Confronting Our Enemies: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayetsei
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And Jacob went on his way, and angels of God met him. And Jacob said when he saw them: 'This is God's camp.' And he called the name of that place Mahanaim" (Bereishith 32:2-3).

These concluding verses of this week's Torah portion raise several questions. The angels that met Jacob are not reported to have said or done anything, only to have appeared. What was their mission? What did their presence accomplish? Jacob acknowledged that the visit of the angels made this spot "God's camp;" why then did he name the place Mahanaim, camps, in the plural?

This strange episode occurs at a particularly stressful time in Jacob's life. He had just concluded a treaty with his hostile father-in-law, Laban. Although that confrontation was over, Jacob might well have wondered whether he could in fact trust Laban to keep his side of the covenant. Would Laban and his men sneak up and attack Jacob and family; would Laban kill Jacob and take the entire family back to his own home?

While worrying about Laban behind him, Jacob also was very worried about what lay ahead when he would have to confront his brother Esau. Would Esau attack and murder Jacob and family? Could Jacob possibly assuage Esau's longstanding antagonism?

As Jacob anguished over these threatening possibilities, he must have been extremely jittery and unsure of his and his family's future.

"Angels of God met him." These angels did not have to say or do anything. Their very presence served to reassure Jacob of God's providential care for him. He realized that he would be able to overcome the challenges that threatened him because he was in God's camp—and God would protect him.

Jacob named the place Mahanaim, in the plural, because the camp served to protect him from two dangerous enemies, Laban and Esau.

Laban and Esau represent two different sorts of enemies.

Rabbinic literature depicts Laban as the archetypal sneak, cheat, and hypocrite. Laban seeks to out-maneuver others through devious means. He may appear to be sweet and generous while actually planning ways to destroy his victims. He is characterized as the classic example of the smiling person who stabs you in the back. He is dangerous because he is subtle. He preys patiently on his victims, uses many ruses to disarm opponents, and harms them when they least expect it. He lies, cheats, flatters…he does whatever is necessary to achieve his ends.

Esau is ruthless in a different way. He is not subtle and cunning like Laban. Rather, he is described in rabbinic literature as a violent and boorish thug. Esau is ready to confront his enemies directly and to prevail over them due to his physical strength. He is rough and blood thirsty. Although he is surely a dangerous opponent, one can easily detect his malice and can try to develop means of defense.

Jacob's Mahanaim symbolized the need for the Almighty's help in combating both types of antagonists. The angels' presence enabled Jacob to gain confidence in his ability to survive the challenges he faced.

In our world today, we also confront the Laban and Esau types of enemies. Among the Labans are those who speak softly and self-righteously, as though they are being intelligent and objective in their views; and yet, who promote anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in scurrilous ways. The Labans of the media and academic left pose as supporters of human rights—but they assume that everyone seems to have human rights except Jews, especially Israeli Jews. These are very dangerous and insidious enemies, ruthless in their persistent denigration of Jews and Israel—denigration that leads to and encourages anti-Jewish, anti-Israel violence.

As the Labans seek to dehumanize Jews and Israelis, the Esaus seek to perpetrate violence against us. The Esaus are terrorists blinded by hatred. They train their children to hate and to murder. They glorify and honor murderers of Jews and Israelis. The violent Esaus and their supporters are dangerous; their "moral universe" is vastly different from ours. They promote and justify hatred and murder; they rejoice at the shedding of Jewish blood.

How nice it would be if angels of the Lord would appear before us to give us encouragement at a time of great crisis. How fortunate Jacob was to have

received a visit from heavenly messengers as he confronted threats from Laban and Esau.

Absent a miraculous visit from angels, we ourselves need to combat the Labans and Esaus of our time and place. We need to maintain our own Mahanaim that will defend us from the constant immoral propaganda of media, academic and political pundits; and we need to be strong and smart enough to defeat the violent Esaus of our generation.

In the beginning of this week's Parasha, Jacob is reported to have had his dream in which he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending it. In the dream, he received God's promise: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed. And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in you and your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back into this land" (Bereishith 28: 13-15).

Let us remember this promise of God, and let us be strong, happy and confident.

Angel for Shabbat