VAYISHLACH: The Two-Camp Theory

After twenty years in Laban’s house, our patriarch Yaakov Avinu returns to the Land of Israel. He knows that his brother Esav is waiting for him there. Twenty years earlier, Esav had sworn to kill him. Yaakov has no way of knowing whether Esav still holds a grudge, or whether he has moved on with his life, forgotten what happened, and forgiven him.

Before crossing the border, he sends messengers to his brother. They come back with bad news: Esav is on his way to meet him with four hundred men. Yaakov is afraid. Nobody brings four hundred men to a welcome party… So he makes a strategic decision: he divides his family, his servants, and his flocks into two camps.

The Torah explains why:

> וַיֹּ֗אמֶר אִם־יָב֥וֹא עֵשָׂ֛ו אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶ֥ה
> הָאַחַ֖ת וְהִכָּ֑הוּ וְהָיָ֛ה הַמַּחֲנֶ֥ה
> הַנִּשְׁאָ֖ר לִפְלֵיטָֽה׃

“If Esav comes to one camp and attacks it, the remaining camp will be able to escape” (Bereshit 32:9).

Planning for the worst, Yaakov splits his camp in two, not to conquer but to survive. If Esav attacks, he will not find everyone together. While he fights the first camp, the second will have a chance to escape. The family’s survival strategy is simple: never keep everyone in one place.

By the way, this was not the only step Yaakov took. He also sent Esav a very generous gift, and he prayed. Diplomacy, defense, and Tefila. All three at once.

NACHMANIDES: A MESSAGE FOR HISTORY

Nachmanides, Ramban, offers an extraordinary reading of this episode. He sees the division into two camps as “the preview of a historical pattern that will repeat itself through the centuries.” This is the principle of *maase abot, siman labanim*: whatever happens to our patriarchs is not only a story about the past. It is also a sign of what will happen to their descendants.

In the case of the two camps, the sign is clear.

Ramban writes:

כי יעקב יודע שאין זרעו כולו נופל ביד עשו

“Yaakov knows that his descendants will never fall at once into the hands of Esav.”

The enemies of the Jewish people will not all attack at the same time. When one king issues decrees against our property or our lives in his kingdom, another king, in another kingdom, will have compassion on the Jews and take in those who had to flee. Ramban also cites the Midrash (Bereshit Rabba 76:3), where our Sages explicitly identify Yaakov’s two camps with two great parts of the Jewish people: our brothers in the south of the Land of Israel and our brothers in the Diaspora. And he concludes that this Parasha carries a message for all generations.

THE WORLD IN THE DAYS OF NACHMANIDES

Nachmanides was not writing theory. He was born in Girona, Catalonia, in 1194 and died in the Land of Israel around 1270. A look at what was happening to Jews in those years shows the historical weight of his words.

France. In 1182, King Philip Augustus expelled the Jews from the lands under his rule.

England. In 1190, in the city of York, the Jewish community suffered a terrible massacre in the castle tower, besieged by an anti-Jewish mob.

Germany. In 1235, in the city of Fulda, Jews were falsely accused of murdering Christian children to use their blood. It was one of the first blood libels of medieval Europe.

And then, the other camp. In those same years, many Jewish communities in Sepharad and in the East, the ones we broadly identify today with the Sephardic world, lived under far better conditions than their brothers in Ashkenaz, in central and western Europe.

Egypt. Take the case of Maimonides. Years before Ramban was born, he had fled Cordoba because of the religious persecution of the Almohads. After several years of wandering he settled in Egypt, under a much more tolerant Muslim government. There he became a physician at the court of Saladin's dynasty and wrote his great works. In other words, one Muslim government forced him out of his homeland, and another Muslim government allowed him to reach his full potential.

Spain. Meanwhile, in the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, many Jewish communities were thriving. Jews who had escaped the Almohads settled there. In Aragon, King James I had Jews among his administrators and advisers and held Nachmanides in great respect. In 1263, when Ramban had to take part in the famous religious disputation of Barcelona, the king granted him freedom to make his case.

Turkey. A little more than two centuries after Ramban's death, Christian Spain, which had been a place of refuge and prosperity, expelled its Jews. The year was 1492. And who took in many of those Jews? The Turkish sultan Bayezid II, a Muslim ruler who opened the gates of his empire to them.

The remarkable thing is that the players are not always the same. The roles reverse. Governments change. But the

historical pattern Nachmanides identified, incredibly, holds: when some doors close, others open.

TODAY'S CAMPS

I believe we can see a new expression of this Providential pattern in the international relations of the State of Israel. While some countries condemn Israel, accuse it of genocide, or push for sanctions in international bodies, other countries defend it, strengthen their ties with the Jewish state, and form new alliances. And the most interesting part is that the makeup of these two camps keeps changing.

Europe. In recent years, many European governments have taken positions more and more hostile to Israel. The Spanish government of Pedro Sanchez, for example, has pushed to suspend the association agreement between the European Union and Israel. But Germany, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have opposed that move. And who knows what will happen, *literally*, tomorrow? This Sunday, November 29, Spain holds elections. A change of government in Madrid could also mean a positive change in its relations with Israel.

Meanwhile, in that same Europe, Greece and Cyprus keep strengthening their strategic, economic, and military alliances with the Jewish state.

United States. President Donald Trump has shown firm support for Israel. But no one knows how this relationship will develop after the next presidential election. Among Democratic Party supporters, for example, the shift in public opinion has been enormous. Ten years ago, 53% of Democrats sympathized with Israel. Today, according to a Gallup poll from February 2026, only 17% sympathize more with the Israelis, while 65% sympathize more with the Palestinians. Political friendships, however solid they seem, may not be permanent.

Latin America. Perhaps the most surprising transformation is taking place in Latin America. The Argentina of Cristina

Kirchner, whose government had drawn close to Israel's adversaries, stands in sharp contrast to the Argentina of Javier Milei, who proudly declared himself "the most Zionist president in the world." In Colombia, the government of Gustavo Petro had broken diplomatic relations with Israel and accused it of genocide. The new president, Abelardo de la Espriella, not only restored relations but, this past October 14, opened the Colombian embassy in Jerusalem. Bolivia also restored its diplomatic relations with Israel. Chile and Honduras sent their ambassadors back. And Paraguay, Guatemala, Honduras, and now Colombia have their embassies in Jerusalem.

Sometimes it is two steps forward and one step back. And sometimes the reverse. Some move away and others draw near. Countries that condemned Israel yesterday may become its allies tomorrow. The camps are constantly being reshuffled. But what matters most is that they are never all on the same side.

LIKE YAAKOV

Yaakov did not know what Esav would do. We do not know either which governments will stand with Israel and which will stand against it five, ten, or twenty years from now. Israel must follow our patriarch's example: cultivate friendships, strengthen existing ties, and build new alliances, without placing all its trust in a single country, however powerful and generous it may be.

At the same time, as Yaakov did, Israel must be ready to defend itself against whatever comes. Today, Barukh HaShem, unlike so many centuries of our history, we have a sovereign state and an army of our own.

And, of course, we must pray to HaShem and learn to recognize Divine Providence in the shifting dynamics of international relations as well. We should not fix our attention only on the doors that close, but also on the ones HaShem opens for us.

The historical pattern that Yaakov anticipated, and that Nachmanides identified almost eight centuries ago in this episode of our patriarch’s life, is not the absence of enemies. It is that Israel will never have to face all of them at the same time.

We must not let the noise of those who curse Israel keep us from hearing the voices of those who bless it. And they are not few.