Strategies for Confronting our Enemies: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayishlah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In a past lecture for the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, Professor Zvi Zohar quoted from the writings of Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Toledano (1880-1960), who had served as the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv during the years 1941-1960. Rabbi Toledano was critical of rabbis who called on Jews to accept their fate passively. These rabbis taught that Jews must bow to the harsh decree of Exile and servitude to the nations, until such time as the Almighty decides to grant us ultimate Redemption.

Rabbi Toledano wrote: "Let me state outright, that—begging their pardon—they [these rabbis] caused the loss of individual lives and of entire communities of the Jewish people, who in many instances might have saved themselves from death and destruction, had the leaders and rabbis of the generation instructed them that they were obligated to defend themselves against aggressors…." He went on to praise the "flowers of this new generation who 'awoke and wakened' to revive oppressed hearts, to engirdle themselves with a courageous spirit, and to restore the crown of Israel's honor to its pristine glory." (Yam HaGadol, H.M. 97)

During the many centuries when Jews passively accepted the injustices and cruelties committed against us, the oppressors took full advantage of our weakness. They confined us to ghettoes; they branded us as pariahs; they deprived us of basic freedoms; they committed acts of violence and murder against us; they planned and executed a Holocaust of European Jewry.

With the rise of modern Zionism, Jews decided that enough is enough. It was time—well past time—for the Jewish people to assert its own rights, to have its own sovereign homeland, to fight actively against those who oppress us.

The nations of the world were unaccustomed—and are still quite surprised—to see Jews who have shaken off the garb of passive victims, who have become politically active, who have created a strong and heroic State of Israel. If the historic levels of anti-Semitism have not declined in the modern period, at least everyone now knows that the Jews do not and will not accept anti-Semitism without fighting back.

As Rabbi Toledano noted, we may take pride in the heroism of the new generations of Jews who have demonstrated a courageous spirit and who have striven “to restore the crown of Israel’s honor to its pristine glory.”

Defending Jewish life and honor requires multiple strategies. We may gain insight from this week’s Torah reading which describes Jacob’s forthcoming confrontation with Esau. Jacob was returning home after many years in the domains of Laban. Jacob had a large retinue with him—his family, his workers, his flocks. He learned that Esau was approaching with 400 men. Jacob well understood that Esau’s forces were powerful, and that Esau could wipe out Jacob and his entire retinue. How did Jacob prepare for his dangerous confrontation with Esau?

Drawing on the Torah’s description of events, Rashi notes that Jacob adopted three strategies. First, he prayed to God. Second, he sent Esau gifts and engaged in diplomacy. Third, he prepared his company for possible battle. All three of these strategies, employed simultaneously, led to Jacob’s success in his dealing with Esau.

Some think that praying alone is all that is necessary. We should accept whatever God wills. Such a philosophy, criticized so sharply by Rabbi Toledano, is still advanced by segments of the community. It sounds as though it is pious—yet it is self-destructive. It gives full sway to the enemy to wreak havoc on us. It surrenders human initiative, and leaves us at the mercy of those who would harm us.

Some think that we can achieve our goals solely by means of diplomacy. If we give enough of our property to the enemy, this will lead to peace. If we speak in diplomatic niceties, we will gain the goodwill and cooperation of others. Yet, such a policy is also self-destructive. The enemy is never satisfied with our concessions and always demands more. The enemy’s goal isn’t to gain a bit more property from us; their goal is to destroy us. Concessions and diplomacy alone cannot solve our problems.

Some think that we must rely on our military strength. If we have enough arms and missiles, we can force the enemy to submit to our will. We can overcome their hostility only if we show them that we are much stronger than they are and that we can do them great harm. Yet, such a policy leads to an unpleasant reliance on military might that can corrode our way of life, and can give a false sense of security. Enemies, after all, also have access to arms and missiles; living in a constant state of military confrontation is not happy or healthy.

We may learn from our forefather Jacob that confrontation with the enemy requires a three-fold strategy. We must turn to the Almighty, and strengthen our spiritual lives. We must be ready to engage in diplomacy and concessions, as a reflection of our genuine wish to find ways to achieve peace and goodwill. We must have the military might to back up our prayers and our diplomacy.

For many centuries, Jews became accustomed to an attitude of passivity and defenselessness. They relied on prayers or on material gifts to those in power. In the modern period, Jews have added the strategy of political and military power. Our task today is to maintain a proper balance that includes all three dimensions: prayer, diplomacy, military strength.

By blending our spiritual, diplomatic, political and military approaches, we can help “restore the crown of Israel’s honor to its pristine glory.”

Angel for Shabbat