Esav, Yaacov and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, I participated in a symposium on interfaith dialogue and cooperation. One of the participants, a highly respected Orthodox rabbi, cited a statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: “It is a halakha that it is known that Esav hates Yaacov.” He applied this statement of Rabbi Shimon as an iron law of history: non-Jews hate Jews! When I challenged his usage of this text, he raised his eyebrows in surprise: “Just look at our history. It is a long story of anti-Jewish hatred. Esav will always hate Yaacov; non-Jews will always hate Jews.”

I’ve heard and read words of other rabbis who have echoed this understanding of Rabbi Shimon’s statement. Jews are universally and always hated. There is no escape from anti-Semitism. It is a built in “law of nature.”

I bristle at this line of thought. While indeed Jews have faced—and still face—hateful enemies, it is also true that tremendous numbers of non-Jews don’t hate us at all! They respect us, work with us, and stand up for us in times of trouble. To view ourselves as the eternal victim is psychologically problematic. At worst, it generates a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we assume everyone hates us, then we alienate ourselves from those who are perceived to be our enemies.

What did Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai mean when he asserted that it is a law that Esav hates Yaacov? His comment relates to this week’s Torah portion.

Esav hated Yaacov for having won their father’s blessing. Yaacov fled home and stayed away for many years, ultimately returning with his wives and children. Yaacov was afraid that Esav would attack him and his family. Instead of a hostile reunion, though, Esav hugged Yaacov and kissed him. In the Torah text, the word “vayishakeihu” (and he kissed him) has small dots on top, as though to imply added meaning to the word. Rashi, citing Rabbi Shimon, suggests that Esav’s kiss was insincere; he still hated Yaacov. The kiss was only a ruse. In spite of Esav’s outward signs of love, he was steeped in hatred for Yaacov. Rabbi Shimon’s statement, thus, can be understood simply as an interpretation of a particular biblical text involving just two people, Esav and Yaacov; it has nothing to do with ongoing relationships between Jews and non-Jews.

However, it is possible to apply his statement to a larger context. Rabbi Shimon was known for his deep hostility to Rome. He despised Roman rule over Israel and spent years of his life hiding from Roman authorities who wanted to execute him. It would not be unreasonable, then, to interpret Rabbi Shimon’s statement as an expression of visceral opposition to Rome and mistrust of Roman rule. By identifying Rome with Esav and the Jews with Yaacov, Rabbi Shimon was warning Jews to maintain their resistance to Roman rule, and not to trust any peace overtures they may offer. Roman hatred, in his eyes, was implacable.

Although Rabbi Shimon’s statement can be understood both in terms of the biblical passage and his own personal historical setting, it is a huge stretch to cast his statement as an iron law of history for Jews and non-Jews in all places and all times. Even if one would want to extrapolate his statement so broadly, why should the views of one rabbi, living several thousand years ago in a highly hostile relationship with Rome, be taken as the one authentic view on Jewish relations with non-Jews? And why should anyone today cite this statement in a way that condemns Jews to eternal victimhood?

If Rabbi Shimon's statement is to be taken in its largest context, I would suggest an entirely different understanding of it.

The Torah and Midrashim describe Esav as a physically powerful hunter. In contrast, Yaacov is described as a quiet person "dwelling in tents." Esav was strong and aggressive. He personifies the bully who depends on his strength to cow others into submission. Yaacov was essentially a shy, hesitant person…an ideal target for bullies.

Rabbi Shimon's statement was not about Jews and non-Jews; it was about bullies and patsies. It is indeed a "law of nature" that bullies will hate and oppress those whom they perceive to be frightened weaklings. Esav-types will always look down on and try to hurt Yaacov-types.

The lesson is: don't be a victim! Don't allow bullies to humiliate you or to physically hurt you. Yaacov was able to overcome Esav by outsmarting him and outmaneuvering him; by defeating the bullying tactics of Esav, Yaacov won his own liberation.

The Esavs of the world—whatever their religion or nationality—are hateful and arrogant bullies. The Yaacovs of the world—whatever their religion or nationality—need to stand up to those who would humiliate and crush them.

When people succumb to the self-image of victimhood, they live as perpetual victims. When the Yaacovs develop their strength and self-confidence, they can resist—and defeat—the bullying tactics of Esav.

Angel for Shabbat