

**Parshat Vayishlach
November 30, 2012
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"Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and smite me, the mother with the children."
(Genesis 32:12)

Our torah portion for this week focuses on the subject of enemies. Jacob was about to be reunited with his bitter enemy, his brother Esau. The brothers had not seen one another in twenty years. Jacob had fled from his home after Esau threatened to kill him. And now twenty years later he was returning. He hopes for reconciliation but he is not at all sure how he will be greeted.

How does one treat your enemies?

Can you imagine a more relevant question than the one posed by our torah reading today? On Thursday the Palestinians won a symbolic vote in the UN that changes everything and nothing. When Prime Minister Netanyahu last spoke at the UN he recognized that the end of this process would have to produce two nations for two peoples. But as the Israeli ambassador to the UN, Ron Prosor, pointed out yesterday –nowhere in Mohammed Abbas' comments on Thursday was their any mention of two nations for two peoples – in fact he went on to say that Abbas has never uttered those words and never publicly acknowledged Israel's right to exist as an independent nation. And if Abbas' silence on the matter is troubling – Hamas' comments are even more so – as they condemned yesterday's events issuing a statement saying: "We do not recognize Israel, nor the partition of Palestine, and Israel has no right in Palestine. Getting our membership in the U.N. bodies is our natural right, but without giving up any inch of Palestine's soil."

There is an old Yiddish saying that suggests you have to have *mazel* even when it comes to enemies. The Palestinians have good *mazel* – as they have us for an enemy. But we Jews, *nebach* - -our *mazel* is not so good – because we have the Palestinians for an enemy.

Closer to home – all eyes are focused on the political debate in Washington. The clock keeps ticking as we get closer and closer to the "fiscal cliff" and here in our country political enemies try and figure out how to deal with each other.

I saw two fascinating movies recently – I recommend them both to you – one is Lincoln and the other an Israeli Documentary called "The Gatekeepers" (Somrei Ha-saf) that is based on interviews of the last six heads of Israel's Shin-Bet – Israel's well respected Security Agency. Both of these movies in one way or another – also focus on this theme of how one deals with one's enemies. In the Gatekeepers the struggle to protect Israel from terrorism and what it does to your own soul and in the Lincoln movie we see how President Lincoln struggled with the carnage that was the Civil War and how he struggled with the politicians of his own day – inside his own party and out – to emancipate the slaves.

On a more modest level, a fascinating debate has developed within the Jewish community

over a letter sent out by a colleague, Rabbi Sharon Brous, the rabbi of a congregation called Ikar in LA, and she was harshly attacked by Dr. Danny Gordis in a Times of Israel article that he titled: "When Balance Becomes Betrayal". I recommend their dialogue to you – you can find it online at timesofisrael.com and search for Danny Gordis. Danny takes issue with Rabbi Brous for expressing sympathy and compassion for Palestinian suffering as well as Jewish suffering in the recent Pillar of Defense actions in Gaza. Danny Gordis' attack and Rabbi Brous' excellent defense as well as articles similarly written by a number of eloquent colleagues all focus on our central question of how does one treat one's enemies. And the fact that in so many areas in our contemporary world we cannot seem to get this right makes today's torah portion and Jacob's dilemma only more relevant.

According to Rashi (on Genesis 32:8), "Jacob prepared himself to meet his enemy in three ways, with gifts, with prayer, with war." (*Doron, tefilah, milchama*)

According to Rashi, we should first approach our enemies with gifts (*doron*). How often does our own pride prevent us from coming forward and making a concession, trying to make peace, apologizing, giving a small something to show our good intentions? How often is it easier to lash out, then to make overtures of peace? What is your initial reaction, your reflex in confronting an enemy? Is it like Jacob - one of appeasement or is your first reaction to put up your dukes, to fight and make matters worse - before you can make them better? Most of us find that when attacked our first response is to fight back, to defend ourselves. When attacked we feel dehumanized so we return the favor. It is so natural to dehumanize our enemies. That is what soldiers do in war. During World War II the Japanese became Japs. During the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese became gooks. How often do we Jews see the Palestinian Arabs as less than human, not worthy of any compassion and any consideration? How often do we feel absolute contempt for our personal enemies - those towel heads, let's nuke them all!"

One of the great lessons of the Torah is the humanity even of our bitter enemy. "If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him." (Exodus 23:4) If we find the lost wallet of our enemy, we are obligated to return it, with all the credit cards and cash intact. Our enemy is still a human being. That is why a famous Talmudic passage teaches that God told the angels when the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, "My children are drowning and you sing songs to me!"

