

## Thinking Torah

By Rav Alex Israel – www.alexisrael.org

### Parshat Vayishlach:

# Cyclic History - *The doctrine of Ma'aseh Avot Siman L'Banim*

This week, we will examine the famous doctrine of Ma'aseh Avot Siman Lebanim. This meta-historical theory has been applied by many commentators throughout Sefer Bereshit, however, it is in this Parsha that the Ramban truly "goes to town" with this theory.

The following mekorot should put you in the picture:

### Chavruta Study:

1. See the opening comments of the RAMBAN to our parsha.
2. Ramban on 32:9, 32:16
3. See also the Ramban on Bereshit 12/6 (read until "al kol panim") where he outlines his theory in principle.  
- How does this theory work?
4. See the first few lines of the Ramban's introduction to Sefer Shemot.  
- How does he describe Sefer Bereshit here?

### For Further Reading

See Nechama Leibowitz's excellent article : "History repeats itself" In "Studies in Bereishit" pg. 372

### The Shiur Section

Ma'aseh Avot Siman Lebanim. This principle appears in the Rabbinic literature, stretching from the Talmud and the Midrash, all the way to the great scholars of the Medieval period, and it states - in the most basic form - that future events will mirror past events and conversely; that the occurrences of the forefathers will recur to their children after them. A simple translation of that phrase is: "the actions of the fathers are a sign for the children".

In our specific story, we will see how the meeting between Esav and Yaakov - fraught with the threat of Yaakov's imminent demise; coloured by feelings of dread, prayer, hope - is read as a paradigm of all future encounters between the Jewish nation and Non-Jewish oppressors. The image of helpless Yaakov; weighed down by his wives and children, innocently going on his own journey; confronted by an aggressor who threatens him with death is taken as a model for future happenings of this sort.

### LESSONS OF THE PAST.

" A saying of Rabbi Jonathan: Whoever wishes to placate a king or a government and knows not their policy nor can he predict their attitudes; let him place this chapter (of Yaakov and Esav) before him and learn from it the art of appeasement and diplomacy" (Midrash Lekah Tov)

Our Parsha has implications which go beyond the written narrative. Nachmanides (the RaMBaN - abbreviation for Rabbi

Moses Ben Nachman) emerges as the champion of this meta-historical philosophical reading of the Biblical text and it is in our Parsha where this type of analysis is given special prominence. His introduction to our Parsha explains his multi-layered reading of the Biblical text.

" This Parsha is written to tell us .... that everything which befell our father (Yaakov) with his brother Esav will occur to us repeatedly in our relations with the children of Esav. [Rome and the entire Christian world are seen as heirs to the title "Edom" and thus Esav's children.] We should teach ourselves to be prepared to act according to the three pronged strategy that Yaakov adopted: Prayer, diplomacy and saving ourselves from war- by fleeing and escape."

Nachmanides will read every detail of the story as an allusion to a later historical reality. Let us read a selection of these interpretations.

### TAUNTING THE DOG

Our Parsha begins with Yaakov's approach to Esav. Yaakov is returning to Canaan and he sees fit to inform Esav of his arrival. The messengers return with the news that Esav and a whole army of men are already on their way to meet Yaakov and his family.

"Yaakov sent messengers to ahead to his brother Esav in the land of Seir, to the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows, 'Thus shall you say, 'To my Lord Esav, thus says your servant Yaakov: I stayed with Laban and remained until now...I send this message to my lord, in the hope of gaining your favor.'" (32:4-6)

The Midrash comments :

" Rav Huna said, 'Someone who meddles with a problem which is not his is like a person who grabs a dog by the ears'. God said to Yaakov: 'Esav was busy with his own business. Why did you dispatch a delegation to him?'"

The Midrash sees Yaakov's message as an act of stupidity and foolishness. Esav would never have known of Yaakov's arrival had he not been informed by Yaakov's messengers. He is inviting the evil upon himself, taunting the dog by pulling its ears! Why go and draw Esav to you? You should have let him carry on his own life!

The Ramban sees the wider historical context of this critique:

"In my opinion, this detail alludes to the fact that WE WERE THE CAUSE OF OUR OWN DOWNFALL by the hands of the Rome. In the Second Temple period, the Hasmonean kings made a treaty with Rome and some of their representatives even went to Rome and in the end, this was the first step of our falling into their hands."

We have already noted the Rabbinic identification of Rome with Esav. Ramban is referring to a deal made between the King Agrippas with Rome, to assist him in ridding Israel of Greek power. In replacing Greece, the alliance with Rome opened the door to a greater evil. It was the Romans who destroyed our Temple and exiled us from our land. We invited them through the door. Yaakov invites evil upon himself and so do his descendants. History repeats itself.

## TWO CAMPS

Yaakov "divided the people with him ... into two camps. He said ' If Esav comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape.'" (32:7-8)

The Ramban comments:

"This too is an allusion: Esav may make plans and decrees which aim at destroying our name completely but he will succeed in harming only a section of our people in certain lands. A ruler in one land will make laws and edicts against Jewish property and Jewish lives and a leader in another land will have compassion in his country and will save the remnant.... See that this detail also alludes to future events."

Indeed the Ramban knew this very well from personal experience. In the shadow of Christian influence, the Ramban himself was expelled from Spain by the King's decree. He found refuge in Jerusalem and proceeded (in his seventies!) to work on rebuilding the Jewish community in the Holy City. In our Century, where we have witnessed the destruction of a third of world Jewry - the entire fabric of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe - we have seen a revival of intense Jewish life and learning in the Jewish centres of Israel and America. History repeats itself!!

