

## Esav Kisses Yaakov: The December Dilemma in November

The Rabbis in the Midrash teach us that whoever wants to learn how to deal with the “*shilton*” (usually translated as “authorities”) should read this parsha. So already in the rabbinic period our Sages saw in this section a lesson for dealing with the world and culture around us. And since Parshat Vayishlach always comes out in the fall, around the time of American holidays, there are lessons we can learn. Here are two nuggets from the parsha.

Yaakov prepares a strategy for dealing with his brother Esav. He has not seen him in decades, and assumes Esav wants to kill him as he did in their youth. Yaakov sends gifts, prepares for a fight, and prays. The rabbis see this as a threefold formula (*doron-milchama-tfila*). Already, we see a model for interacting with the culture around us. Sometimes, it is friendly, accepting, embracing. We share gifts with each other, both material and cultural. Sometimes, it is more hostile, either in the form of Anti-Semitism, in which case we need to stand up. Other times, we encounter (more benign) values that do not match ours, are hostile to ours. In that case we need to develop healthy boundaries, to sometimes say “no!” to influences around us. And we always need to pray. This may actually be one effective definition of Modern Orthodoxy.

Later on, when Yaakov and Esav actually reunite, we are told (Bereshit 33:4), “And Esav ran to greet him, and he hugged him, and he fell on his neck and he kissed him, and they cried.” Every *Baal Koreh* and most folks who look at a Chumash immediately notice the dots on top of the word “*Vayishakeihu* – And he kissed him”. They almost jump out at you saying “*Darsheini!* Interpret me!” Thus, there is a famous dispute (only partially referred to by Artscroll, which quotes Rashi) about whether the kiss was genuine and sincere, or not. Both views can be seen as correct interpretations.

The rabbis see Esav/Edom as the ancestor of Rome. It is not important whether there is a genetic/biological tie between Esav/Edom and Rome. There is certainly a cultural tie. And if one realizes that Esav/Edom, via Rome, and again via its successor in the Church, is the ancestor of Western Civilization, then this Biblical encounter can be seen as the model for the Jewish encounter with the Western World. Sometimes it is positive and sometimes not.

This parsha always falls out during the Fall/early Winter holidays in the US. Quite often, we read it in December when we are dealing with an environment different than (at best) or hostile to (at worst) Judaism, the Jewish People, and Jewish values. At times, we do our best trying to ignore the culture around us, trying to find smatterings of commonality with it. At others times, we bolster our own approaches defensively. While we love the US and Western Culture, the kiss just does not feel quite genuine in December. This year, we read the parsha in November, before Thanksgiving. It just feels much more compatible this year to observe Chanuka the week of Thanksgiving. The kiss seems more genuine and comfortable this time.

As we read of the encounter in this week's sidra, let us enjoy what we can enjoy with the world around us. Thanksgiving gives us an opportunity to share gratitude along with our neighbors, along with the enduring hopeful message of the Chanuka lights. This month, the kiss seems genuine. We can deal with December in December!

Shabbat Shalom!

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