Danny Gordis challenges Rabbi Brous – "Is it not too much to ask that you, as a Jew, care for our Israeli sons *more* than you care about the children of terrorists?" Sounds like a reasonable and fair critique. But what Rabbi Brous and her defenders respond is, of course she cares *more* for our sons than for the enemies' sons, but does that mean there is no room in our hearts for the suffering of our enemies? This was beautifully emphasized when Rabbi Eddie Feinstein weighed in and wrote, "Every time Israel's ambassador Michael Oren was interviewed on CNN this past week, he carefully detailed the painstaking efforts taken by Israel's military to avoid harming Palestinian civilians. Given just a few precious moments of the world's media attention, Oren talked of the text messages, phone calls and leaflets dropped into Gaza neighborhoods warning of impending attacks and guiding Palestinian families toward safe havens. This, he argues persuasively, is what distinguishes a democracy from a regime of terror. This is what keeps us from becoming them."

Jacob prepares himself also with prayer. What possible use is prayer in dealing with one's enemies? There is a recognition that there are times in dealing with our enemies when the first step – reconciliation will not be sufficient. When for all our good efforts those who oppose us cannot be appeased. So what then – surrender? Of course not. We have a right to live, to assert our own rights as much as those who oppose us. "Turn the other cheek" is not a Jewish value. As much as we want peace, as much as we must do everything within our power to pursue peace, sometimes we have to prepare for war.

The prophet Jeremiah said it so well, "Peace, peace, but there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:14) That seems to be the current stand of the Palestinians. No matter how many concessions this enemy does not seem to want to make peace. Sometimes no matter what we do, the other side wants to maintain a state of war.

This brings us to Jacob's second step, *tefilah*, prayer. Once our attempts at reconciliation have failed, we pray for peace. Once we have failed to *make* peace, we *pray* for peace. Jacob does not say - "OK, I tried to make peace, I failed, now I am going to knock the living daylights out of you!" There is yet another intervening step - of prayer. I find this a fascinating second step - maybe even more fascinating than the first. As we say countless times in our daily prayer book, "May He Who makes peace in the heavens, make peace for us and all Israel, and let us say amen." We pray, not because prayer is a panacea. God is not some giant vending machine; if we put in the right change the right result comes out. We pray not to change the world, but to change ourselves; not to move God but to move ourselves. We pray not because of what it does to them, but because of what it does to us - it keeps us from becoming cynical, it keeps us from developing a heart filled with hatred and enmity. As we embark on the path of war, we pray to maintain our own humanity and the vision that a day of peace will come and that "nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4).

When we are forced to go to war, we are in great danger. There is a danger that you will be killed, but there is also a danger that you will kill. Both can be fatal - one to our bodies and one to our souls - so we pray. In the choice of kill or be killed - I prefer to kill over being killed, but we pray that we will not lose our humanity in the process. That when the killing is done – we may have killed but we pray we will not have become killers. Prayer is a second and necessary step that Jacob takes as he prepares for the third and most terrible step of war itself. Danny Gordis would have us choose: either you are for us or against us. Rabbi Brous would respond – "Of course I am for you – but I am worried about what all of this killing is doing to the Jewish soul and so I pray."

The movie, *The Gatekeepers*, which I am sorry to say is only playing for a few more days in Manhattan – is an incredible documentary that by interviewing six heads of the Shin Bet, Israel's respected Security Agency – gives a remarkable insight into the soul of Israel and what all these years of war has done to the Jewish soul. It is not a pretty sight. It is remarkably frightening and remarkably touching – the depth of the evil they have confronted and the depth of humanity they struggle to maintain.

The Talmud teaches, "If someone comes to slay you, rise up and slay them." It is this dictum that underlay, I believe, our actions these past 65 years. We have a right of self-defense. Often there is no choice; we have to prepare ourselves for battle. War is sometimes necessary

- and when it is necessary - make sure you do not lose.

A long time ago, father Jacob taught us how to deal with our enemies. Defeat them, if we must –but never become them. Jacob understood that in order to defend oneself it is necessary to protect one's body and one's soul.

The final line of *The Gatekeepers* is a statement by Ami Ayalon who became head of the Shin Bet in 1995 after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin but he also served as commander-in-chief of the Israeli navy and a member of the Knesset – and he sums it all up with the words: “The tragedy of Israel's public security debate is that we don't realize that we face a frustrating situation, in which we win every battle, but we lose the war.”

Father Jacob was determined to win all the battles *and* the war, so is Rabbi Brous, and so am I.