

Parshas Vayishlach, 5768 Appeasement?

*"My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honor.
I believe it is peace for our time...
Go home and get a nice quiet sleep."*

(BRITISH P.M. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN UPON HIS RETURN FROM HIS MEETING WITH HITLER Y" S.)

There is no question that as history is repeating, the question of war vs. appeasement has returned-perhaps it really never left.

As Observant Jews we take comfort in the fact that when we have doubts we can look to the Torah for answers. However, as this week's Parshah/portion demonstrates, both of these routes are taken in short distant of the other: Rashi (9-10th century) 33:4, in describing Yaakov/Jacob trying to find favor in the eyes of his brother Eisav/Esau, uses an old French word "אפיזמענט"/"apaisement (I trust some are not surprised that it is a *French* word), whereas Shimon and Levi (chapter 34) not only flatly reject a treaty with Shechem but obliterate his city.

So, who was right, which path is more advantageous, war or appeasement? How could it be that Yaakov and the Shevatim/Tribes chose two conflicting paths¹ in the span of a few weeks?

I believe the answer to the above is hidden within what is perhaps the most famed Rashi or Midrash (Commentary written by the Rabbis of the Talmud which included both personal teachings and Oral Torah truths) in all of Chumash/Five Books of Moses;

¹ (the Meforshim/commentators generally explain Yaakov's concern with the actions of Shimon and Levi (34:30), not with the mass execution per se, nor with the course they opted for, but in the way it was executed.

הלכה היא, עשו שונא יעקב - *it is a matter of "law": Esau (throughout history) despises Jacob.* And, although many discuss this tenet, few, if any, make mention of the oddity of *where* the Rabbis and Rashi chose to transmit this revelation: *not* when we see the fright of Yaakov; nor when Eliphaz (Eisav's son) strips him bare; not even, really, when they now confront each other.

Instead it is a comment on the word "they embraced" (33:4) that is chosen as the apropos moment to let us in on this teaching. Why? Would it not appear that Jacob's embrace is, if anything, the antithesis of that rule and acting on it?

Ah, but *this* is the secret. Sure, we must be pragmatic, and, there *are* times that are ripe for pacification, but there is one qualifying rule: **you must know your enemy and who you are dealing with.** If we should ever delude ourselves into having a dialogue with viscous foes based on the false premise that they are not all *that bad*, then we doom ourselves in that said process. However, as demonstrated through Yaakov, if at even the climax of appeasement we are aware of with whom we are sitting down at the table, then and only then can we even consider appeasement. "They embraced", yet Jacob was consciously aware, even then, that he was reviled.

That was the danger with Shechem; he came like a lamb asserting to want only alliance and camaraderie, only to then go back home and continue violating their sister. The Shevatim would not be fooled. Eisav, as duplicitous as he was, never hid his feelings toward Yaakov and what his intentions always were. Yaakov in turn never fell victim to deluding himself from seeing the obvious.

R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (d. 1859) would demand but one thing from his students, Truth, "Peace without truth", he would say, "is not peace". While the peace he was speaking of was not geopolitical, the force and simplicity of his point is, sadly, lacking in today's mindset.

Iran.

What do we do? Only G-d knows. However, what we *can* be sure of is that if the Baker-Hamilton report-and others like it- has an underlying temperament of delusion and dilution of the enemy, then that prospect, through that agent, must be abandoned.

In our personal lives as well, we can not expect to reach any great heights if we do not first admit what our issues are. If we do not first assess our *inclinations* we

can not begin to triumph over them. Too often we mistakenly begin by underestimating the strength of temptation and in turn fail to vanquish it.

I recall, about 6 months ago, our old buddy and perennial “contributor” to our Drashos, A.J. Jakobs (Esquire magazine editor and author of the books “Know It All” and the forthcoming “The Year of Living Biblically”), embarked on a project where here would go a certain number of days *without uttering a lie*. “Yes, it *does* look like you gained weight”, “Indeed, I did get your messages, but I still did not return the calls because I do not like you that much” and so on.

While it was an intriguing experiment (I suppose), I more accurate (truthful?) moniker would have been going *without holding thoughts back*. Honesty however, the rare variety, is truthful and frank *evaluation* of self and others: I *am* going bald; he *is* smarter than I; I *am* jealous² etc. It is to depart from preconception and bias and have the courage to see things as they really are, warts and all, a painful yet rewarding process.

As the government of Israel begins to embark on new talks with her neighbor(s) this week, while we must not have illusions about the reality of these talks- whether we approve of them or not- we *must* demand this; at the very least, let not the exhaustion of fighting, the yearning for peace nor the hope for acceptance cloud their minds and hearts from an honest evaluation of all the participants involved, their motives and trustworthiness.

And, most of all, we shall not forget the one other preparation which Jacob had made in anticipation for his meeting with the enemy- Prayer.

² On this last example, see Drashah for Parshas Vayaitzay, 5768.