

Message from the Haftara

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Yaakov and Eisav, Shoulder to Shoulder

TO-L'DOT

In this week's haftara, the prophet Malachi opens his prophecy with an expression of divine scorn for Israel's older twin: "Is Eisav not a brother to Yaakov? So says the Lord: Yet I loved Yaakov and hated Eisav, so I made his mountains desolate and gave his inheritance over to desert jackals" (1:2-3). The prophecy, which continues the theme of conflict between the twins that is seen in the parsha, confirms what would become a central theme of Jewish thought from biblical to modern times: The rivalry and discord between the two ancient siblings prefigures a much longer and deeper saga of conflict and distrust between two civilizations. Throughout history, the Jewish people would find themselves time and again pitted against the physical and spiritual heirs of Eisav – first the small neighboring nation of Edom, then the much larger Roman Empire, and finally the titanic world of Christianity that supplanted it.

However, today, after centuries of persecution and suffering, develop-

ments in Christian theological thought, and changing attitudes among Jews about engaging with others, we may finally be moving beyond this ancient conflict.

The Christian world, especially the Catholic Church, with its epicenter in Rome, long viewed the tiny Jewish people as a threat – a living challenge to the legitimacy of the Church as the "new chosen people". For this reason, Christian theologians from ancient times have insisted on the Jews being an accursed race. They celebrated the indigence, statelessness, weakness, vulnerability, and poverty of Jews around the world – and often reinforced these desperate conditions – as a putative testimony to what they saw as God's favor of the Church and rejection of Israel. This stood in direct contradiction to the prophet Malachi's words, which favored the future of Yaakov and his descendents – the people of Israel.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, in his famous 1956 address and resulting essay, *Kol Dodi Dofek* ("The Voice of My Beloved Knocks"), speaks of several ways in which God, through the founding of the State of Israel, "knocked" or beckoned throughout history to the Jewish people to fulfill its historic destiny. One of these divine "knocks" was the fact that the State of Israel very existence was a repudiation of the two-thousand-year-old Christian narrative of supersession:

The theological arguments of Christian theologians to the effect that the Holy One has taken away from the Community of Israel its rights to the Land of Israel, and that all of the biblical promises relating to Zion and Jerusalem now refer in an allegorical sense to Christianity and the Christian Church, were all publicly shown to be false, baseless contentions, by the establishment of the State of Israel. One must have a broad familiarity with theological literature from the time of Justin Martyr down to the theologians of our own day to comprehend the full extent of this marvel by which the central axiom of Christian theology was shattered. (p. 34)

This crisis of the Christian narrative about themselves is evident in many contexts, not least in the major sea change that took place in Catholic theology's attitude toward the Jews in the second half of the twentieth century. In its 1965 *Nostra Aetate* declaration, the Church rejected the idea that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, and emphasized that Christianity and Judaism shared a spiritual bond and should continue to engage in dialogue. Nevertheless, even today, Israel's relationship with parts of the Christian world remains fraught. In the complex web of international relations, the Church or the Christian world often exert pressure that is meant to tie the

hands of the State of Israel in its fight against its enemies.

At the same time, there remains a hope for a brighter future. The advent of the Messianic era has the potential to reunite the two brothers, Yaakov and Eisav, in the recognition that different peoples possess different legitimate paths to connection with the one true God. As the Rambam explains, Christianity, though historically challenging to the Jewish people, has also served as a vehicle for the introduction of God's Scripture and ideas into the global sphere.

Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for the Mashiach's coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together, as Tzefanya 3:9 states: "Then I will transform the people's language and turn their words into clear, clean speech so that they may call upon the name of the Lord and serve Him shoulder to shoulder" (Hilchot Melachim 11:7).

The realization of this potential has indeed begun. Today, certain segments of the Christian community are some of the strongest supporters and allies of Israel, speaking a language that recognizes Jewish chosenness and the true ancient connection of our people to our land. With this as a

model, we can perhaps begin to envision a time in which the tension and feelings of persecution that have poisoned two millennia of Jewish-Christian relations will be a phenomenon of the past. Instead, through mutual efforts of dialogue, cooperation, and shared work, Yaakov and Eisav can become partners in building a better global society and healing its ills.

This is a vision that Rabbi Soloveitchik had even before Nostra Aetate. In the early days of the State of Israel, he argued in his essay “Confrontation” (Tradition, issue 6.2, 1964, page 26) that the Jewish People may “cooperate with the members of other faith communities in all fields of constructive human endeavor”, on the condition that this does not entail any kind of spiritual, halachic, or dogmatic compromise of Jewish principles. More than half a century later, as we move from conflict to redemption, we dream of rising even higher, to the level of commonality of spiritual purpose described by Rambam through the prophecy of Tzefanya. At that time, we will be able to proclaim in truth that God’s will has touched all of the nations; in the words of our haftara: “The Lord is great beyond the territory of Israel” (Malachi 1:5). 