

Parshat Vayishlach: What made Eisav embrace Yaakov?

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Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai says it is a halaka (Jewish law) that Eisav hates Yaakov. In Parshat Vayishlach, Eisav did not kill Yaakov even though he wanted to do so for over 34 years.

What made Eisav crack? What are the lessons for today in dealing with Eisav? After all, there is a principle "that which happens to our forefathers happens to us as well" applies to the End of Days. At the end of Parshat Vayeitzei after Lavan departed from Yaakov, "Yaakov went on his way, and Angels of G-d encountered him. Yaakov said when he saw them, "This is a G-dly camp." So he called the name of that place Machanaim."

Rashi says there was a changing of the guard from the angels which protected Yaakov in Haran to the angels which now greeted him from the Land of Israel. The Targum Yonatan said these were the Angels that "protect us from our enemies." Angels are not mentioned as much in connection with Avraham and Yitzhak as they are in connection with Yaakov. In Parshat Vayera Avraham is visited by the three angels in Mamre. At the akedah (Binding of Yitzhak) Avraham and Yitzhak are visited by the angel of G-d. Yaakov's story really begins with angels going up and down his ladder and continues throughout his life.

Rabbi Kahane from Queens explained that we all have angels protecting us but the difference is that Yaakov was on such a high spiritual plane he was actually able to see them. Parshat Vayishlach maintains this theme. Yaakov had reached such a high spiritual level that he was constantly dealing with angels. He was the culmination and fusion of the lovingkindness of Avraham his grandfather and the strength and restraint of his father Yitzhak. That enabled him to reach the sphere of the angels. This is the basis for much of Kabbala. It is not surprising then that Parshat Vayishlach begins with Yaakov sending "angels" to Eisav. "Then Yaakov sent Angels ahead of him to Eisav his brother in the land of Seir, the field of Edom."

Rashi says that Yaakov sent actual angels - not just emissaries. Even though "the angels returned to Yaakov saying, 'We came to your brother, to Eisav, moreover, he is heading toward you, and 400 men are with him,'" the angels had an intimidating effect upon Eisav according to the Or Hachaim. They were also sent to impress him. They acted as an "early warning system" for Yaakov, as angels they were not limited by time or space. Even though Eisav was strong and powerful, Yaakov's angels must have terrified him to some degree.

The enemies of Israel today, including Iran, are similarly terrified by the angels of Israel. This was extremely apparent in the 1967 War when the Arabs were so panic stricken they ran without putting on their shoes. They were so mortified by Israel's angels they left Hebron wide open so that Rabbi Shlomo Goren Z"l conquered the city himself in a jeep. But Yaakov was not relying only on his protective angels to fight Eisav, and Israel today is also not relying solely on its protective angels.

Yaakov prepared a three pronged approach according to Rashi: 1) gifts, 2) prayer, 3) war and division of his camp to allow for ultimate survival. This strategy has been successfully used by the Jewish People for time immemorial. Unfortunately, only in the modern era has the ability to fight back been employed compared to the past 2000 years. The Meam Loez says indeed the third prong is the ability to flee. Yaakov was not the only one who had angels working for him.

As it turns out, his brother Eisav had at least one (B.R.32:25) who wrestled with Yaakov at the Jabbok Stream. Despite Eisav's many faults he still was the grandson of Avraham and the son of Yitzhak. He killed Nimrod to avenge what Nimrod did to his grandfather. He showed tremendous honor to his father. Eisav's angel wounded but did not kill Yaakov.

The Sforno says this is the history of the Jewish People. Eisav will hurt us but never destroy us. And indeed Eisav has hurt us for the last 2000 years but the Nation of Israel has risen and will continue to rise. Eisav's angel in the end was forced to give us a blessing. And Yaakov said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The angel replied, "No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Israel. For you have striven with the Divine, and with man and have overcome."

The Sforno adds that we will overcome Eisav and be more victorious with even greater blessings just as Yaakov was. It has always been my belief that if Eisav's angel could hurt Yaakov to such a degree causing him to limp, imagine what the Angels of Yaakov must have done to Eisav. He must have been "hurt" rather badly. The war between Yaakov and Eisav had been fought by their respective angels before they met face to face. Yaakov had won before they encountered each other on the physical plane.

This was a spiritual war as much as a physical one. Yaakov won both and although the "dots" over the word "kissed" raise doubts about Eisav's intentions, "Eisav ran towards him, embraced him, and kissed him, then they wept." Eisav was forced to give a "blessing" just as his angel was forced to give Yaakov a blessing. Eisav had "cracked." it is also why Eisav left the Land of Israel with all his possessions immediately after the encounter. "So Eisav started back that day on his way to Seir" (33:16).

And it is also why at the End of Days (Obad.1:21) it says, "And saviors shall come up on Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Eisav." Israel today will be victorious despite the threats of all her enemies. We are descendants of Yaakov who toppled the mighty Eisav. We will prevail, with G-d's help, just as Yaakov our forefather did.