1197

Esau—Loved or Loathed?

By Arye Arazi*

This week’s reading deals with the conflict between Jacob-Israel and Esau-Edom. In line with the view of Genesis as the prototype of all subsequent history, some people wish to see this reading as a model which guides us in relations between Jews and other nations, a model of eternal conflict. On the other side, the haftarah for this week (taken from

* Arye Arazi is Deputy Director General of Student Administration at Bar Ilan University and lecturer on management and leadership. The article was written in memory of the author’s mother, Holocaust survivor Ruth Dienstag, daughter of Abraham and Gittel, and my father Saul ha-Cohen son of Yehudah and Leah, of blessed memory. Originally published in 2016; this translation has not been reviewed by the author.
Malachi, chapter 1) presents a far more complex model. Although the dominant situation is that “I have accepted Jacob and have rejected Esau” (Mal. 1:2-3), there is yet another reading, which sees the Holy One, blessed be He, as angry at the people of Israel, heaven forfend: “Now if I am a father, where is the honor due Me? And if I am a master, where is the reverence due Me?” (Mal. 1:6). This is coupled with a positive attitude displayed towards the nations of the world: “For My name is honored among the nations...I am a great King—said the Lord of Hosts—and My name is revered among the nations” (Mal. 1:11-14).

Since we are commanded to follow in the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, the attitude of the Jews towards other nations is influenced by the way we perceive the Lord’s attitude to the gentiles. This article will present several ways of approaching this relationship.

The classic approach in Jewish sources maintains that Jews are important, while gentiles are of no account. There are many sources for this notion, dating as far back as the Sages, who had this to say about the proselyte:

> After he has immersed and come up, kindly words of consolation are said to him. Fortunate are you for adhering to the One who created the world by fiat, for the world was created only for the sake of Israel; and only Israel are called the children of the Almighty, and only Israel are beloved of the Almighty.¹

This attitude persists even to our day, with Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef quoted from one of his lessons, in 2010, as saying with respect to the gentiles:

> They have no place in the world, except to serve the Jewish people...In the time of the Messiah the Jews will be given life eternal, and the gentiles will be granted long life so that they can work for the Jews.²

In contrast to this approach, there are other approaches that view the nations of the world in a more favorable light. One interesting source evincing a positive attitude towards other nations is found in the haftarah for this week. The last of the prophets, Malachi, is

¹ Minor Tractates, *Gerim*, chapter 1.

² Taken from http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=752408. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this remark was quoted from a public lecture, not from Rabbi Yosef’s books on *Halakhah*. 

2
the mouthpiece for strong words of the Lord against the people of Israel for offering up blemished offerings. His prophecy relates to the other nations in the following terms:

For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is honored among the nations—said the Lord of Hosts...For I am a great King—said the Lord of Hosts—and My name is revered among the nations.

(Malachi 1:11,14)

A fine explanation of these words appears in Malbim’s commentary on Malachi:

Even though all the nations are idolaters, nevertheless My name is honored among the nations, for all know that there is a supreme Primary Cause over everything, and He is called the G-d of G-ds. Only they say that it is beneath His dignity to oversee the lower creatures and that He handed over the running of the lower world to His servants, just as a king delegates leadership to his ministers and servants and wishes for them to pay Him homage when they approach the King. They are the intermediaries between Him and the people, and they are to be honored like the King. Thus all the incense that is offered to the stars and constellations is because they are close to the Primary Cause and receive their abundance from it.3

According to Malbim, the gentiles who worship “gods,” which we call idolatry, essentially acknowledge the Holy One, blessed be He, whom they perceive as the “G-d of G-ds.” For this, the Holy One, blessed be He, praises them and derives pleasure from them. Thus the gentiles are important even for their spirituality, and at times their spiritual worship is even more pleasing to the Holy One, blessed be He, than the worship of Israel.

In view of the direction taken by this week’s haftarah, let us now examine some other sources that show a positive and respectful attitude taken by Jews toward gentiles.

The first source appears in the words of Moses to the Israelites in Parashat Va-Ethanan, words which indicate that a vital role is to be played by the gentiles (Deut. 4:5-6):

See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the Lord my G-d has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to enter

3 Malbim based his commentary on Menahot 110a.
and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, “Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.”

These verses imply that the nations serve as judges or witnesses, as it were, who observe the deeds of the people of Israel and are impressed by the wisdom and understanding of Israel.