## A MAN WRESTLED WITH HIM

Another story seen in a meta-historical light is Yaakov's struggle with the strange man.

" Yaakov was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." (32:25)

One of the puzzling features about the story is the identity of the mysterious attacker. He is described as a man but then Yaakov talks about seeing God! Who is he? The commentators talk about Yaakov wrestling with an angel. But what is the purpose of this angel?

Rashi quoting the Midrash, identifies this protagonist as the "Officer of Esav". He is the Patron Angel of Edom. According to Rashi then, Yaakov is fighting the National angel of Esav. This is not a fight between humans; this is a battle of National destinies. This is a struggle in which both fighters are locked in mortal combat an entire night. Equal forces face each other, no one being able to overpower the other. Who will prevail over whom?

The Ramban once again, sees this episode as yet another allusion to future events:

" The whole episode represents future history. That there would come a time when the descendants of Esav would overcome Yaakov, to the brink of absolute annihilation. This happened during the days of the Mishna in the generation of Judah ben Baba and his colleagues. At that time R. Hiyya bar Abba pronounced 'If a man will say to me , give your life for the name of God', I will give

it; but on condition that he will put me to death immediately. A time of torture and forced conversion I could not bear.' What did they do in such times (of forced conversions)? They would bring white hot iron balls and place them under the armpits and drive their souls from them.

There were other generations who did such things and worse than this but we endured all and it passed us by, as is intimated by the text : 'And Yaakov came to Shalem' (33:18) (Shalem means whole or perfect) - Yaakov emerged intact."

So this story too, represent the night times, the dark times, when we are locked in game of life and death, and even though we get hurt and we limp, we emerge intact and we emerge having prevailed against Esav.

## VIEWING HISTORY IN CYCLES

Many have noted this tendency of the Ramban to connect different events in history. The American Jewish academic Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in his book "Zachor" notes that the Ramban was typical of many Medieval Jewish scholars:

"There is a pronounced tendency to subsume even major new events to familiar archetypes, for even the most terrible events are somehow less terrifying when viewed within the old patterns rather than in their bewildering specificity. Thus the latest oppressor is Haman and the court Jew who tries to avoid disaster is Mordechai. **Christendom is 'Esav' or 'Edom'**, and Islam is 'Yishmael'....The essential contours of the relations between Jews and gentiles have been delineated long ago in rabbinic aggada..."

(Hence, even today, there is reluctance in certain circles to the introduction of new commemorative days - like Yom Hashoah - into the Jewish calendar. This argument will say that the commemoration of the Shoah can be subsumed within Tisha B'av. After all, it is the selfsame phenomenon just repeating itself!).

How do we relate to these ideas? Are they a method of avoiding reality, or maybe something more? Can we really draw such precise historical parallels from our Biblical stories to current events? Can we really read the Bible in this way?

In his commentary to Lech Lecha, the Ramban introduces the principle of "maaseh avot" and makes a rather radical statement.

" I will tell you a rule to be applied throughout the parshiot of Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov. The Rabbis stated this rule as "everything that happened to the fathers is a sign for the children". The Torah tells stories, at length, about journeying or well digging and the like. You might think that these are meaningless detail but in reality they all tell us something about the future. **WHEN AN EVENT OCCURS TO ONE OF THE PROPHETS WHO ARE OUR FOREFATHERS, HE WILL KNOW THAT IT WILL BE DECREED TO HIS DESCENDENTS IN SOME FORM.... AND THE EVENT WILL TAKE PLACE NO MATTER WHAT."**

The Ramban seems to be indicating that the lives of the avot - the patriarchs- somehow DEFINE the future. "He will know that it will be decreed to his descendants ...and the event will take place no matter what"! Questions abound. How do we choose which events find later expression and which do not? Why should the patriarchs have this effect?

The Ramban was strongly attracted to the kabbalistic mystical traditions. Might we suggest that in the same way as the patriarchs are referred to in their fatherly status, the Ramban sees the Avot literally as fathers to the children of Israel. They are the genetic blueprint of the Jewish Nation. They are the DNA which will form the People of Israel! If they do something, it has ramifications far greater than their individual lives. An act by the avot has an effect all the way down the line. It's like the avot are the prime elements of the Jewish people and now we live in the tracks that they have trodden.

The truth is that even this interpretation is somewhat unsatisfactory. Children do not always look like their parents and the same events which befall a parent are not necessarily visited upon the sons. Nonetheless, the Ramban's tendency to unite Jewish History into cyclic recurring patterns is a very popular idea that finds its expression in many ways. In exactly this way, we incorporate many hundreds of years of pogroms and persecution into the fast day of the Ninth of Av. On that day we "unify" the burning of the Temple with other tragedies. On Passover we can celebrate freedom not solely as a historical event but as a living reality.

And when -in a weeks time- we say the blessing for the Chanuka candles and we praise God, " She'asa nissim la'avoteinu - Who made miracles for our fathers - Bayamim Hahem, ba'zman hazeh - in those days of old and IN OUR TIMES" we are expressing a profound belief that Jewish destiny is linked not just between Jews - horizontally - but also vertically, throughout the generations. Our collective Jewish history is seen not as a series of chance happenings but rather as a process, a meaningful journey. In that sense we do not simply move blindly into the future. Our past and our future are intertwined, each one enlightening the other.

Shabbat Shalom.