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Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

ESAV AS BROTHER, ESAV AS OTHER

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ESAV AS BROTHER

We shall open our study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayishlach* ("the vision of Ovadya"; *Ovadya* 1) with a short analysis of the *parasha* so that we may better understand the message of the *haftara*. At the beginning of the *parasha*, the Torah describes the encounter between Yaakov and Esav, presenting the two as brothers going out to meet each other. Tension and dread do indeed mar their relationship, but nevertheless we are dealing with a relationship of brothers, rather than that of strangers.

Yaakov has no idea how Esav will relate to him. It is possible that his brother's anger has abated, and that Esav's momentary disappointment has not been transformed into perpetual enmity, and therefore they may be able to renew their fraternal relations. But it is also possible that Esav's immediate fury turned into everlasting hostility and that Esav's hatred for him runs as deep as ever. It seems reasonable to assume that Yaakov was drawn to Esav and wished to meet him out of a desire to renew the relationship between them and have a positive influence over him, on the presumption that Esav would be open to his overtures. In any event, he turns to him as a brother – "And Yaakov sent messengers before him to Esav **his brother**" (*Bereishit* 32:4). Esav is living in the land of Edom, but he is still Yaakov's brother, and therefore Yaakov turns to him. Esav also refers to Yaakov as a brother – "And Esav said, I have enough, **my brother**; keep what you have to yourself" (*ibid.* 33:9) – and relates to him as a brother. Whether Esav actually kissed Yaakov with all his heart (following one opinion in *Chazal*) or he kissed him "with diacritical dots (*nekudot*)" and the intention of causing him harm, it is their brotherhood that defines their relationship. Needless to say if Esav's response expressed love and compassion, but even if he wished to harm Yaakov, the driving force behind that desire was the

jealousy and competition between two brothers, one having been favored by their father over the other.

ESAV THE FATHER OF EDM

In contrast, at the end of the *parasha*, we find an entirely different Esav. "Now these are the generations of Esav, who is Edom" (ibid. 36:1). Esav leaves the house of Avraham and the people of Israel and becomes **Edom**. From now on, he identifies as Edom. He is no longer Yaakov's brother living in the land of Edom as he was at the beginning of the *parasha*, but rather he is Edom, and therefore his generations are the story of Edom, as is emphasized in another verse as well: "And these are the generations of Esav the father of Edom in Mount Se'ir" (ibid. v. 9). Scripture emphasizes two significant actions as expressions of Esav's leaving the house of Avraham. First, his marriage to Canaanite women, "Esav took his wives of the daughters of Canaan... These were the sons of Esav who were born to him in the land of Canaan" (ibid. v. 2-5), against the wishes of his father, Yitzchak. As opposed to what happens at the end of *Parashat Toledot*, where Esav wants to follow Yitzchak's instructions to Yaakov regarding the establishment of a Jewish nation, and therefore seeks a wife not among the daughters of Canaan, here the Torah emphasizes that Esav's Canaanite wives remained an integral part of his household.

The second and decisive stage was his abandonment of the land:

And Esav took his wives, and his sons, and his daughters, and all the persons of his house, and his cattle, and all his beasts, and all his substance, which he had acquired in the land of Canaan; and went into another country away from his brother Yaakov. (ibid. v. 6)

Esav's decision to leave the land is not only an economic decision, but rather a critical decision regarding his identity. The longer that Yaakov dwelled in Charan, the more Esav thought that Yaakov had settled there, turning his back to the land of Israel and the house of Yitzchak. Yaakov's marriages to local women and the long years that he lived in Charan led Esav to think that Yaakov had chosen to remain there and was not planning to return. Had he left only on account of Esav's anger, surely he would already have returned, and therefore it was reasonable for Esav to assume that Yaakov's eyes were no longer directed to the land of Israel. If Yaakov went to Charan "for only a year or two," but remained there for over twenty years, it was reasonable to conclude that his plans had changed and that life in the Diaspora was appealing to him. Thus, Esav saw himself as the son who would inherit the land and continue Jewish nationhood. From this perspective, Esav's marriages to the local daughters of Canaan were preferable to Yaakov's marriages to the daughters of Charan. When

Yaakov returned, however, and it became clear that his settlement in Charan had only been temporary, and that the time had come to seize his rightful place in the land, Esav dropped everything and abandoned the family framework. From now on, he is no longer a Jew but a stranger; he no longer belongs to the house of Avraham, but is the father of Edom.

