

**Parshat Chukat:**  
**Do Opposites Really Attract?**  
**The tragedy of Esav and Jacob's relationship**  
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*Class of 2013*

Of all the troubled sibling relationships in Breishit, the relationship between Jacob and Esav has always been the most painful for me to study. Even prior to their birth, Jacob and Esav are at odds with each other, struggling in Rebecca's womb. From the moment they are born they are total opposites, which only pushes them further apart. As children and then adults, their relationship is plagued by competition and deception, forcing Jacob to flee after he steals Esav's blessing. At no point during their childhood and earlier adult years do Jacob and Esav get along as brothers.

Their story does offer us one glimmer of hope, when they reunite many years later as Jacob and his family travel back to Canaan. Jacob and Esav encounter each other directly, and fall into a weeping embrace. The text provides us with a sense of relief, and with a temporary ability to believe that time has healed the wounds of their younger adult life, and that Jacob and Esav are now finally prepared to overcome their differences and appreciate each other as family.

Tragically, our hopes for a permanent reconciliation are shattered by a scene in this week's parsha. As the Israelites, Jacob's descendants, approach Edom, Esav's descendants, they issue an ostensibly simple request:

“Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us; **15** that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors. **16** We cried to the Lord and God heard our plea, and God sent a messenger who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. **17** Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory.”  
 (Numbers 20:14-17)

כֹּה אָמַר אֶחָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְּהָ יְדַעְתָּ אֶת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מְצַאֲתֵנוּ: (טו) וַיֵּרְדוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיָּשֻׁב בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים רַבִּים וַיִּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹאֲבוֹתֵינוּ: (טז) וַנִּצְעַק אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ וַיִּצְאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ בְּקֶדֶשׁ עִיר קְצֵה גְבוּלְךָ: (יז) נַעֲבֹר־נָא בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא נַעֲבֹר בְּשָׂדֶה וּבְכַרְם וְלֹא נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר דֶּרֶךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ נִלְךָ לֹא נֹטֶה יְמִין וּשְׂמֹאל עַד אֲשֶׁר־נַעֲבֹר גְּבוּלְךָ: (במדבר כ, יד-יז)

But the Israelites' request for passage is met with hostility:

‘But Edom answered him, “You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.” **19** “We will keep to the beaten track,” the Israelites said to them, “and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot—it is but a small matter.” **20** But they replied, “You shall not pass through!” And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed. **21** So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.’  
 (Numbers 20: 18-21)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדָוִם לֹא תַעֲבֹר בִּי פֶן־בְּחָרְבִי יֵצֵא לְקִרְאֲתְךָ: (יט) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַסְלָה נַעֲלֶה וְאִם־מִימִיךָ נִשְׁתֶּה אָנִי וּמִקְנֵי וְנִתְּתֵי מִכְרָם רַק אִין־דָּבָר בְּרַגְלֵי אֲעֹבְרָה: (כ) וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תַעֲבֹר וַיֵּצֵא אֲדָוִם לְקִרְאֲתוֹ בְּעַם כְּבֹד וּבִיד חֲזָקָה: (כא) וַיִּמְאֵן אֲדָוִם נָתַן אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹבֵר בְּגְבוּלוֹ וַיִּטּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַלָּיו: (במדבר כ, יח-כא)

Many see this passage as confirming what our rabbinic tradition has taught us about Esav - that unlike Jacob, who was a man of peace, Esav was violent towards everyone. And so it is not surprise that many generations later, Esav's descendants exhibit violence towards Jacob's descendants during their time of need.

Rashi, however, cites a fascinating midrash that connects this encounter back to Isaac's blessings for his two sons:

Else we will go out against you with the sword: You pride yourselves with the 'voice' your father bequeathed you (the voice is the voice of Jacob), and declare, "We cried out to the Lord, and God heard our voice" (verse 16). But we will go out against you with what my father bequeathed me: "You shall live by the sword" (Gen. 27:40) - [Midrash Tanchuma Beshallah 9] (Commentary on Numbers 20:18)

(יח) פן בחרב אצא לקראתך - אתם מתגאים בקול שהורישכם אביכם, אמרתם (פס' טז) ונצעק אל ה' וישמע קולנו, ואני אצא עליכם במה שהורישני אבי (בראשית כז, מ) ועל חרבך תחיה:

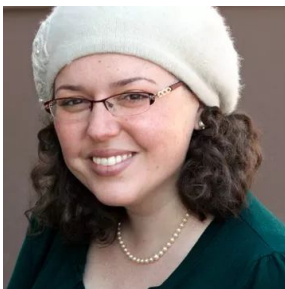
According to the Tanchuma, Edom's refusal to allow the Israelites to pass through their land was not simply an expression of their generally violent tendencies. Rather, it was a hearkening back to the blessings that Isaac bestowed upon his two sons when Jacob stole Esav's blessing. Isaac recognized Jacob's voice, but in spite of his uncertainty over the true identity of the son claiming to be Esav, he gave the first born's blessing to Jacob. He then gave a weeping Esav a separate blessing, including that he shall live by the sword. And now, centuries later, the descendants of these twin boys are now realizing the blessings; the Israelites are asking for mercy on the basis of their voice, and the Edomites are responding through the sword.

So what are we to make of this midrash? Why is it significant to connect this scene in Chukat all the way back to Breishit?

I believe this connection teaches us a vital lesson about parenting and managing relationships. Jacob and Esav began their lives at odds with each other. However, it is not this fact alone that was responsible for them becoming enemy nations. Rather, as Rav Hirsch teaches in his commentary on Genesis, it was Rebecca and Isaac's flawed parenting of their twin sons that created this divide. For rather than embrace the opportunity to nurture their sons according to their individual needs, Isaac and Rebecca instead chose to play favorites.

This flawed parenting choice was the fatal blow to the hope of salvaging the twins' relationship. Because Rebecca and Isaac created this dynamic between their children, Jacob felt that he could deceive his father (at his mother's own encouragement) to take the blessing. According to the midrash, it is the outcomes of this dynamic that, hundreds of years later, encouraged further strife between Jacob and Esav's descendants.

If we read the events of this week's parsha on the surface they appear to simply affirm our understanding of Jacob as a man of peace, and Esav as a man of violence. But as the midrash and Rav Hirsch teach us, the tragic hostility that Edom exhibits towards Israel in this week's parsha was not just a result of personality differences, but rather a tragic parenting error with eternal consequences. This interaction serves as a powerful reminder to us that when we are presented with the challenge of managing different children with different needs, it is our responsibility as parents and educators to embrace and appropriately manage differences, rather than pit them against each other.



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