

“Two Hundred and Three”

Two Hundred and Three.

That is a number I want you to remember because there is going to be a quiz at the end of my sermon and you'll be able to use that number to answer my question.

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Onto tomorrow's Torah portion (***Editor's note Parshat Vayishlach Genesis 32:4-36:43***).

The sedrah opens with Jacob who now has two wives, Leah and Rachel, two additional "spouses" Bilhah and Zilpah, thirteen children, a large amount of flocks, a good deal of wealth and an unspecified number of additional family members, workers, and shepherds. He has come a ***long*** way from the previous Torah portion where he had left his parents' home alone, fleeing for his

life as a result of his brother Esau's death threat. As this portion opens, life is clearly better for Jacob.

But as the narrative unfolds, Jacob is finally going back home and is faced with the realization that he must confront his brother again. How is he going to face Esau's death threat? How is he going to survive this encounter? As a result, Jacob does three things. He sends servants on ahead with magnificent gifts to present to his brother Esau. In fact, he sends *wave after wave* of gifts and with each one, his servants announce "these are presents from your servant, your **younger** brother." In addition, Jacob splits his camp in half and prepares for war. He figures his brother may indeed attack him so he organizes his family into two camps, which will allow some to flee if his brother wants a battle. In case things turn sour, he prepares for

the worse case scenario . Finally, Jacob does one more thing: he sits down that night and prays to G-d.

The rabbi love looking at this section, analyzing the three things our patriarch does to survive his brother's encounter, and try to apply his actions to our lives. That is what I want to do for you on a communal level tonight.

What do I mean?

Well, in many ways, our Jewish community is faced with a similar fear that Jacob experienced— survival. We, like Jewish communities all around the country, are worried about how we are going to survive as a people.

For the first time in recorded history, the biggest fear Jews are facing in a country is not anti-Semitism, but assimilation.

We are the oldest minority in America, we produce the fewest number of children, and more and more

intermarried families do **not** raise their families in the Jewish faith. The future is so bleak that, for the first time, we are hearing from Jewish leaders in Israel that American Jews should stop raising money for Israel and keep their dollars for ***domestic*** Jewish survival. As much as they appreciate our support, they are concerned for our survival and feel more should be put into keeping American Jewry from vanishing.

If I can be a little like the rabbis of old, I think we can learn a lot from Jacob and his strategy tomorrow. He does three things in order to survive against his brother and they are tactics that can also work to preserve Jewish life in America and maybe even allow it to grow.

What does Jacob do? First, he sends gifts to his brother. That is such an interesting turn of events because that is the opposite of how Jacob has treated Esau in the

past. Jacob was known to “sell things” to his brother (remember the bowl of soup for the birthright?); he was not above deceiving his brother and outright stealing from his brother. He saw Esau not as a brother, but as a rival and an enemy. Jacob felt Esau could only be responded to in one way. Yet for the first time, Jacob finally realized that maybe there was a better approach and thus began a campaign of sending him gifts, showing him respect and offering him brotherly kindness.

Perhaps, for the Jewish community to survive, we need to take a similar approach toward those who are in interfaith homes. In the past, intermarried Jewish homes were treated as “lost”, as those who have abandoned our heritage and as those who weaken our tradition. As a result, they were treated with indifference, at best, contempt at worse.

Maybe we need to be taking a better approach, a warmer approach and reach out to these families.

Traditional congregations need to be encouraged to bring families of all shades to synagogues and temples. We need to welcome children who may not be Jewish according to Jewish law to attend Sunday school and Hebrew school, and find ways for intermarried couples to participate in religious life, all without violating Jewish law or pressuring the non-Jewish spouse to convert when they are not interested. With intermarriage at over 50%, and with over a million children in those interfaith homes, I think we should be trying a new strategy for survival. It is a whole different approach from the past, yet in order for the Jewish people to survive, it is critical. It is a positive, it is needed, and it can create a future for the Jewish community.

Jacob also split his camp to make sure some of his tribe and some of his family will survive. Jacob was nothing if he wasn't a realist. He saw the dire situation before him and made the most of it.