Indeed, the verses create an intended contrast between Esav and Yaakov. As opposed to "**And Yaakov dwelt in the land in which his father has sojourned**, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Yaakov, Yosef being seventeen years old..." (ibid. 37:1-2), it is stated about Esav, "Thus dwelt **Esav** in Mount Se'ir: Esav is **Edom**. And these are the generations of Esav the father of Edom in Mount Se'ir" (ibid. 36:8-9). The correspondence and the contrast are clear. Whereas Yaakov lives in the land of Canaan, it being the land in which his father had sojourned and where he establishes a family that continues the family tradition, his brother Esav settles in the land of Edom because he identifies with its local inhabitants, and his generations are the generations of the Edomite nation. In light of this, a later verse states: "And these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom, before there reigned any king over the children of Israel" (ibid. v. 31). That is to say, there is a kingdom of Edom that relates to Esav, and is not connected in any way to the kingdom of Israel, which constitutes a separate entity. Thus, from the dream of serving as successor to Avraham and Yitzchak, Esav sets off to a foreign country and establishes there a new kingdom.

In summary, at the beginning of the *parasha*, Esav is presented as a brother who is engaged in a tense quarrel with Yaakov, whereas by the end of the *parasha*, he has severed himself from him and set out on an entirely different path.

TWO ATTITUDES

This double thread regarding Esav continues throughout the Torah. Let us examine the next encounter with Esav just before Israel's entry into the Promised Land:

And Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, Thus says **your brother** Israel, You know all the travail that has befallen us: how our fathers went down into Egypt, and we have dwelt in Egypt a long time; and Egypt vexed us, and our fathers: and when we cried to the Lord, He heard our voice, and sent an angel, and brought us out of Egypt: and, behold, we are in Kadesh, a city in the uttermost of your border: let us pass, I pray you, through your country: we will not pass through the fields, or through the vineyards, nor will

we drink of the water of the wells: we will go by the king's highway, and we will not turn to the right or to the left, until we have passed your borders. And Edom said to him, You shall not pass by me, lest I come out against you with the sword. And the children of Israel said to him, We will go by the highway: and if I and my cattle drink of your water, **then I will pay for it**: I will do you no injury, only on foot will I pass through. And he said, You shall not go through. And Edom came out against him with much people, and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border: so that Israel turned away from him. (*Bamidbar* 20:14-21)

As is evident from the passage, twice Moshe seeks permission to pass through Edom's border, and twice he is refused. First, Moshe approaches Edom as a brother, hoping that they will understand the travails that befell Israel during their bondage in Egypt and allow them to pass through their land out of a sense of fraternity and identification with their distress. But they do not respond positively to this petition to their feelings of brotherhood, and therefore Moshe once again sends out messengers on the assumption that he is dealing not with a brother but with a nation like any other nation. Thus, he emphasizes the benefit and economic profit that Edom will derive from Israel's passing through their land.

The idea of fraternity is emphasized by the Ramban in his commentary to the parallel verses in the book of *Devarim*, which also make mention of "your brothers, the sons of Esav" (*Devarim* 2:4):

And the meaning of "your brothers, the sons of Esav" – for Israel traces back to Avraham, and all of his seed are brothers, for they were all circumcised. And this is the reason for: "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother" (*Devarim* 23:8). Only the descendants of the concubines, Yishmael, Midyan, and all the descendants of Ketura are not included in [this] brotherhood, because of the verse: "For in Yitzchak shall your seed be called" (*Bereishit* 21:12). (Ramban, Commentary to *Devarim* 2:4)

While I don't know the basis for the Ramban's assertion that the sons of Esav were circumcised, his argument that Scripture relates to them as brothers is clear.

In contrast, the verse in the Song of the Sea includes Esav among the other nations of the world in its list of nations threatened by the parting of the sea: "Then the chiefs of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moav, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away" (*Shemot* 15:15).

