VAYISHLACH: The “NOs” That Define Our Lives

□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□

(Bereshit 32:12)

THE SWORD OF ESAV

Ya’aqob Abinu returns to the land of Israel. He has many doubts. One of them is whether his brother Esav still holds a grudge against him. Twenty years earlier, Esav had decided to kill Ya’aqob. Now Ya’aqob wonders: does Esav still hate me, twenty years later? Maybe his resentment has faded and he has forgotten what happened so long ago. Ya’aqob cannot be sure. And there is one more complication: he hears that Esav is coming at the head of 400 men. Too many people for a welcoming committee.

Ya’aqob fears the worst and senses the danger to himself and his family. He prays for Divine help with the famous words: “[HaShem], save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav.”

When the brothers finally meet, Esav does not attack. Some biblical commentators explain that Esav came intending to destroy his brother and take his family and possessions, but at the last minute his heart changed. Why? The night before, Ya’aqob had fought with an envoy of HaShem (an “angel,” although the Torah calls him a “man”). This figure struck Ya’aqob on the thigh and left him wounded. When Esav saw Ya’aqob limping, he was moved (or decided that Ya’aqob was no longer a worthy opponent). According to this reading, what twenty years could not do, pity did in a matter of minutes. Directly or indirectly, HaShem saved Ya’aqob from Esav by making him fight that angel.

ESAV'S INVITATION

Now the mood turns into a family reunion. Esav thanks Ya'aqob for his generous gifts and tells him: "I have plenty, my brother." Esav is a successful man, the patriarch, founder and leader of the people of Edom. But, as his mother had foreseen, he did not follow the path of his grandfather and his father. The Edomites, led by Esav, had abandoned the beliefs of Abraham Abinu and worshipped idols, like the rest of the world.

At this point Esav no longer sees Ya'aqob as his enemy, but as his brother and friend. And here, ironically, a huge problem begins for Ya'aqob. Something more delicate and subtle than Esav's sword, but just as deadly.

Now that they have made peace, Esav does what any brother would do when his sibling comes back from far away. He invites Ya'aqob to join his family (Bereshit 33:12). "Nis'a venelekha." *Come, let's go together to my land, Se'ir, and live there as one family. Your little children will play with my children, their cousins. And I already have some daughters and granddaughters in mind who would be very good matches for your sons.*

Ya'aqob knows that if he accepts, his children will assimilate into Esav's family. That would be the end of Abraham Abinu's legacy, the "Judaism" of that time, not by Esav's sword but by the quiet dissolution of the faith that Ya'aqob's family practiced.

THE "NO" THAT CHANGED HISTORY

At that crucial moment, Ya'aqob heroically said "NO" to Esav. He said it very diplomatically: *Esav, you go ahead, and I will follow at the pace of my little children.* Esav, who perhaps did not catch the hint, insisted: *If you like, I'll leave some of my men with you to protect you on the way, until you reach my house.* Ya'aqob endured the tremendous pressure of that

moment and, uncomfortable but firm, turned Esav down a second time: *Why should I find so much favor in your eyes?* Esav finally got the message and left.

If I had to describe in my own words what Ya'aqob experienced in this encounter, I would say that in one and the same event he faced both antisemitism and assimilation. Against Esav "the enemy," God intervened directly (following the opinion mentioned above) by sending the fighting angel. But against Esav "the friend," there was no Divine intervention. There was a human decision. Ya'aqob had to act on his own and accept the consequences of his choice. In this second case God does not step in. He expects Ya'aqob to make the right decision himself.

IF YA'AQOB HAD NOT SAID "NO"…

We, the descendants of Ya'aqob Abinu, still face very similar challenges. Today's society is open to cultural and social integration without barriers or discrimination. Assimilation has already claimed millions of Jewish souls: children, parents and whole families who did not have the strength or the conviction to say "NO" to Esav the friend. The results have been catastrophic.

Two numbers say it all: 1927 and 4,200,000. In 1927, the Jewish population of the United States was 4.2 million. How many Jews should there be in the United States today, almost 100 years later? There was no Shoah in America, no concentration camps, no antisemitic massacres. And Jewish immigration to this country continued. I am not a math genius, but my intuition tells me there should be no fewer than 15 or 20 million Jews in the United States today. There are fewer than 6 million. What happened to the millions of Jews who are no longer counted as such?

To resist assimilation, we have to keep growing in our observance and in our knowledge of Jewish values. Educate our

children in Jewish schools, and teach by example. And have the courage and conviction to say “NO” whenever a relationship with Esav threatens to move from cordiality and respect to a social level where we risk losing our identity and our Jewish future.