

"A HISTORY OF THE FUTURE?"

In times of stress, there is a natural tendency to look for solutions in the occult. In periods of crisis and uncertainties, we try to lift the curtain of time and peer into the future by unearthing in ancient texts of hoary prophecies the secrets of events that have not yet occurred.

This is an understandable feeling, but I am not happy with it. In the last several weeks I have received several letters from friends and family in Israel, reporting to me about (or including newspaper clipping of) a book recently published which predicted the Yom Kippur War, and later developments which have not yet taken place. Also, a number of Hasidic teachers have made predictive announcements about current events in Israel. My answer to all of them was: abandon your naivete! True bitahon or emunah (faith or confidence) does not need arcane hints or mysterious allusions. It is not necessary to interpret every crisis and imminent confrontation between superpowers as the Biblically prophesied מלחמת גוג ומגוג (the fateful War of Gog and Magog). I remember in my own lifetime the theme of this biblical war of "the end of days" was applied in contemporary fashion, successively, to the wars between Germany and America, Germany and Russia, Russia and the United States, Russia and China, China and the United States, and this past month, between Russian and the United States. One imagines, from all this speculative talk, that the Messiah is about to call his first press conference...

It is interesting that the author of the book I mentioned, on the basis of his exegesis of several difficult verses in Daniel, predicted that Israel would achieve a stunning victory in the month of Heshvan. Well, unfortunately, Heshvan has come and gone and we are now in Kislev, and Israel still has won no astounding victories.

Yet I would not want it to be thought that I in any way deny prophesy, or the ability of prophetic texts correctly to predict future events. It is just that I am distrustful of the tendency to rely upon our imaginative interpretations implicitly, as if our salvation will come from speculative commentaries. But I do believe that there are certain historic patterns that tend to repeat themselves throughout human history. Moreover, I accept fully what our Rabbis said:

הנביאים היו נביאים אשר היו נביאים אשר היו נביאים, the biographies of the

fathers anticipate the history of their descendants. The best place to look for such historic patterns is in the life of the Patriarchs, and it indeed happens that specific events of our own days reveal the contours of occurrences of long ago.

So, despite my own skepticism -- or, perhaps, because of it, since I feel more confident when I approach such a difficult task critically -- let me invite you to explore with me one such pattern of ^{היסטוריה} in biblical history, and wonder with you if this is not ^{סימן לבנים}, a history of the future; whether or not the story of Jacob is a parable for Israel today.

The Biblical tale is simple and austere in the outlines of its drama. Esau has sworn to kill Jacob for supposedly stealing from him the blessings of their father Isaac. Esau was now marching against his brother, and Jacob was afraid. He divided his family, preparing for a massacre, and hoping that at least part of them would survive. Jacob then crossed the river and ^{ויותר יעקב לבדו}, Jacob remained alone. He is then attacked by a mysterious antagonist who struggles with him until dawn and injures Jacob in the thigh, so that he leaves the battle limping. The unknown assailant wishes to leave, but Jacob will not let him go ^{כי אם ברכתני}, until you will give me your blessing. The blessing is given, and Jacob is told that his name would henceforth be not "Jacob" but "Israel." The next day, Jacob proceeds to his encounter with Esau, and there is no bloody massacre, but instead, they meet and part in peace.

The Rabbis flesh out this story by adding a number of details. For instance, on the Biblical verse that ^{וירא יעקב מאד ויזר לו}, that Jacob was very frightened and sore afraid, the Rabbis say that two synonyms for fright are used in order to indicate that not only was Jacob afraid of being killed, but he was equally afraid of killing others.

They say that the general strategy of Jacob included preparation for three policies: ^{הכנה לשלוש}, he prepared himself to give gifts to or appease Esau; he prayed to God; and he made all preparations for war in case the two previous approaches failed.

Who was this assailant? The Rabbis answer that it was ^{מלאך הגואל}, the guardian angel of Esau; as it were, the spiritual cause of Esau. What did this angel look

like? There are many answers. Some say כרועה צאן נדמה לו, he appeared to Jacob like a shepherd. Others answer: כארביליסטים, an arch-thief. Others say פרמקוס, a magician. And yet others say בלמות תלמיד תכס נראה לו, he appeared to him in the guise of a scholar.

Why did Jacob request a blessing from this stranger? The Rabbis answer: the whole battle was over the legitimacy of the blessings that Isaac had given to Jacob. And these blessings primarily concerned the right to Eretz Israel. The angel of Esau argued that the blessings of Jacob were illegitimately obtained, and therefore the Land of Israel belongs to Esau. Jacob was willing to settle in the battle if at least Esau would concede the justice of Jacob's claim, his cause, the right of his title to the Holy Land.

I have told the story as simply as I can. Let us now go to the dangerous part -- the drawing of parallels.

To me, Esau is represented by today's Arabs. I know that many people will object and maintain that the appropriate Biblical symbol for the Arabs is Ishmael. However, that is not necessarily so. Some anthropologists maintain that Palestinians are ethnically different from other Arabs, and hence not, in all probability, descended from Ishmael. Furthermore, if one wishes to play on names, Esau is identified as Edom, the "red one," and clearly Red Russia is behind the Arab cause today. Moreover, and more seriously, in the prophets, such as Obadiah, and much more explicitly in the medieval commentators such as RaMBaN, Esau always represents whoever it is who seeks to destroy Israel, no matter what his ethnic descent.

