Putting Down Ancient Grudges (and Learning Kindness):

Between Israel and Edom

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Memory is a double-edged sword. Past sufferings can ground appeals to empathy and compassion, but they can also legitimize every form of cruelty and callousness. As Israel approaches the land of Israel, it is given a sobering lesson in old grudges and the moral blindness they can foment.

Inching closer to the Promised Land, Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom asking for permission to pass through. Israel’s leader begins by invoking the familial ties between Israel and Edom—“Thus says your brother Israel”—and continues by enumerating the tribulations that the Israelites have endured: “You know all the hardships that have befallen us—that our ancestors went down to Egypt; that we dwelt in Egypt for a long time; and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors. We cried to the Lord and He heard our plea, and He sent an angel who freed us from Egypt” (Numbers 20:14-16). Moses’ opening is readily understandable: “‘Brother’ is a term used for an ally and expresses friendly and brotherly relations.”

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1 Cf. what I have written in “Turning Memory Into Empathy: The Torah’s Ethical Charge,” CJLI Parashat Mishpatim 5774, available here.

2 Amos Frisch, “The Request to Cross through Edom’s Land,” (Hebrew), available at http://www.biu.ac.il/jh/Parasha/chukath/frish.html. My essay owes a great deal to Frisch’s fine study, although the broader interpretations I offer differ from his. Cf. also the comments of Aaron b. Elijah (Karaite scholar, 1328?-1369), Keter Torah to 20:14.
(1437-1508) explains, Moses hoped that Edom “would have mercy upon Israel, since [Israel and Edom] were the children of twin brothers, Jacob and Esau” (comments to Numbers 20). But why does Moses so emphasize Israel’s travails in Egypt? R. Joseph Bekhor Shor (12th century) suggests that Moses sought to elicit compassion from the Edomites “like a person who tells his beloved friend of his sufferings and the experiences that have befallen him in order that he take it to heart and have mercy on him” (comments to 20:14).

Moses’ appeal to Edom’s compassion is evidenced not only by what he does say, but also by what he doesn’t. Moses’ description of Israel’s recent experiences in his message to Edom differs from the depiction he offers elsewhere. Recounting Israel’s recent past to his father-in-law Jethro, Moses tells him “everything that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel’s sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them” (Exodus 18:8). Here Moses emphasizes God’s wondrous salvation; the Israelites’ suffering is literally bracketed by their deliverance at God’s hands. In a similar vein, when the pilgrim brings first fruit to the Temple, he recalls how “the Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents” (Deuteronomy 26:8). These passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy stress Israel’s miraculous redemption by God; moreover, they accentuate the punishment meted out to Israel’s oppressors. In contrast, in Moses’ message to the Edomite king the story of Israel’s liberation is muted, and the fate of Israel’s enemies is ignored altogether: Moses makes no mention at all of the punishments inflicted upon those who treated Israel inhumanely. “Why forego the lesson that the Edomites could have learned from the punishment of the Egyptians? Does it not contain a suitable hint that might have brought them to respond
favorably to the request addressed to them?” It seems clear, as Bible scholar Amos Frisch notes, that in dealing with the Edomites, Moses deliberately avoids making even an “implicit threat”: “The request [to pass through Edom] is directed entirely at the conscience of the hearers; there is no place in it for hints of aggression.”\(^3\) Israel will not threaten Edom, nor will it fight: When Edom “goes out against Israel in heavy force, strongly armed,” Israel simply “turns away” and seeks another route to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:20-21).

Edom’s hard-hearted response to Israel’s request serves a powerful educational purpose. The people will soon arrive in the Promised Land, where they will be expected to create an ethos of “brotherhood” and generosity.\(^4\) In Deuteronomy especially “the recounting of Israel’s story results in generosity.” The story of the Israelites “begins with the people’s landlessness and slavery and ends with their possession of the promised land. God’s generous gift of a fruitful land is meant to stimulate matching acts of generosity.” And yet, in stark contrast, “the Edomites refuse to show hospitality to Israel, even though Israel recounts some of the difficulties it has encountered to that point.” According to Bible scholar Nathan MacDonald, Edom’s failure of compassion thus “becomes a negative example. The

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\(^3\) Frisch, “The Request.”

unstated assumption is that Israel would not behave this way\textsuperscript{5}—or, perhaps more accurately, the implicit command is that Israel should not behave in this way.

