting, our faith spurs us to take action on our own behalf. While Israel does not send gifts, it does make every effort to reach a peaceful solution to serious disputes through dialogue and negotiation. An important example of this is the recent rapprochement between Israel and Turkey. Last week, Eitan Na'eh, Israel's new ambassador to Turkey, [presented his credentials to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#), ending a half-decade of frosty relations between the two countries. This encounter between Israel and Turkey represented the culmination of years of difficult talks aimed at restoring friendly relations between the two nations. In addition to diplomatic relations, Israel must take the necessary precautions to protect itself militarily, for Israel must be prepared to defend itself from the adversaries that surround the Jewish state and be prepared to attack the opposition with mortars, missiles, rockets and other acts of terror.

Our efforts to protect and defend the Jewish state directly reflect Jacob's intuitive approach to conflict. We encourage the United States to stand beside Israel on the diplomatic front, protecting the Jewish state from blatantly anti-Israel resolutions in the United Nations, while laying the groundwork for what we hope will be a meaningful dialogue with the Palestinians aimed at achieving a lasting peace. At the same time, our hard work has provided Israel with the wherewithal to protect itself, by itself, from external threats. When we read about Israel's [recent decision to buy a total of 50 F-35 advanced fighter jets](#) giving it two full squadrons of the new warplane, and the [visit of U.S. Secretary](#)

[of Defense Ash Carter](#) for a ceremony marking the delivery of the first two F-35 stealth fighters this week, we all rightfully feel a sense of pride that our hard work really does make a difference, and it really does give Israel the defensive advantage it needs to protect itself in such a dangerous neighborhood.

After his banishment from Israel, Nachmanides made his way ultimately to Israel. He arrived first in Jerusalem and established a [famous synagogue](#) that the state of Israel recently rebuilt, which stands proudly today in the Old City of Jerusalem. That great structure serves as a testament to our tenacity, devotion and faith, and also serves as a reminder that while throughout our history, from Jacob to Ramban to today, we continue to face adversaries who threaten our safety and well-being, today the people of Israel face those challenges not as a persecuted minority, but as sovereign nation devoted to protecting and defending the Jewish people around the world. ■

Peace Through Strength

And Esau ran to meet him (Genesis 33:4)

וירץ עשו לקראתו (בראשית לג:ד)

As he guided the United States during the last years of the Cold War before the fall of the Soviet Union, President Ronald Reagan preached a message of security and peace through strength. In a [1996 address on national security](#) President Reagan said, “We know that peace is the condition under which mankind was meant to flourish. Yet peace does not exist of its own will. It depends on us, on our courage to build it and guard it and pass it on to future generations. George Washington’s words may seem hard and cold today, but history has proven him right again and again. ‘To be prepared for war,’ he said, ‘is one of the most effective means of preserving peace.’” According to a surprising Midrash, our forefather Jacob made peace with his brother Esau for precisely this reason.

Having decided after 22 years in Haran to return home to Canaan, Jacob sent a message to his brother Esau, who had once vowed to kill Jacob for the crime of stealing the blessing from Isaac. How would Esau respond? Was he still consumed with hatred and vitriol for Jacob or could the brothers reunite in peace. The answer Jacob received from his messengers is clear: “We came to your brother Esau, and he also comes to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” (Genesis 32:7) Esau does not need four hundred men to make peace, but his violent intentions were apparent to all. Yet, when the moment of truth arrives, rather than attacking Jacob, “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept.” (33:4) Why did Esau have a sudden change of heart? While Rashi suggests that Esau experienced a sudden rush of compassion, a startling Midrash suggests that Esau changed his attitude towards Jacob for an entirely different reason. Rabbi Berechya suggests that, “...when God saw Jacob’s great distress, he sent four pairs of angels to make war with Esau throughout the night. When the first pair approached...they began to attack them. When Esau said, ‘I am Jacob’s brother!’ they left him alone in honor of Jacob. The same happened with the second, third and fourth pair...When Esau saw the damage that these angels had done to him and his men, he became fearful of Jacob his brother and left to greet him in peace.” (*Midrash Tanchuma Kadum* 7) According to the Midrash, Esau approached Jacob in peace when he recognized that rather than being weak, Jacob had great strength, backed by powerful forces willing to assist him in his time of need.

Backed by its strong ally, the United States, Israel is blessed with similar strength, which rather than being a source of conflict, has ensured stability with many of Israel’s neighbors. [Speaking via satellite to the 2016 Saban Forum](#) at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted that, “the U.S. is the indispensable power in the world and in the Middle East, and I believe it must remain so,” he said. “The state of Israel has no better friend than the United States of America, but as someone in the region, I can say that the United States has no better friend than Israel. Strengthening Israel in the Middle East is strengthening American values in the Middle East.” Netanyahu stressed that in the Middle East, only the strong survive. “Nobody makes peace with the weak,” he said. “In the Middle East, the weak don’t survive... The strong and the smart survive.” Jacob would certainly have wholeheartedly agreed. ■

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