

Geulas Yisrael #79- Vayishlach

Redemptive Swagger

Yaakov had been repeatedly assured by Hashem of His divine protection and of a safe return to his homeland. Hashem had confirmed Ya'akov's legacy as the "chosen" son and as the successor to Yitzchak. His position in history having been guaranteed, Ya'akov had every reason to be confident as he faced off against Esav's army of four hundred mercenaries.

Yet he remains agitated. Facing this intimidating militia, Ya'akov doesn't rely upon divine promises or redemptive assurances. Desperately preparing for this confrontation, he fervently prays, divides his camp in two, and assembles a package of appeasement to pacify his violent brother's rage. Despite his confidence and Hashem's guarantees, Ya'akov takes nothing for granted.

Ya'akov's battle with Esav sets a model for Jewish history. His nighttime wrestling match with a supernatural foe, signaled that this meeting of brothers would extend well beyond that particular time and place. What happened on that original battle-field between Ya'akov and Esav would carve out templates for the future. By adopting a cautious policy of pragmatism and pacification and "bending" to his brother's authority, Ya'akov was educating us about our own struggles with a hostile world. Confidence can't undermine caution. Reassurances should not replace responsible behavior.

Studying Vayishlach en route to Rome

As they traveled to ancient Rome to petition on behalf of our people, our Chazal routinely read Parashat Vayishlach. Our hobbled and defeated nation was in no position to lodge demands. In 70 AD Yerushalayim was trounced by the Romans, and sixty years later, the Bar Kochba rebellion was brutally and bloodily crushed. Much antagonism existed between Rome and Judea and the mighty Roman empire had little interest in acceding to requests from a lame people soon to become obsolete.

In this fragile state of vulnerability Chazal carefully adhered to Ya'akov's roadmap, hoping to stabilize our rickety situation. As their ships navigated to the western shores of Rome, Chazal looked to Ya'akov's encounter with Esav for guidance.

They knew they lived at a precarious moment of Jewish history and proceeded with great caution.

Of course, Chazal were well aware of the redemptive promises. They knew that despite their feeble state, ultimately, Ya'akov's children would prevail over Esav. They just had no clue how long it would take and how exactly the road to redemption would unwind. Little did they know it would be thousands of years before the sun would once again rise upon Yerushalayim. Little did they know that rivers of Jewish blood would flow through two millennia of hatred and ruthless persecution. They clung to Ya'akov's policy, and, ever since, Jews have waited confidently for redemption while not allowing redemptive confidence to muddle responsible behavior.

Caution during geula

Surprisingly, Ya'akov exhibited the same restraint even as his triumph begins to unfold. Having defeated a celestial fighter, Ya'akov is now renamed Yisrael, alluding to his own personal victory as well as to the triumphant moments of Jewish history. The name Yisrael stems from his victory **כי שרית עם אלקים ואנשים ותוכל** -he wrestled with angel and man and emerged victorious.

When Jews struggle, we clasp on to heels of history which exceeds us and eludes us. During these phases of clutching and grasping we are named "Ya'akov". When we succeed and defeat our enemies, we live through periods of victorious "Yisrael". **מה טובו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל**. During our periods of "Ya'akov" we live temporary and unstable tents or an **אהל**. During triumphant periods of "Yisrael" we craft sturdy and permanent structures or a **משכן**.

Now bearing the name Yisrael, Ya'akov is assured of our eventual victory over Esav. Yet, he still acts vigilantly, warily dividing his camp and mollifying his brother.

Vaysihlach provides a directional course of action even during redemptive eras of Yisrael. Even as history turns, and the redemptive era emerges, Vayishlach cautions us not to act with over-optimism or with impudence, not to carelessly rely upon miracles, and not to throw our fate upon supernatural intervention. This is a harder road to follow. Under the intoxicating spell of redemption, we

sometimes become too giddy with anticipation, and we sometimes lose our balance.

Mordechai's decision

The Babylonian exile was drawing to a close, and we had already returned to Yerushalayim and begun construction of the second Beit Hamikdash.

Unfortunately, the process stalled in the face of international opposition to Jewish expansionism. Though the wheels of geula were halted, it was clear that history was trending toward a Jewish return to Yerushalayim. Prophecies had predicted a quick 70-year exile which was about to expire. An air of confidence breezed through Jewish communities around the world, and we were one step away from geula.

At which point, dark clouds descended upon Shushan. A reckless king promoted a descendant of Esav, empowering this megalomaniac murderer with unlimited power. Imposing his authority upon the citizens of Shushan, Haman demanded that everyone bow to him as he walked past. Most Jews acceded. Bowing to a human, even a self-appointed demigod, was not legally forbidden and should certainly be authorized to protect their lives. Most Jews in Shushan followed the template of Vayishlach, bowing to Haman just as Ya'akov had bowed to Esav centuries earlier. This was a sensitive moment as we struggled with a supreme and homicidal tyrant, and it appeared wise to "bend" rather than stand tall and risk genocide. Even though redemption was around the corner, Vayishlach seemed prudent.

One Jew disagreed, and his name was Mordechai. ומרדכי לא יכרע ולא ישתחוה. Refusing to bow, Mordechai's defiance infuriated Haman and unleashed a potential genocidal nightmare. Thankfully Mordechai, Esther and the Jews of Shushan rallied, fasted three days, zealously prayed and reversed this ghastly decree.

In celebration, we look back at Hashem's intervention and glorify Mordechai and Esther's heroism. Chazal were not so unequivocal in their endorsement of Mordechai's decision. Was he correct in his refusal to bow? Should he, like other Jews have followed the course of Vayishlach and displayed greater compliance? Chazal are ambiguous about this question, and it certainly seems as if Mordechai didn't enjoy universal validation. The Megillah concludes by describing Mordechai

as someone who was roundly acknowledged by *most* of the Jews, suggesting that some still chafed at his irresponsible behavior, which had endangered an entire nation. All is well that ends well, but Chazal didn't explicitly ratify Mordechai's veering from the careful and balanced course of Vayishlach.

Vayishlach presents a roadmap not just for dark days in Rome in the aftermath of destruction, but also for sunny days in Persia on the eve of redemption.

Redemptive Swagger

We now stand at the end of history facing the same challenge as Mordechai and the Jews of Persia. Ironically, it was much easier for Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues, who simply cut and pasted from Vayishlach. It would have been futile and foolish to exhibit confidence or swagger. They followed Vayishlach to a tee.

Everything has changed. We have witnessed miracles and historical revival. With Hashem's assistance we have defeated waves and waves of celestial opponents. The promises delivered to Ya'akov are wafting through the land of Israel as Jews stream back from across the globe. Our world has turned radiant and redeemed.

Vayishlach is still with us. We know that it will end, but not when nor how. We cannot fall into redemptive swagger, naively assuming that we can take any risk or proceed down any reckless path with divine assurance to back us up. We must maintain caution and act with historical responsibility.

Caution and confidence can exist side by side. Lack of confidence in Hashem's renewed appearance in history is a flaw in our faith. We have waited for Him to reenter our world and we cannot blind ourselves once He does. Our relationship with Him and our prospects for the future must each be optimistic and confident.

Confidence though cannot eliminate caution. Recklessness was never our tradition, and it cannot become ours now.

We are the first in thousands of years to face this delicate balancing act. Can we steer between caution and confidence? Can we live redeemed lives without abdicating the cautious path of our past?

Geula brings privileges but also new challenges.