



Red Alerts

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Parashat VaYishlah 5784

The *parashot* of the Torah often employ a “bookending” technique, using similar words or phrases in both the first and last verses of the *parashah*, in order to create a thematic frame for the action in the middle.¹ Parashat VaYishlah’s bookends are especially pronounced, in that its first and last verses each end with the same word: “אֲדוֹם - Edom.”

The *parashah*’s opening verse finds Ya’akov preparing to reencounter his brother Esav after two decades of bitter estrangement:

בראשית לב:ד

וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לִפְנֵי אֶל עֵשָׂו אָחִיו אֶרְצָה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֵה אֲדוֹם:

Genesis 32:4

Ya’akov sent messengers ahead to his brother **Esav**, in the Land of Seir, the field² of **Edom**.

¹ We see this technique used in the last three *parashot* as well: Parashat Hayyei Sarah begins by recounting “שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה - the years in the life of Sarah” (Genesis 23:1), and ends by counting “שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל - the years in the life of Yishmael” (Genesis 25:17). Parashat Toldot begins by calling Yitzhak “בֶּן אַבְרָהָם - the son of Avraham” (Genesis 25:19), and ends by referring to Yishmael also as “בֶּן אַבְרָהָם - the son of Avraham” (Genesis 28:9). Parashat VaYitzei begins with Ya’akov leaving home and **encountering** a place (בְּמָקוֹם), where he sleeps and dreams of “מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים - angels of God” (Genesis 28:12), and then ends with Ya’akov, on his way back home, **encountering angels of God** (בּוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים) (Genesis 32:2).

² The word שָׂדֵה sometimes refers to a specific area where work (hunting, shepherding or agriculture) is done, and then it is translated as “field”—as in Genesis 37:7: “וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ מְאֻלְמִים בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה - And there we were,



And the last verse in the *parashah*, which comes at the end of a long list of all of Esav's descendants, is:

בראשית לו:מג

אֱלוֹף מַגְדִּיאל אֱלוֹף עִירָם אֵלֶּה אֱלוֹפֵי אֶדוֹם לְמִשְׁבֵּתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אַחְזָתָם הוּא עֵשָׂו אָבִי אֶדוֹם:

Genesis 36:43

The Chief of Magdiel, the Chief of Iram. These are the Chiefs of Edom, by their settlements, in the land of their holdings—and **Esav** is the father of **Edom**.

Between these two verses, we now have a lot of information about what “Edom” refers to. It was first the name of a place where Ya’akov’s brother Esav dwelled at the time of their reunion. Eventually, it became the name of a nation with many clans, sprawling across a sizable territory.

That historical connection is succinctly explained by the *parashah*’s last phrase: “עֵשָׂו אָבִי אֶדוֹם” - Esav is the father of Edom.” In other words, the one-day great nation of Edom is made up primarily of generations of descendants of Esav. A man became a family. A family became a nation.

The story of how Esav came to be called Edom, however, is not that simple. To understand that, we have to go all the way back to the moment of Esav’s birth, where there are already hints of the name he will one day acquire:

binding sheaves in the field.” But the word can refer to any wide open clearing of land, and so it is also translated as “plain,” “pasture,” “country,” or just “land,” any of which might be a better translation in this verse. But I wanted to retain the word “field” in order to maintain the connection that is in the Hebrew to the description of Esau as “אִישׁ שְׂדֵה” - a man of the field” (Genesis 25:27). Next week’s Dvar Torah will be a fuller exploration of the meaning of this particular landscape in the Torah.



בראשית כה:כה

וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲדָמוֹנִי כָּלֹ כְּאֶדְרֵת שֵׁעַר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו:

Genesis 25:25

The first one emerged, all **red** (*admoni*), and cloaked with **hair**, and they called him **Esav**.

There is some subtle wordplay here. Along with the name, Esav, two other words in this verse echo names that we will associate with him. The one who will become *Edom* (אֶדוֹם) is first described as *admoni* (אֲדָמוֹנִי), meaning red; the one who will dwell in the Land of *Seir* (שְׁעִיר), is covered with *sei'ar* (שֵׁעַר), meaning hair.

