

# Diplomacy

Diplomacy has become a dirty word. The seventeenth century English diplomat Henry Wotton said that a diplomat is sent abroad to lie for his country. And there is a fine line between sycophancy, being dishonest and on the other hand finding the right way of making one's point with greatest effect.

The Torah has several examples of how important diplomacy is. Avraham must negotiate all the time with the people and monarchs he encounters. So too does Isaac. Jacob has to deal with Esav and he certainly humbles himself both with Esav and Lavan. The Midrash and the Talmud record that Rabbi Judah the Prince who was head of the Jewish world during the second century had to send diplomatic messages to Rome. We are not sure which Roman Emperor he addressed. But he instructed his secretary R. Afess to write a letter in his name to the Emperor Antoninus. R. Afess wrote 'From Judah the Prince to his Majesty the Emperor.'

Rabbi Judah took the letter and tore it up. He told him to write: 'From your servant, Judah, to his Majesty the Emperor Antoninus...' R. Afess objected that Rabbi was debasing himself. Rabbi Judah replied 'Am I any better than my elder, Yaakov? Did not Yaakov say [to Esav]: "Thus says your servant, Yaakov...?'

A similar debate is found in the commentaries on this week's reading. Benjamin has been imprisoned for apparently stealing the cup of Joseph. Joseph is threatening to keep him as a slave and let the others go. Judah steps up to negotiate and uses humbling language repeatedly. He refers several times to himself and his father as 'your servant.'

The Midrash plays on the opening word in the Torah this week 'Vayigash' because the word meaning 'to approach' is used both of approaching for war and approaching to settle terms of peace and suggests that Judah was prepared for both possibilities.

Rashi says that first Judah opened aggressively and then turned to a more conciliatory approach. Different times call for different responses and I suspect the aggressive approach reflected a Jewish response both to Roman and Christian oppression. However, to think that the biblical Judah was in any position to threaten Joseph is laughable. Unless it was bluff!