

Jewish Center of Teaneck
VaYishlach 5783

Prayer, Diplomacy, and War:
The Halakhic Hierarchy in Response to Challenge

I.

Ramban begins his commentary to the sedra in an unusual fashion. Rather than simply commenting on the first *pasuk*, Ramban pens a brief introductory essay concerning Yaakov's conduct in preparation for his confrontation with Esav.

In that space, Ramban notes that the encounter between Yaakov and Esav has a two fold message: first, that the Almighty delivered Yaakov "from the hand of he who was stronger than him". Second, that Yaakov did not rely upon his righteousness, and fully dedicated himself to preparing for the confrontation with his brother turned mortal antagonist.

Concerning the second issue, Ramban notes that Yaakov employed a three fold approach, one which is fully intended to be paradigmatic for us. Even within the Ramban's celebrated expansion of the principle of *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים*, this particular example, concerning our national ethos in confronting external challenge, is afforded a pride of place. Later in the sedra, Ramban¹ cites the example of R. Yanai, who, according to the Midrash, would literally relearn this section of the Torah every time he embarked on a diplomatic effort with Roman authorities. The one time he, apparently, neglected to do so, he, quite literally, lost his shirt.

II.

With respect to the substance of the triad itself, Yaakov, first, and foremost, prayed intensively². Second, he sought rapprochement with Esav through a gift of exceptional magnanimity. Finally, as a last resort, he prepared himself for the possibility of physical confrontation.

It is critical to note that Ramban classifies all three constitutive elements of Yaakov's response as forms of *hishtadlut*, of human effort. Unwilling to simply rely on Divine deliverance on the basis of

¹ See comments of Ramban to Bereishit 33:15, based on Bereishit Rabbah 78:15.

² There can be little doubt that Yaakov's petition that Hashem should spare Yaakov and his family is yet another instance of the modality of prayer which Yaakov introduces at the beginning of Parshat VaYetze: prayer in crisis.

his own righteousness, Yaakov's engagement in prayer, from Ramban's point of view, *is itself reflective of human initiative*.

Of course, the efficacy of the prayer is entirely contingent upon Divine acceptance of the petition. And yet, what is critical for our purposes is not the efficacy of the prayer, but the decision to utilize it altogether: Yaakov, from Ramban's point of view, actively chose to pray, and in this respect, seized the spiritual initiative in a moment of crisis. In this respect, Yaakov reflected the orientation of his mother, Rivka, who, in experiencing the pangs associated with his own pregnancy made, in Ramban's understanding, contra Rashi, a decision to immerse herself in prayer, 'ותלך לדרוש את ה'.

All too often, prayer in moments of crisis is contrasted with other, ostensibly more proactive forms of response. While those are certainly necessary, it is vital to redress the misconception that prayer in a moment of crisis-ממעמקים- is in any sense affiliated with passivity. To wait for Divine salvation without spiritually activating oneself would indeed constitute passivity. Seeking the Almighty with every fiber of one's spiritual, emotional, and intellectual being is anything but passive, in the best tradition of 'ובקשתם משם את ה' אלוהיך ומצאת כי תדרשנו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך.

The man of faith prays in crisis as a primary response, one reflective of unwavering belief in the power of Divine deliverance, a deliberate, conscious, and wholehearted choice to beseech the Omnipotent for redemption in a moment of personal crisis..

III.

The second mode of response is, of course, diplomatic engagement (in this instance, through the massive mincha which Yaakov sends, along with conciliatory language.) Like the first mode, prayer, its efficacy is fully contingent upon the recipient's orientation at that moment, and the spirit in which the overture is received.

Yet, once again, what is critical with respect to the middle element of Yaakov's three-fold response is its deployment altogether. The halakha, in Rambam's view, repudiated offensive war under any and all circumstances, unless peace terms had been rejected (Rambam Melakhim 6:1). As such, Yaakov's utilization of diplomacy, even at enormous financial expense, prior to initiating martial confrontation, is itself fully paradigmatic.

While Ramban is subsequently critical of Yaakov as having been overly solicitous of Esav, it is crucial to note that Ramban's critique is constricted to Yaakov initiating the encounter with Esav altogether. Once he had initiated contact, Ramban fully approved of Yaakov's methods, and indeed, the sequence in which he deploys them.

Seforno, for one, identifies Yaakov's attempt to reach a peaceable understanding with his brother as fully dispositive with respect to future generations, citing the rabbinic tradition that R. Yochanan b. Zakkai would have been fully successful in preventing the catastrophic destruction of Mikdash had his diplomatic endeavors not been prevented by the zealots, bent, as they were, on confrontation.

IV.

Finally, Yaakov prepared for war. In Ramban's conceptual framework, military preparedness and readiness is, on the basis of Yaakov's conduct alone, a fundamental imperative.

And yet, it must be fully emphasized the extent to which the use of force is perceived as, without question, the worst outcome, even if necessary. It is not only, as previously noted, that the halakha rejects offensive war until the deployment of peace commissions, but even within Yaakov's prayer in its own right, Chazal discern profound and fundamental reticence on Yaakov's part to engage in force. Noting the double language of *יראה* and *צרה*, the latter reflecting an even deeper sense of trepidation and horror, Chazal assert that Yaakov feared not only the possibility that his family might be slaughtered, but, if possible, was even more deeply concerned that he might have to use lethal force against his brother, *שמא יהרג הוא את אחריים*.

Halakha not only permitted but demanded military readiness and preparation in self defense, as well as personal readiness to use force under similar circumstances. The rabbinic dictum, *הבא להרגך, השכם והרגו*, is not merely a permission structure, but, far more significantly, a clear mandate.

Nevertheless, the halakhic ethos demands that we perceive these situations as nothing short of a necessary evil. The inevitable loss of *tzelem elokim*, the use of violence, and the consequence of inflicting grave injury or death itself on the Almighty's creatures is fundamentally abhorrent, even when fully justified, entirely necessary, and even, normatively speaking, required.

The mere fact that David HaMelech was denied personally fulfilling his life dream of constructing the Mikdash, at least in part, because he had fought the wars of the Almighty, the overwhelming majority of which, save the disastrous incident involving Uriah, were fully justified, is sufficient basis to understand the abhorrence towards even fully justified violence in the halakhic tradition.

Similarly, the restriction against bringing weapons into the sacred space of Beit HaKnesset or Beit HaMidrash, while, obviously, subject to override in cases of pikuach nefesh, reinforces the perception of weaponry as anathema to spiritual attainment.

Finally, our eschatological vision of universal peace and tranquility, in which war itself is finally banished from the historical stage, ensures that we conceptualize that which, at times, is utterly essential in the present, as utterly lamentable.

V.

As such, Yaakov's response to Esav, what the Ramban perceived to be a veritable archetype, not only appeals to three distinct modalities of human initiative. It is, of equal note, the sequence in which these are deployed which is so vital.

Primarily, we respond with prayer, by beseeching He whose hand is all powerful for deliverance. Second, we seek peaceful resolution through diplomatic means. Finally, when all other options have been exhausted, we must be prepared to wage war, though, without question, as a necessary evil, one, which fills us, like our illustrious ancestor, with a sense of dread, ויצר לו- שמא יהרוג, הוא את אחריים.

Contemporary trends in certain segments of the observant community, a fringe of which glorify weaponry and even violence itself, betray the halakhic tradition of relating to use of force as a necessary evil, and nothing more. For the rest of us, we will continue, as part of our sacred obligation of anticipating redemption, צפית לישועה, eagerly anticipate a day during which the proverbial lion will lie in peace and tranquility with the lamb, when swords and spears shall be relics of a distant past.