The Arabs of today, like Esau of old, swear vengeance against Israel. The fear of the Israelis in our day, like that of Jacob, is not only that they will be killed, but equally their revulsion against killing others.

That stark Biblical phrase, ויותר יעקב לבדו, "and Jacob was left alone," was never more true than it is today, when we are isolated from all the world.

We too have a triple approach. We are prepared, no matter how hawkish our views, to give Esau his doron (gift) -- some of the occupied territories. We approach the future, despite our depression, with tefillah or hope; and we are,

of course, prepared for milhamah (war).

Our struggle with the angel of Esau is the core of all our current entanglements and difficulties. All the wars we have fought in the past 25 years have concerned the right of the Jews to the Land of Israel, assured us by the blessing of Abraham transmitted to Jacob through Isaac. The claim of our antagonists is that Jacob stole that blessing, with stealth and deceit, and therefore it is not rightly ours.

Our Arab-Esau enemy appears and has appeared in various guises. For some he is the רועה צאן, the shepherd; this is the romantic image of the bucolic Arab or the bedouin, reminiscent of Lawrence of Arabia or Hollywood's Shiek of Araby. Many of us see the Arabs as ארכי ליסטים, a murderous figure, looking collectively somewhat like Arafat, with the sneer of Ibn Saud. Yet others see them as magicians, פּרמקוסט, who can dig their fingers into the dirty sand of the desert and pull out infinitely rich oil wells. And now we have learned, to our great regret and at our expense, that בדמות תלמיד חכם נראה לו, Arabs are not all fools, are not all primitive, that they can be shrewd diplomats who know how to isolate Israel by concerted action.

We emerged from this most recent encounter צולע על ירכו, injured and hurt, having lost our finest and our best, the young men who were killed or wounded or missing.

Thus far, it certainly seems as if the story of Jacob is the history of the future. What of the rest of the story?

I do not know, nor can anyone know. But if the rest of the story does follow true to the Patriarchal pattern, and one certainly hopes that it will, if life will follow the script of Scripture, then somehow or other our right to the Land of Israel, to our autonomous existence as a free State, will be legally acknowledged and morally confirmed by all the world. שרו של עשן, the Angel of Esau, will recognize us. The Arabs themselves will declare that our name is not "Jacob" but "Israel," that is, that our rights to the Holy Land are beyond moral reproach.

Indeed, that is already partly the case as the Arab nations declare, for the most part, that they are willing to

accept the existence of Israel. Although all of us who have lived through the Holocaust recognize that when they speak about pushing Israel back "to the borders of 1967," that is only the first step to pushing us back to the borders of 1947, nevertheless there has been some movement. And the encounter with Esau may yet turn out to be not another bloody war, but, after all, a peace conference!

Admittedly⁺, there are many differences between the story of Jacob and our contemporary condition. Certainly Jacob was much more of a dove than a hawk, too much for the taste of most of us. Indeed, the later Jewish tradition castigates Father Jacob for being overly deferential to Esau. And yet, the same plot may hold in its general outlines.

We may have to give Esau his doron or minha, his gifts of occupied territory. We may emerge from this encounter limping. But we must never despair! We will survive and our right to Statehood will be recognized.

Such is the pattern of Jacob's life. Is it a paradigm for us? Dare we hope so? I think we may, although we may never feel any certainty about events of the future.

It is true that we may have to give more of a doron or מנחה לעשו, more of our territories, than we want or certainly ought to.

Nevertheless, listen carefully to the following Midrash, the report of what one great Sage told us. His words are recorded in the Midrash called (וישלח י"א to) תגומא ישן:

א"ר הושיעא, אמר לי זקן אחד: אומר לך טיבו של
מדרש וכשתהא דורשו, אמור אותו משמיו עתיד עשו
להחזיר ליעקב כל מה שנטל מיעקב. שנא'
מלכי תרשיש ואיים מנחה ישיבו" מנחה
יביאו אין כתיב כאן, אלא מנחה
ישיבו. אמרת לו: זהו הדבר הטוב,
ובמשך אני דורשו. אמר לי: ומה את
שנתן לו מדעתך... דברים שנטל
מישראל באונס עאכ"כ.

Rabbi Hoshiah said: I met an old man who told me, "I will relate to you a beautiful Midrash, and when you preach it, mention it in my name. And that is, that Esau will some day return to Jacob all that he had taken from Jacob. How do I know this? Because the prophet said that "the Kings of Tarshish and Iyyim will return a gift to Jacob." It does not say that they will bring a gift, but that they will return a gift. I replied to the old man: that is a beautiful thing, and I shall repeat it in your name. He then concluded by saying to me: Now, if Esau will return to Jacob that which Jacob gave him willingly, how much more so is it certain that those things that he took from Israel by force will he return to him!

To which we may respond: דָּהוּ הַדָּבָר הַטוֹב, that indeed is a good word, something worth believing in and hoping for in the future. And we add one word: הַלְוָאִי !