The linguistic connection between the word *Edom* and the color red (*adom*) then becomes explicit in the first recorded dialogue between Esav and Ya'akov. This is where the name Edom is first mentioned explicitly. It is inserted as an interruption in the action, as if the narrator turned to speak to the reader directly:

בראשית כה:כט-לא

וַיֵּזֶד יַעֲקֹב נָזִיד וַיָּבֹא עֹשֶׂה מִן הַשָּׂדֶה וְהוּא עֵיף: וַיֹּאמֶר עֹשֶׂה אֶל יַעֲקֹב הַלְעִיטֵנִי נָא מִן הָאֲדָם הָאֵדוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי עֵיף אֲנִי עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ אֶדוֹם:
וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מְכֹרָה כִּיּוֹם אֶת בְּכֹרְתְךָ לִי:

Genesis 25:29-31

Once when Ya'akov was cooking a stew, Esav came in from the field, famished. And Esav said to Ya'akov, "Give me some of that **red, red stuff** (*ha-adom ha-adom*) to gulp down, for I am famished"—**which is why he was given the name, "Edom."**

But Ya'akov said, "First sell me your birthright."



According to this story, the name “Edom” is indeed a play on the word for the color red (*adom*). Esav gained the name “Edom”—“The Red”—because of his ravenous hunger for that red, red stuff.

That means that the name Edom comes from a story of humiliation. It was Esav’s gluttonous cynicism that caused him to foolishly sell his birthright to his brother for a bowl of stew. And it was Jacob—full of self-interest and guile—who took advantage of a tired and hungry man. This was a moment that Esav later regretted, the moment that began what would become decades of bitter conflict between these two brothers.

The bookends of Parashat VaYishlah, then, are tethered to these two moments in Esav’s early life. When its opening verse tells us that Ya’akov is sending messengers to, “**Esav** his brother, in the Land of **Seir**, in the field of **Edom**,” those names call us back to the earliest memory we have of Esav, coming all ruddy (*admoni*) and hirsute (*sei’ar*)—and we are reminded that he emerged “first.”

But when the *parashah*’s last verse tells us that “**Esav** is the father of **Edom**,” we are called back to the second episode in Esav’s life, to that red, red stuff (*ha-adom ha-adom*)—and reminded that, though he was the firstborn, he quickly and disgracefully lost his birthright.³

This closing is meant to do more than simply inform us of Edom’s genealogy. The Torah is warning us, with a (red) thread of connected words that stretches back to the moment of Esav’s birth, that the relationship between these two peoples has always been deeply troubled.

³ Parashat VaYishlah even prepares us to catch that signal by repeating some version of the phrase, again and again, throughout its final chapter: “And this is the legacy of **Esav, who is Edom**” (Genesis 36:1); “Esav settled in the hill country of Seir—**Esav is Edom**” (Genesis 36:8); “These are the children of **Esav** and their chiefs—**he is Edom**” (Genesis 36:19).



That warning helps prepare us for the future encounter between Edom and Yisrael. Parashat VaYishlah⁴ is the last we hear of Esav himself, but Edom will make an appearance much later in our narrative, in the Book of Numbers.

The Children of Israel are in the final year of their decades of wandering through the desert. As they move northward, they are heading toward the territory of Edom. So Moshe sends out a request for safe passage. These are ancient relatives, after all. The Torah describes this moment with very familiar language:

במדבר כ"ד

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מַלְאָכִים מִקְדֵּשׁ אֶל מֶלֶךְ אֱדוֹם כֹּה אָמַר אֲחִיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת כָּל הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר
מִצָּאֵתָנוּ:

Numbers 20:14

Moshe **sent messengers** from Kadesh to the King of **Edom**: “Thus says **your brother Yisrael**: You know all the hardships that have befallen us.”

There is the opening word of our *parashah*, *vayishlah*. Moshe is sending out messengers, as his ancestor Ya’akov once did, to Edom. And that connection is explicit, for Moshe emphasizes, “**your brother** Yisrael.”⁵

⁴ After the confrontation in Numbers 20, all is quiet on the Edom front for a time. Once the kingship of Israel begins, however, the Edomites return to do battle with Israel, first under Saul, and then David, and then continue to afflict them throughout the history of ancient Israel. Our Rabbis even suggest that Esau had one other famous descendant, a figure they read into the last verse of the *parashah* I quoted above. Rashi gives us the classic Rabbinic association (cited from a *midrash* in Pirkei de-R. Eliezer): “Magdiel [one of the final chiefs of Edom]—this is Rome.” This becomes the strong Rabbinic association with “Edom”: a coded name for the Romans, the arch-enemy of our Rabbis, the ones who had torn their society apart. And the Kingdom of Edom, over time, came to represent the ruling powers, the kingdom that would never end until the coming of the messiah. Edom comes to represent not just one enemy, but a history of enemies who have terrorized the People of Israel repeatedly.