**Why does the king evince no compassion at all for “his brother”?**

Summoned to respond with kindness and generosity to his “brother’s” plight, the king of Edom fails. But why? Why does the king evince no compassion at all for “his brother”?

A series of literary connections links the delegation Moses sends to the king of Edom with the one Jacob had sent to Esau (Edom’s ancestor). Our passage begins by noting that “Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom” (20:14); when Jacob had anxiously anticipated meeting Esau after long years of separation, “Jacob sent messengers to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom” (Genesis 32:4). Moses’ message to the king begins with “thus says (koh amar) your brother Israel” (Numbers 20:14); Jacob had long ago instructed his messengers to open similarly with, “Thus says (koh amar) your servant Jacob” (Genesis 32:5). As we’ve seen, in his unwillingness to let Israel pass, the king “goes out against him (likrato) in heavy force” (Numbers 20:20); similarly, Jacob’s messengers had returned from meeting Esau with the frightening news that “he himself is coming to meet you (likratkha), and there are four hundred men with him” (Genesis 32:7). In presenting the encounter between Moses’ messengers and the king of Edom, the Torah seems to want us to keep Jacob and Esau, Israel’s and Edom’s respective ancestors, very much in mind.

Recall how callously Jacob had treated his older brother. 6 Esau returns from the field exhausted, famished, and in pursuit of food. When he approaches Jacob to ask for a share of the latter’s lentil stew, Jacob responds stonily: “First sell me your birthright” (Genesis 26:31). Bible scholar Yair Zakovitch observes that “we would have expected Jacob to try to alleviate his brother’s distress quickly, to give him food and drink with no conditions and without (it goes without question) expectation of payment. Not only is this not the case, but Jacob demands the highest price—the birthright—for a simple bit of food.” 7 Faced with a weary (ayef) brother in need, Jacob fails to muster any compassion for him; sensing an opportunity to get what he wants, he takes advantage of his brother’s situation.

The Karaite scholar Aaron b. Elijah (1328?-1369) explains the king of Edom’s steely insistence that Israel not pass through his land in light of this fraught family history. On his account, in this moment, “Edom takes vengeance on Israel for what Jacob had done to Esau,” 8 questioning the ways in which Jacob had mistreated him. 9 The word rendered above as “hardships,” tela’ot, derives from a root suggesting weariness. Jacob had been cruel to Esau when he had been weary; now that “Jacob” is weary, “Esau” has no intention of responding with open

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6 I have explored Jacob’s problematic behavior in this situation—and the consequences he faces—in “No Excuses: Jacob’s Sin and Its Consequences,” CJLI Parasha Va-Yeitzei 5775, available here. With very minor changes, this next several sentences are taken from that essay.


8 Jacob Milgrom, Numbers (1990), p. 168

9 Keter Torah to Numbers 20:18.
arms. Any hopes of family reconciliation or of traumas being left in the past are shattered here with the realization that for the king of Edom, old grudges die hard.

**Few things stand in the way of trust and generosity like raw, unmitigated fear.**

Deuteronomy offers another clue for why Edom reacts menacingly to Israel’s request. There, God tells Moses that when the Israelites approach, the Edomites “will be afraid” of them (Deuteronomy 2:4). Few things stand in the way of trust and generosity like raw, unmitigated fear. Living in deep dread of the Israelites, the Edomites cannot find another path besides combativeness and aggression.

