

NOVEMBER 27, 2017

Parashat Vayishlach

Facing Problems Head-On

Jacob was left alone (Genesis 32:25)

וַיִּוְתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ (בראשית לב:כה)

On November 19 we marked the 40th anniversary of the first official visit to Israel by an Arab head of state. This unprecedented visit by the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat laid the groundwork for the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, which remains indispensable to Israel's security and serves as an important foundation for regional stability and peace. Sadat's 1977 visit was viewed by Israelis and the world as an earthshaking shift in the region. Over the previous two decades, Egypt—the largest, most populous and most powerful Arab country—had led multiple Arab efforts to destroy the Jewish state. But in a gesture of hope and goodwill, both Egypt and Israel were reaching out to each other in peace and acceptance.

In contrast to this spirit of benevolence, *Parashat Vayishlach* opens with Jacob expressing great fear about meeting his brother. Upon learning that Esau approached Jacob with 400 of his men, “Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed...” (*Genesis* 32:8) Jacob sent gifts, split his camp and prayed for salvation. We read how on the night before the fateful meeting, after accompanying his family over the ford of Jabbok, the final natural barrier between himself and Esau, “Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.” (32:25)

What was Jacob doing alone on the other side of the *wadi*? Why after traversing the ford with his family did Jacob return to the other side? Rashbam (on verse 25) suggests: “He wanted to pass after them [his family], for he intended to find a different path to run away, so that he would not meet with Esau.” According to Rashbam, rather than face a difficult and frightening confrontation with his brother, Jacob attempted to flee. It was for this reason that immediately, “there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day...” (32:25) The Sages describe this “man” as a celestial angel. Rashbam explains that the angel struggled with Jacob on that night to convey to Jacob, “that he cannot run away.” Rather, he must confront Esau and reach an agreement to end the decades-long feud with his brother.

Running away and avoiding direct interaction doesn't solve problems, but instead exacerbates it. This is the lesson of Sadat's visit to Israel. As Sadat stated while addressing the Israeli Knesset, “I come to you today on solid ground to shape a new life and to establish peace...But to be absolutely frank with you, I took this decision after long thought, knowing that it constitutes a great risk.” Each side paid a price for the first peace agreement between the State of Israel and one of its Arab neighbors. Israel took what it saw as a major security risk by returning all of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, which it had won during the defensive 1967 Six-Day War. And Egypt was expelled from the Arab League for making peace with Israel. But this demonstration of courage and wisdom led the Nobel committee to award President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately, the “great risk” Sadat warned of was all too real. On Oct. 6, 1981, members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad assassinated President Sadat.

Jacob “got the message” from the angel, and his meeting with Esau led to peace and reconciliation. Through direct negotiations and goodwill, Israel and Egypt understood that same message. Let us pray that in the near future [direct negotiations](#)—the only path that can lead to a permanent peace agreement—will see peace spread between Israel her neighbors. ■

Utilizing our Blessings to Help Humanity

And [he] encamped before the city (Genesis 33:18)

ויחן את פני העיר (בראשית לג:יח)

Many, if not most, of us are unaware of the fact that the citizens of the east-African island nation of Madagascar have been [suffering from a terrible outbreak](#) of a plague called “Black Death.” While we are of course concerned for the welfare of the victims of this terrible disease, which has claimed almost 200 lives and infected thousands, it is gratifying to know that the Jewish state is lending a hand as well. The website Israel21c [recently reported](#) that Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the South African branch of Magen David Adom assembled an aid package for Madagascar following the deadly plague outbreak. Ayellet Black, deputy Israeli ambassador to South Africa, told the African News Agency that, “Israel has a long standing tradition of offering humanitarian assistance and coordinating relief to alleviate disease, hunger and poverty. We have experience in helping countries going through natural and man-made disasters and will always provide assistance to help those in need.” In fact, our longstanding tradition of helping others harkens back to the days of our forefather Jacob.

Following the fateful reunion with Esau, Jacob settled with his family at the outskirts of Shechem, where we read that Jacob, “encamped before the city.” (33:18) Based on this phrase, three sages in the Talmud (*Shabbat 33b*) suggest that Jacob improved the lives of the residents of the city in significant ways. “Rav said: Jacob established a currency for them. And Shmuel said: He established marketplaces for them. And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: He established bathhouses for them.” Rabbi Yerachmiel Roness [notes](#) that through these actions Jacob demonstrated that he was, “not solely focused on his own needs and interests, but rather display[ed] interest in the welfare of the wider community.”

Commenting on these three types of projects, Rabbi A.Y. Kook (see *Ein Ayah Shabbat vol.1* p. 210) explains that one could view the world as a place where, “Each person feels that his brother’s existence and needs presses against his boundaries and minimizes his own needs. In truth this is an erroneous worldview from which hatred, competition and stinginess emerge between fellow men and neighboring nations. An internal perspective teaches us that as mankind increases in numbers, people will better be able to assist one-another by sharing their strengths, so that each can benefit from and use that which his friend produces...” Rav Kook concludes by noting that the actions of Jacob, which were intended to improve the lives of the citizens of the neighboring city, must serve as a “signpost [and lesson] for his descendants that we bind our collective abilities to serve collectively to sanctify the Holy name...”

Today, the state of Israel—named after our forefather Jacob who was also called Israel—follows proudly in the footsteps of our ancestor in its concern for the well-being of others not only around the world, but especially in its own neighborhood. Two weeks ago, “the IDF allowed an Israeli TV crew to film it opening the border gates to Syria, and allowing in a group of mothers and their children who were then transported to an Israeli hospital for medical treatment,” the [Times of Israel reported](#) (You can watch the report [here](#)). “It has become unremarkable” for Syrian civilians to come to Israel for treatment,” one mother told the TV interviewer. “Everyone wants to come here. Adults too; not just the children.”

While IDF “Operation Good Neighbor” is certainly geared towards winning the hearts and minds of a Syrian public that has been indoctrinated to hate Israel and her citizens, Israel is concerned for the Syrians’ well-being as well. When asked why we bring the injured and sick Syrians into Israel for treatment, one IDF officer answered, “A human being must be a human being, first and foremost.” In addition to the medical treatments, Israel [regularly ships supplies](#) such as food, fuel and clothing to the civilian population across the border. When a Syrian mother was asked by a reporter why she wasn’t afraid that people back in Syria would know that she had been in Israeli territory she said that, “In the past [Israel] was considered an enemy. But now that she [Israel] extended her hand [to help us] most of the [Syrian] people are with you, they love Israel. They see your true face and are simply exposed to the truth and reality.” ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.