

VAYISHLACH (GENESIS 32:4-36:43)

Way to Go, Joe! (Lieberman)

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

After an absence of 36 years, Jacob was returning to Israel (Canaan). He had left so long ago – 1) to escape the murderous plans of his brother Esau; and 2) to seek a wife. They had been difficult years. Esau's son confiscated all his possessions, forcing him to arrive at his uncle's home with nothing but a walking stick and the shirt on his back. His uncle/father-in-law Laban mistreated him terribly. Laban lied to Jacob and cheated him every step of the way. Laban swindled him over wages and even switched brides on him! (He put a heavy veil over Rachel's sister Leah and tricked him into marrying the wrong wife!) Not satisfied with cheating his son-in-law, Laban actually tried to kill him! (See "Watch Out For What Car?".)

Now, after all those years, Jacob was returning home, a wealthy and powerful man with a large family.

How did Jacob survive this terrible ordeal? How did this lonely Jew among strangers manage to flourish under such difficult circumstances?

Perhaps we can see the answer in Jacob's first communication with his still-angry brother:

*Jacob sent messengers ... to his brother Esau... He told them, "tell my brother ... 'I lived with Laban – **and observed the 613 Commandments. I didn't pick up any of his evil ways. Therefore, you will not be able to defeat me because G-d will continue to protect me.'***" (A synopsis of Genesis, 32:4-5 and the commentaries of Rashi and Sifsei Chachomim.)

Our strength comes from adhering to the word of G-d.

It is so easy to allow the majority to dictate to us how we should act and what we should believe. It would have been so much less complicated for Jacob to pursue the path of least resistance and embrace the idolatrous ways of Laban. He would have fit in so much better had he just allowed himself to assimilate.

However, had he allowed himself to "fit in," he would have given up the sanctity of Torah observance. He would have abandoned the one thing that made him unique. And, in the process, he would have destroyed himself.

Throughout history, our People have found ourselves in situations where our values stood in sharp contrast to the values of those around us. It is a mistake to think that we will succeed by running away from who we are. Our *raison d'etre* is to set an example for others to follow, rather than the other way around.

If I may allow myself a personal note of pride. My oldest son is currently studying and teaching in China. I assumed that he would wear a cap, rather than attracting attention to himself by wearing a *Kippah* on the streets and in the classrooms of Beijing. I was wrong. He is unashamed and unabashed. How many people do you know who aren't afraid to look Jewish in Tiananmen Square?!! Some people ask him what his head covering is for. A common response is, "Oh, you're Jewish? Jews are very smart! Look at Einstein and Karl Marx!"

Unlike America, where you can go into any store to buy kosher food, China presents many challenges. You can't buy milk in a store and assume that it's pure cow's milk. Many food items are only available through the local rabbi who imports them. Glatt Kosher chicken and beef are available, slaughtered in Inner Mongolia!

It would be so much easier to go with the flow. But Torah is not about what's easy; it's about what's right.

A funny thing happened on the way to synagogue last Friday.

I got into my car to drive to Services. I was running late; it was about ten minutes before sundown. I turned on the radio and heard a familiar voice. Senator Joseph Lieberman, candidate for the Democratic nomination for president, was being interviewed. "What's he doing on the radio," I asked myself. "I thought he's a Sabbath observer!"

I reminded myself that with so little time before sundown, the same question could be asked about what I was doing in my car! But, I wondered, I'll be in Shul in about a minute. Who knows how long he'll stay on?

The host spoke to the senator about Iraq and the economy. "Why don't you come back on the show some other time, and we'll give you an hour?"

While the host was still talking, I heard Lieberman say, "Well, thanks for having me on the show. Have a great weekend."