

JACOB & ESAU: ENGAGE OR RETREAT

By: Rabbi Yosef Vogel

Vayishlach

Kislev, 17 5773

One of the most suspenseful moments in the biblical story of Genesis occurs when Jacob meets Esau. After years of hostility and deep hate, Jacob has been told that his brothers' feelings towards him have not changed. Jacob therefore is left with no choice but to prepare himself and his family in the best way possible. He devises a multi strategy in order to maximise his chances of survival.

After careful consideration he devises a plan where he manages to present himself and his family to Esau in a way which would appear to be reconciliatory but could also be easily adapted to a combative position if need be.

We are told that in deciding the formation of family members and their relative exposure to Esau, Jacob chooses to protect his beautiful and only daughter Dina from Esau by hiding her. Because of which, our sages say, Jacob is punished. For it is only Dina who might have had a positive and sobering effect on Esau.

The question is obvious, was it not Jacobs's obligation as a wise and caring father to be vigilant and protect his daughter from a hostile and negative individual such as Esau? Yes, she might have had a positive impact on her uncle, but should one expose oneself or ones children to such a risk, in the odd chance that one could make a positive difference in the lives of others.

It is at this moment in one of the great showdowns - between powerful personalities, representing opposite extremes - that one of the great lessons in social responsibility is derived. Yes it is true that we have an obligation to ourselves and that consequently we should protect ourselves and our families from foreign and hostile influences. However, just as importantly we have a responsibility towards other people as well, even if this entails exposing ourselves to the risk of being negatively influenced by them.

It is this incident between Jacob and his brother Esau which is symbolic of the essence of the conflict between good and evil that exists inside each and every one of us. It is this eternal lesson which we learn from this story that we must never forget. Yes, we must protect our own, however we will never fully reconcile our differences, until such time, that we expose ourselves to foreign negative forces, which we can in turn sublimate and eventually transform into a positive. It is also the only way to build up our immune system in dealing with adversity, so that when we are ever exposed to risk we are in a strong enough to retain our integrity.

30th November 2012Sedra: **Vayishlach**

Shabbat Begins: 3.41pm

Shabbat Ends: 4.48pm