This duality continues in the words of *Chazal*. See *Kiddushin* 18a, which deals with the laws of inheritance applying to a non-Jew and does not decide whether Edom should be treated like Israel or like the other nations:

R. Chiyya bar Avin said in the name of R. Yochanan: A non-Jew inherits his father by Torah law, as it is written: "Because I have given Mount Se'ir to Esav for an inheritance" (*Devarim* 2:5). Perhaps a heretical Jew is different! (*Kiddushin* 18a)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YIRMIYAHU AND OVADYA

Now, let us move on to the attitude toward Edom adopted by the Prophets and in our *haftara*. A prophecy that very closely parallels the vision of Ovadya is found at the end of the book of *Yirmiyahu* (49:7-22). Many expressions found there are strikingly similar to the style of Ovadya. For example, this is what Yirmiyahu says about Edom:

I have heard a rumor from the Lord, and an ambassador is sent to the heathens, saying, Gather yourselves together, and come against her, and rise up to the battle. For, lo, I have made you small among the nations, despised among men. Your terribleness has deceived you, and the pride of your heart, O you that dwell in the clefts of the rock, that holds the height of the hill: though you should make your nest as high as the eagle, I will bring you down from there, says the Lord. (*Yirmiyahu* 49:14-16)

And this is formulation of Ovadya:

We have heard tidings from the Lord, and an ambassador is sent among the nations. Arise, and let us rise up against her in battle. Behold, I will make you small among the nations: you are greatly despised. The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high: who says in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground? Though you soar aloft like the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord. (*Ovadya* 1:1-4)

So too, Yirmiyahu writes:

If grape gatherers come to you, would they not leave some gleanings? If thieves by night, they will destroy only till they have enough. But I have stripped Esav bare, I have uncovered his secret places. (*Yirmiyahu* 49:9-10)

And Ovadya expresses himself as follows:

If thieves came to you, if robbers by night, (how are you cut off!) would they not have stolen till they had enough? If the grape gatherers came to you, would they not leave some gleanings of grapes? How has Esav been pillaged, how are his hidden things sought out! (*Ovadya* 1:5-6)

There is, however, a significant difference between the two prophecies, namely, the basic attitude toward Edom. Yirmiyahu's prophecy concerning Edom was said in the framework of a series of prophecies concerning the nations. The heading for all these chapters is "The word of the Lord which came to Yirmiyahu the prophet **against the nations**" (*Yirmiyahu* 46:1), and included in this collection are prophecies directed at Egypt, Bavel, Elam, Kedar, and others. The prophecy directed at Edom is part of that collection, and the prophet turns to Edom as he does to all the other nations.

In light of this, Yirmiyahu's rebuke does not relate to Edom's turning their backs to their brother and denying the fraternal relationship that should exist between Israel and Edom because they are members of the same family. Rather it refers to Edom's pride, exaggerated reliance on their own strength, and their feeling of invulnerability. Edom acts with arrogance and defiance towards God, and for this, warns the prophet, God will make a reckoning, just as punishments await the other nations who have sinned. Desolation and destruction will come upon Edom as a result of their pride and their denial of the relationship between man and God that obligates the nations of the world. They are a nation like all others and the attitude toward them is like that toward all nations.

In contrast to Yirmiyahu's approach, that includes Edom among the other nations, we find that other prophets reproached Edom, only because they had turned their backs to Israel. Thus, for example, in the prophecy of Amos:

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Edom, I will turn away its punishment, but for the fourth I will not turn away its punishment; because he

did pursue his brother with the sword, and did cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath for ever. (*Amos 1:11*)

Ovadya's prophecy embraces both of these elements. It opens with passages that parallel the prophecy of Yirmiyahu, including the way he relates to Edom as one of the nations. Edom is defined as a nation that does not know its place, and instead of being small among the nations, it has pretensions of greatness. The problem, as stated above, is pride, and the issue is judged in the framework of Edom's status as a nation. This section, the first part of the *haftara*, continues until verse 9, and it is very similar to Yirmiyahu's prophecy and approach.

INDIFFERENCE TO THE FATE OF HIS BROTHER

From verse 10 onwards, however, the *haftara* undergoes a complete change in direction. From now on, Ovadya rebukes Edom for denying Israel **as a brother**. The complaint about Edom's wrongdoing does not relate to the actions themselves, but to their ramifications for Yaakov as a brother. This point is sharpened in the coming verses, which speak not of the evil committed by Edom, but of Edom's indifference to the fate of a brother:

On the day that you did stand aloof, on the day that strangers took captive his substance, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, then you too were one of them. But you should not have looked on the day of your brother on the day of his misfortune; nor should you have rejoiced over the children of Yehuda on the day of their destruction; nor should you have spoken proudly on the day of distress. (1:11-12)

Edom does not commit injustice against Israel, but they rejoice at Israel's downfall. Fraternity does indeed find expression, but in the form of happiness over misfortune, and it is because of this that the prophet directs his fury at them. A famous expression of this feeling is found in the verse in *Tehillim* (137:7): "Remember, O Lord, against the children of Edom the day of Jerusalem, when they said, Raze it, raze it, to its very foundations." Bavel destroyed the Temple, but Edom encouraged them to do so. Edom advised them to destroy not only what was necessary for the destruction of the building, but everything down to its very foundations. This was not out of a desire to profit at Israel's expense, but out of jealousy toward and competition with a nation with whom Edom felt a special connection.

