

The upcoming holiday of Hanukkah is often seen as a child's festival, but it is, at base, a story of violence, conflict and power. "The few defeated the many ..." we say in our prayers, marveling millennia later at the miracle of Jewish power. The defeat of Antiochus by the Maccabees set in motion a centuries-long emphasis in the Jewish polity on the possibilities and potential of Jewish military power. Only with the overwhelming defeat of the Jewish nation first by the Roman Emperor Vespasian in the year 70, then Hadrian in the middle of the next century did Jews in large number turn from the idea that power is to be equated with military strength.

Until the rise of political Zionism in the nineteenth century, the dominant perspective in Jewish thought was on spiritual, not material, power. The rabbis, as a result, altered the focus of Hanukkah. No longer did the Maccabees have prominence. Instead, through the story of miracle of the oil, God became the Hanukkah hero. Even the *haftarah* for the first Shabbat in Hanukkah underscored the point. Rabbinic Judaism used the words of Zechariah, "Not by might, not by power, but by My (meaning God's) spirit" as a call to reject political power as the means of achieving our goals. Jewish strength was now grounded in wit, wisdom, diplomacy and accommodation.

Zionism rejected this approach of compromise and diplomacy as a *Galut* (or exile) mentality - a weak failure of the Jewish spirit. Rather than wait for God to bring us back into the Land of Israel, Zionism asserted human power. In place of obsequiousness to Gentile authority, Zionism stressed the need for Jews to take control of their own destiny. They argued for a return to the land, for the normalization of Jewish life and the concomitant development of the military power necessary to live as a sovereign nation.

The State of Israel is heir to the Zionist affirmation of Jewish power. But the assertion of this found power has, in the reality of the Jewish State, been tempered by the notion that strength is not found solely through military might. Consider, if you will, the name of Israel's army. It is called the "Israel Defense Forces," an army which, at least in theory, is only in defensive maneuvers.

The last decade, however, has called into question many of the assumptions of the establishment of a Jewish State. The attempt to end the conflict between Israel and

the Palestinians has taken so many paths, each seeming to lead to a dead end. The diplomatic route of the Oslo Accords was discredited with the failure to reach any compromise three years ago. In response to the resulting *intifada* Israeli governments, first under Prime Minister Ehud Barak, then Ariel Sharon, used different tactics to try to control the violence. Despite assertions that Israeli tactics have ended the violence, there seems to be no abatement to the terror. The debate about ways to proceed has been pitched, both in Israel and here.

Is the most effective policy assassination of suspected terrorists or building a security fence? Should diplomatic channels still be pursued or is it best to take an approach of no negotiation unless terror attacks end? Is the back channel approach of the recent Geneva Accords simply wishful thinking, or is it a framework by which the conflicting parties might find a way to move towards some accommodation?

Uncertainty about how to deal with an intractable enemy is not new. In fact, it is a central theme in this week's *parasha*. Jacob is returning home after a two decade absence. He left out of fear that his brother, Esau, would kill him. In preparation for his return Jacob sends a messenger on ahead to tell Esau he is coming. Jacob's emissaries return, however, with an ominous message: "Esau himself is coming to meet you and there are four hundred men with him." What else could it be, Jacob reasons, but a party of war? Terrified, he considers various tactics. Is there a way to placate this enemy? What means can be found to allow some to survive if all cannot? Is the best route forward diplomacy or contention?

The great medieval Torah commentator, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (or Ramban) taught that the story of Jacob and Esau serves as a model for future generations. "Everything that transpired between Jacob our father and Esau," wrote the Ramban, who lived in the time of the Crusades, "is repeated over and over again in our encounters with the descendents of Esau ... The story of the first encounter between the two feuding brothers is told to serve as an example which we must follow."

Jacob's decisions about the seemingly inevitable conflict are, therefore, worthy of consideration. What is it that Jacob does? First, he divides his family and possessions into two camps. Then, undoubtedly afraid and uncertain, he prays. Finally, he sends gifts to his antagonist, hoping to curry his favor. As a realist, Jacob

prepares for war. As a man of hope and spiritual sensitivity, he prays for peace. He does not seek to antagonize, but uses diplomacy and prudence. In the end, however, he takes neither the course of battle or prayer, but perhaps the hardest path. He confronts his enemy, his brother, face to face.

The current Israeli government pursues policies which are, seemingly, mutually exclusive. They continue to enrage Palestinians by expanding settlements, even in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, plans are being made for a meeting between Prime Minister Sharon and the Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala). While targeted assassinations of suspected terrorists have slowed, they remain a contentious option with no clear evidence of effectiveness in ending terror. What has truly changed in the past three years is any sense of clear boundaries between the Israeli Right and Left. Just this week former Jerusalem mayor and now Likud party member of Knesset, Ehud Olmert, argued for a unilateral withdrawal from areas now controlled by Israel. It is a position one would have thought possible only from the Left a couple of years ago. Yet now Olmert, a staunch Right-winger, concludes that the only way to gain strength as a nation is to consolidate resources and unilaterally withdraw from untenable positions in the West Bank and Gaza.

If anything is clear, then, it is that there is no clear way forward. In part this is because no one knows if anything Israel does will put a lid on Palestinian violence. But it may also be because no one knows what tactic (or variety of approaches) might lead Palestinians to reconsider as a disastrous failure their support of terror as a means to achieve political ends.

Our father Jacob tried various approaches with his brother Esau, because he was uncertain which would lead to the survival of his family. In the Torah Jacob places his children and wives before Esau. Then, alone, he goes out before them to face his enemy. He prepares for the worst, but he gives reconciliation and peace a final chance. Our tradition is divided as to what happens next. A simple reading of the Torah is that upon seeing Jacob Esau falls on his neck, kisses him and they weep. Striking an optimistic note Rabbi Shimon ben Eliezer taught that Jacob's willingness to continue talking broke through to Esau's sense of love and reason (*Bereshit Rabbah* 78:12)

His gamble pays off. Or did it? Commentators of old noticed that above the word in Torah וישקהו "and he kissed him" are several dots. In explaining this Rabbi Yannai played with the words and said it is because he did not kiss him (נישק), but "bit him" (נישר). Why, then, did they weep? Stretching the text Rabbi Yannai said it was because Jacob's neck turned to stone. Esau cried for his teeth, Jacob for his neck.

While Rabbi Yannai's version of Torah seems more farfetched, I think he is closer to the emotional truth of Jacob and Esau's encounter. Enemies do not quickly become friends. Yet even this pessimistic view of Esau does not lead to outright conflict, for the brothers/enemies find a way, after this encounter, to live in an uneasy truce, albeit apart. It seems that thousands of years later, that may be the way only way forward for Israelis and Palestinians.

I do not delude myself into thinking that most Palestinians, either by choice or acquiescence, are currently supporters of those who are anything but an enemy of peace. But it does not mean that we must assume that this is an enemy with whom reconciliation is impossible. A supporter of Israel, I want a Jewish State that is self-confident and powerful, but not at the expense of dignity for our enemies. As a Jew I support a Jewish State that is open to conciliation and compromise, but not at the expense of the security and dignity of my People.

May we learn from Jacob. Prepared, vigilant, strong on the outside even if fearful within, but always ready to make peace. There is a time to harden our necks and not shy from conflict. There is also a time for diplomacy. Jacob understood that those paths need not be mutually exclusive. And may God give us, our brothers and sisters in Israel and the leaders they choose the courage and patience to do all they can - with resolve, but with an openness to reconciliation - to seek a way towards peace.

As Jacob prayed, so do I. So must we all.