I want you to look at the ***Manhattan Jewish Experience***, a congregation on New York's West Side. It is an Orthodox congregation and you'll see this kind of "Jacob Pragmatism" at work. It is called the "Manhattan Jewish **Experience**" because that is precisely what goes on there – experiencing Judaism on every level imaginable. There is a different program each day for whatever your Jewish religious or cultural experiences want to take you. You like to study Torah? Come on Mondays! Want to study about the history of Israel and Zionism? They have several classes on them every Wednesday. Lost because you don't know Hebrew? There

is a beginner's prayer service on Saturday just for you!
Skiing? They have got trips lined up for that as well as a
young people's "Tour of Israel" planned for the spring .
Just want to meet a nice possible future husband and
wife? They have mixers every month!

The ***Manhattan Jewish Experience*** is a realization
that in this mobile, fast paced world, people have different
schedules and Jews have different needs. And for the
future of the Jewish community, we need to be practical
and not just offer the same item on the menu and serve it
at the same time day in and day out.

Finally, Jacob prayed. He realized that sometimes all
you can do is reach back for the things that helped you in
the past. Prayer and G-d have always been Jacob's
guiding light and so he prayed and stayed true to what got
him to where he was in life.

Of all the denominations of Judaism, the one that never seems to worry about declining numbers is the Orthodox. There is no secret there; they always stay true to form. Orthodoxy does things the same way all the time, and its timelessness anchors its followers and keeps them rooted and centered. We can learn from that as well.

Here is my point. For a Jewish community to be prepared for the future and maybe even thrive, we need to see survival in the same terms as Jacob. We need to think of new approaches and reach out in ways we haven't; we need to be practical and be willing to offer different programs at different times and for different needs; and we also need to stay anchored to those things that got us to this point.

Now the quiz. Last Friday, someone came up to me and was upset about the number at attendance that

evening (We only had about 45 people last Friday). He felt that we have a big enough community to have a much bigger crowd at this service. He may be right; believe me, I would love to see every seat filled on Friday Night.

However, that night I realized that there are a lot of things going on Fridays, especially this time of year. The competition for people's time is unbelievable. And then, I did something this past weekend. I realized that we are reaching out to a lot of different people and have a lot of different services and classes throughout a given week. So I went through the membership list and **counted** how many **people** had actually come to synagogue that week. Marc Slotnick coined the phrase "turnstile numbers" from his Hillel days. (These were the number of times the door at the Hillel opened once a week.) What I did however was count not how many times the door opened but how many

different individuals came to the synagogue last week.

Remember we have **twice** daily services, Saturday morning services, Hebrew school, Sunday school, Church League Basketball practice, High School discussion, adult education classes, and various other programs appealing to different Jews with different needs. Now I **didn't** count any person who was here at the Chanukah gift show (I had a conversion that morning as well as Sunday school so I could not get an accurate count), nor did I add those who joined us from Temple Israel, nor non-members, nor people who are studying with me as well as those not of our faith. I also didn't add those who kept in contact this week with us through e-mail, our newest way for people to feel a connection with our community.

How many did I come up with? Well, if you remember the number I gave you this evening, you have the answer....**203**.

That is the number of ***different*** congregants who were a part of the Jewish community just this week, in Charleston, West Virginia (and if you are keeping score at home, those numbers also translated into **99** different families as well!).

And if you **add** the number of non-members and those of other faiths who may be searching, that numbers grows even more impressive.

That is a lot of people and I bet you that number would stay fairly consistent week to week. Not bad for a small Jewish community. And it is because we are reaching out to those who in the past we would have rejected, we are offering something different every day for

different Jewish needs and yet, we still are trying to maintain the traditional things that got us this far, our daily religious services.

Two hundred and three. That doesn't sound like a Jewish community with a survival problem!

May we at B'nai Jacob, like Jacob of old, continue to confront the challenges of survival by continually looking for different ways to bring people from all spectrums through our doors, yet always at the same time, maintaining those important traditions that go us here as well.

Amen