We see then that Ovadya opens his prophecy with a reproach of Edom's conduct in and of itself, similar to that of the other nations. In this, he relates to Esav in accordance with his standing at the end of *Parashat Vayishlach*. In the second half of the book, however, the prophet does not see Edom as just another nation like all the nations, but as a nation that has a fraternal connection to Israel. In this, Ovadya goes back to Esav as he is portrayed at the beginning of *Vayishlach*. From this perspective, the expectations from Edom are different than those from the other nations, and it is in this light that their actions must be judged. The rebuke relates not only to Edom's wickedness in and of itself, but also to their indifference and rejoicing over Israel's misfortune.

THE PUNISHMENT AWAITING ESAV

The difference between the beginning and the end of the *haftara* expresses itself in the punishment that awaits Esav. At the beginning of the *haftara*, and in much more striking manner in the prophecy of Yirmiyahu, God punishes Edom for their pride by bringing them low and casting them down to the ground. Due to their wickedness, Edom will be desolate and destroyed, punished from heaven like the other wicked nations. At the end of the *haftara*, in contrast, Edom's punishment is in relation to Israel.

First of all, the very survival of the people of Israel, who are not destroyed by the nations, but rather merit that "Upon Mount Zion, there shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness" (1:17), constitutes a rout of Edom who had seen themselves as replacing Israel and inheriting their place. The competition between the two nations, which had begun in *Parashat Toledot*, should have finished with the casting low of Israel and their disappearance from the face of the earth as the house of Yaakov, but despite all the calamities, they survive on Mount Zion as the chosen people.

Second, not only does Israel survive, but they overcome their enemies, and Edom will receive its punishment at the hand of Israel. God does not punish them directly, but rather uses Israel as His tool:

And the house of Yaakov shall be fire, and the house of Yosef flame, and the house of Esav for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them, and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esav, for the Lord has spoken it. (1:18)

In the context of this prophecy, this is of prime importance. Esav denies Israel and rejoices over their misfortune, and therefore their downfall will come at the hands of Israel. As one of the nations, Esav is punished at the hand of God, but as a straying brother, the punishment is meted out by the hands of his brother.

ISRAEL AND EDMOM ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

In conclusion, let us add a note about the relations between Israel and Edom across the generations. As we have seen, both the *parasha* and the Prophets recognize a two-fold relationship between Esav and Yaakov, and they relate to both situations. The relations between Israel and Edom across the generations also recognize this two-fold model. Edom was identified by *Chazal* with the Roman Empire, the superpower, our relationship toward which throughout the generations has so profoundly effected Jewish history. It is easy to identify this duality in our relations with Edom. Pagan Rome never had any pretensions about a special relationship with Israel, but rather it viewed Israel as a nation like all others. Augustus or Julius Ceasar and their heirs had no pretensions of coming in place of Israel and their attitude towards us was not one of competition or rejoicing over our misfortune. Their attitude was characterized by great pride and a sense of unstoppable power. It was about this that Yirmiyahu and Ovadya at the beginning of our *haftara* prophesied, and this is the model found at the end of our *parasha*. However, the ascendancy of Christian Rome replaced this model with an entirely different one. Christianity claims to have replaced Israel and finds itself in constant competition with it. Its attitude toward us is one of happiness over our misfortune and the pretension of having taken over our place as the chosen people who has received special blessings. Our problem with Christianity is not the pride in and of itself, but the **competition**, its historical ascendancy being viewed as our replacement. Christianity is Edom who claims to have inherited Israel's role and no longer recognizes Israel as the chosen people. This is Esav at the beginning of our *parasha*, and as may be understood from the Prophets, this model was also viewed as a threat for future generations. Our *haftara* relates to both historical situations that Israel experienced in connection with Edom, and provides consolation and encouragement for both.

May it be His will that the verse be speedily realized through us: "And liberators shall ascend upon Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esav, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (1:21).

(Translated by David Strauss)