⁵ This language of brotherhood also appears in the Torah’s final pronouncement on our relationship with Edom, in Deuteronomy 23:8: “Do not abhor an Edomite, for **he is your brother**.”



The response, however, is not an offer of brotherhood, but a threat of violence:

במדבר כ"ח

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֱדוֹם לֹא תַעֲבֹר בִּי פֶן־בְּחָרֵב אֵצֶא לִקְרַאתְךָ:

Numbers 20:18

Edom answered him, “Do not pass through me, or else I will go out against you with the sword.”

Notice the first person address: “I will go out against you!” This is suddenly more than a national confrontation. It’s personal. Moshe tries to negotiate, offering to move without stopping, and to pay for whatever water they drink along the way. But Edom is resolute—“לא - תעבור - you will not pass”—and they come out in force, armed.

But why is Edom so aggressive, so immediately predisposed to attack? Didn’t Ya’akov and Esav reconcile, after all, long ago? That reconciliation was ostensibly the main subject of Parashat VaYishlah.

Recall that I argued the bookending technique serves to create a thematic frame for the action in the middle. So now look at some of the action that takes place between the bookends:

Ya’akov is terrified of meeting Esav again, and does everything he can to mitigate the possibility of danger: he sends messengers with gifts and humble greetings, he prays to God to save him “from the hand of Esav,” and—in case all else fails—he divides his camp so that at least one half can escape (Genesis 32:4-24). And then Ya’akov spends the night wrestling with some mysterious figure, in what seems to be some kind of spiritual rehearsal for the next

day's confrontation, and he emerges with a blessing and his new name (Genesis 32:25-33), and... it all seems to work.

בראשית לג:ד

וַיֵּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקוּהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרוֹ וַיִּשָּׁקוּהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ

Genesis 33:4

Esav ran to greet him and he hugged him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.

After all these years, and all the pain and anger that has laid between them, some dam seems to have broken, and they come to each other in a raw emotional display. Esav then wants to meet Ya'akov's family. And Esav eventually invites them to travel with him back to his home in Seir (Genesis 33:4-12). It seems our story will have a happy ending.

Not so fast. Ya'akov does not turn down the invitation immediately, but he demurs, claiming his family caravan travels too slowly, and asks Esav to go on ahead, "until I come to my lord in Seir" (Genesis 33:12-13). Esav offers Ya'akov a retinue to escort him, but again Ya'akov declines (33:14-15). In the next two verses, we get a quick account of what happened next:

בראשית לג:טז-יז

וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עֵשָׂו לְדִרְכּוֹ שְׁעִירָה:

Genesis 33:16-17

So Esav started back that day on his way to Seir.

וַיַּעֲקֹב נָסַע סֻכּוֹת

But Ya'akov traveled on to Sukkot.

Ya'akov never shows up. He sends Esav on ahead to Seir, and then turns and goes another way. In fact, R. Abahu says (in Bereishit Rabbah 78:14), “we do not find that Ya'akov ever went to Esav at Mount Seir for the rest of his life.” Did Esav extend his hand in true brotherhood and get snubbed by Ya'akov, ripping open old wounds that had just barely closed? Or did Ya'akov diplomatically maneuver his way out of a trap, and was Esav just trying to lure them back into his territory in order to take them captive?

Whatever happened, something was left unsettled. This relationship, once so badly broken, was never fully repaired. There was, perhaps, a moment of real feeling, the possibility of reconciliation.⁶ But soon enough, ancient suspicions rose up, and brothers went their separate ways, back to their silent standoff.

And so they stood, for centuries. Brothers who were unresolved became nations who were unresolved. When Moshe sent out those messengers, from “your brother Israel,” did they remind the King of Edom of that ancient abandoned reconciliation? When Moshe offered to pay for whatever he consumed (נָתַתִּי מִכְרָם), did it trigger some ancestral memory of humiliation, the day Esav had to pay for what he consumed, and he paid with his birthright (וַיִּמְכֶּר אֶת בְּכֹרְתּוֹ)? That was the day Esav became Edom. So now Edom will turn his brother away, as his brother once turned away from him.

The bookends of our *parashah* mark the rise of two families who became great nations. But they also remind us of an earlier history, and warn us—with little “red alerts”—that not only do families grow into nations, but family conflicts, left unresolved, grow into national conflicts. If that is so, then perhaps part of what it takes to solve these national conflicts is to remember our family ties.

⁶ As it says in Sifrei Bemidbar #69: “R. Shimon ben Yohai says: It is a known tradition that Esav hated Ya'akov, but at that moment it transformed into love and he kissed him with all his heart.”