Old grudges coupled with fear lead to cruelty and heartlessness. Subtly conveying its moral judgment of Edom’s failure, the Torah tells us that Edom “went out against” the Israelites “in heavy force, with a mighty hand (be-yad ha’azakah)” (Numbers 20:20). This last phrase, be-yad ha’azakah, calls to mind God’s description of Pharaoh: “Be-yad ha’azakah yegarshem me-artzo” — because of My mighty hand, Pharaoh shall drive the [Israelites] from the land” (Exodus 6:1). In his refusal of hospitality and generosity, is the king of Edom being compared to Pharaoh? There is deep irony in the parallel: Where Pharaoh is concerned, it is God’s mighty hand which will lead Pharaoh to drive the Israelites out of his land, thus launching them on the (long and tortured) road to freedom; in the case of Edom, in contrast, it is the king’s own mighty hand that chases Israel away, resulting not in freedom but only in further sufferings along the way (Numbers 21:4). The condemnation of Edom is crucial: While refusing

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10 The question of whether and how the story of Israel’s encounter with Edom in Numbers can be reconciled with corresponding passage in Deuteronomy is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.
compassion on account of inherited grievances may be understandable, it is nevertheless unforgivable. Fear, too, may be understandable, but the cruelty to which it sometimes leads remains unpardonable.

Biblical theology is extremely focused on memory. The Torah enjoins Jews to remember the Exodus, and it reminds us that the God of Israel remembers the promises to the ancestors. To take Jewish ethics seriously is to remember what it feels like to be a stranger and therefore to love the stranger.11 But we should not be naïve: Memory is a double-edged sword. We can remember kindnesses done to us, and seek to repay them; we can remember kindnesses not done to us, and commit never to abandon those in need of love and kindness. But we can also remember past crimes and humiliations in the hopes of one day requiting our enemies; if we cannot punish them now, perhaps our grandchildren will make theirs suffer. Memory can deepen empathy but it can also nurture antipathy; it can be redemptive, but it can also be profoundly toxic.12 (During the Bosnian War of the 1990s, Serbian nationalists regularly referred to a military grudge dating back six hundred years!) The king of Edom remembers (too) well what Jacob did to Esau and he will


12 As I have written elsewhere, “The Torah could have responded quite differently to the experience of oppression in Egypt. It could have said, Since you were tyrannized and exploited and no one did anything to help you, you don’t owe anything to anyone; how dare anyone ask anything of you? But it chooses the opposite path: since you were exploited and oppressed, you must never be among the exploiters and degraders. You must remember what it feels like to be a stranger. Empathy must animate and intensify your commitment to the dignity and well-being of the weak and vulnerable. And God holds you accountable to this obligation.” “Turning Memory into Empathy,” cited above, n1.
not give Israel—a people who have endured generations of slavery and oppression since then—so much as an inch.

The Torah’s own relationship to memory and morality is complex. On the one hand, as we’ve seen, Israel is to remember its oppression in Egypt and learn empathy from its pain-laden past. Moreover, Israel is forbidden from holding grudges against the Egyptians (Deuteronomy 23:8). And yet Amalek, who savagely attacks Israel’s stragglers when the people are famished and weary, elicits a very different response: Israel is to “blot out its memory from under heaven” (23:18-19). Some grudges are renounced, while others, it seems, are sanctified. I do not pretend to know how to sort out these seemingly disparate impulses in the Torah. But in this case at least the Israelites are forbidden to do to the Edomites what the Edomites did to them—and I think it is fair to say that Amalek rather than Edom is the exception.

*It would be all too easy for the past to teach you brutality; let it teach you kindness instead.*

Israel is prohibited from nurturing grievances against the Edomites: “Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman” (23:8). But even more fundamentally, it is forbidden from becoming hard-hearted as a result of its often harrowing past. The people’s encounter with Edom on its way to the Land of Promise is intended as a warning and an awakening: When you are settled in your land, people who are hungry and exhausted may come looking for help. Treat them not as you yourselves were treated, but as you would have wanted to be treated. It would be all too easy for the past to teach you brutality; let it teach you kindness instead.
Shabbat Shalom.

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