

Frenemies

The dramatic encounter between Yaakov and Esav has come to be regarded as probably the most significant event in the Torah for relations between Jews and non-Jews. Two brothers compete for love and for a heritage. They part company as enemies. They meet again after many years with anxiety and hesitancy. They finally reconcile but go their separate ways.

Esav in late Talmudic tradition becomes Rome/Christianity and Ishmael becomes Islam even though neither of those people or religions were in existence for hundreds, indeed over a thousand years after the Biblical encounter. Since the Bible could not possibly have had Christianity or Islam in mind, how did this association come about? And should we conclude that just as Yaakov and Esav were eventually reconciled so too the Nations of the World will one day be reconciled to Israel?

“It is a well-known rule that Esav will always hate Yaakov.” It’s a post Talmudic statement of course that reflects the suffering of Jews in Medieval times particularly at the hands of Jews and Christians and one is obliged to take notice of history. Nowadays that the cries of “death to Jews” is heard again both in Christian and Muslim societies we would be stupid not to take heed and respond. Sadly, some of our own rabbis say stupid and dangerous things too about killing our enemies without due process.

Even so it would be wrong, both morally and traditionally to think that everyone is an enemy or that it must always be so. Just as we ourselves have self-hating Jews so too does every other group in society have those who go against the current and can think for themselves.

But the text of the Torah says something more. After the struggle with the Angel it says that Yaakov will now be called “Yisrael” because “you have fought with God and man and have survived.” The struggle must end in achieving good things. Just as we have those within our ranks who fight us politically, so too do we have those who struggle with religion, with God. We should not reject our own simply because we disagree on religious matters either. Some of us often find religion a struggle. But we can overcome. So too can others.