The second source is taken from remarks by Rabbi Israel Lifshitz, author of Tifereth Israel, regarding the words of Rabbi Akiva in the Mishnah: “Beloved is man who was created in the image [of G-d].” Rabbi Akiva’s remarks pertain to the verse, “For in His image did G-d make man,” but Rabbi Lifschitz argues that even reason dictates accepting the view that all human beings were made in the image of G-d.

According to him, the very fact that there are gentiles who have made a significant contribution to the world, and thereby also to the Jewish people, dictates a moral understanding by which it is inconceivable that the Holy One, blessed be He, not reward them, even if they not be G-d-fearing.

He notes several examples of contributions made by gentiles: 1) Edward Jenner, a rural British physician who is considered to have discovered vaccination, having invented a vaccine against smallpox in 1796. 2) Sir Francis Drake, who in 1586, after fighting the Spanish in the Caribbean, stopped at Cartagena, Colombia, in order to restock provisions, including tobacco and potato tubers. He brought the potato to Europe, thereby preventing starvation. 3) Guttenberg, who invented printing in the mid-15th century. 4) The German humanist Johannes Reuchlin, who published a defense of the Talmud in 16th-century Germany, when the Dominicans, led by the apostate Pfefferkorn, sought to burn it.

The third source comes from the writings of Rav Kook:

________________________

4 Rabbi Israel Lifshitz (1782-1861), one of the eminent rabbis of Ashkenaz and author of the commentary on the Mishnah, Tiferet Israel.

5 Mishnah Avot 3.14.


7 Orot, Orot Yisrael 5.2.
The Jews have hidden in them a treasure of special traits. But in order to unite the world in general with them, certain sought-after special talents must be lacking among the Jews so that they be completed by the rest of the world, by all the large-hearted of the gentiles. This makes room for that which the Jews receive from the world.

In other words, there are certain things that from the outset were made to be missing among the Jews so that they could be completed by the gentiles. The new idea Rav Kook brings here is that the function of the gentiles is assigned them from the outset and is not simply after the fact. The Jews, from the start, are in a position of lacking and thus are obliged to complete what they lack by receiving from other nations.

The fourth source comes from Rabbi Ezekiel Isidore Epstein’s book, *The Faith of Judaism: An interpretation for our times*:

Man [not necessarily Jews, A.A.], having been created in the image of G-d, has certain unique traits which are divine—intelligence, freedom, creativity, and morality—and these traits were not given to no purpose, rather to enable him to take part in the works of the Lord. Hence Judaism considers the relationship between man and G-d as one of partnership in which man becomes co-worker with G-d in realizing His purpose.

Rabbi Isidore Epstein goes one step further than the previously cited sources when he places the virtues of the gentiles on the level of the potential, even if it has not been realized or translated into action. The very trait that is in mankind, insofar as one is human, establishes him or her as a partner in realizing the divine design.

The last source and perhaps most far-reaching source comes from the Netziv of Volozhin, who explains why Genesis is also known as Sefer ha-Yashar, the “Book of the Upright One”:

---

8 An Orthodox rabbi and scholar (1894-1962), headed Jew’s College in London and wrote a number of important books on Judaism.

9 *The Faith of Judaism* [p. 118 in Hebrew translation published by Ravi Kook institute in 1961. The text here has been translated back into English from the Hebrew translation. Please get original English.]

10 From his commentary, *Ha’amek Davar*, in the introduction to Genesis.
The patriarchs are meritorious since, aside from being righteous, devout, and utterly loving of G-d, they were also “upright,” that is to say, in their treatment of the gentiles, even the most despicable of idolaters. They always showed them love and were swift to do them good, insofar as that maintained Creation. For example, we see how Abraham prostrated himself, interceding on behalf of Sodom, even though he hated them and their king to the utmost on account of their wickedness, as is made clear in his words to the king of Sodom. Even so, he desired them to continue to exist.

Further on the Netziv praises the way each of our patriarchs treated undeserving gentiles (Abraham’s treatment of Lot, Isaac’s of Abimelech king of Gerar and his fellows, and Jacob’s of Laban). His remarks represent an extreme position in that they show a level of concern for other peoples which is not based on any positive trait with which the nations were blessed. Quite the contrary, even when the other nations were the dregs of morality, the attitude of our patriarchs towards them was one of disinterested concern.

We conclude with the hope that Isaiah’s vision in chapter 2:2-3 come to pass:

In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord’s House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: “Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the G-d of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.” For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Translated by Rachel Rowen