

## Esau, Edom, Rome and the Jews

In this week's Torah portion, *Devarim*, the Israelites are positioned to enter the Land of Israel. But to do so they must pass through the land of the Edomites, south of the Dead Sea. The Edomites are the descendants of Edom, who is also known as Esau, Jacob's "evil twin". The Edomites refuse passage, so God tells the Israelites to leave the Edomites alone and bypass them:

And the Lord spoke to [Moses], saying... Command the people, saying: You are to pass through the border of your brothers, the children of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you. Be very careful. You shall not provoke them, for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as the breadth of a single foot, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as an inheritance." [Deuteronomy 2:2-5]

Why is God being so protective of the Edomites? Isn't Esau a "bad guy"? One answer is provided in the Torah:

You will not hate an Edomite, for he is your brother. [Deut. 23:8]

OK. Brotherhood is worth something. But that cannot be the whole story, because our tradition paints Esau as the very epitome of wickedness. The Talmud says:

Rabbi Yochanan said: That wicked man [Esau] committed five sins [in a single] day. He dishonored a betrothed maiden, he committed a murder, he denied God, he denied the resurrection of the dead, and he spurned [his] birthright. [Bava Batra 16b]

Moreover, our tradition tells us that the Edomites are the ancestors of the Romans, and indeed of all Europeans and the entire Christian world. The Midrash says:

Two orphans were left to [Esau], namely Remus and Romulus, and You [God] gave permission to a she-wolf to suckle them, and afterwards they arose and built... Rome. [Esther R. 3:5]

Now, the Romans, and their successors the Byzantines, dominated the land of Israel for seven centuries: From 63 BCE, when Pompey conquered Jerusalem, to 638 CE, when the Muslim Caliph Omar Ibn al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem. The Romans oppressed the Jews, destroyed their

Temple, and exiled them from their land. So why did God protect them and allow them to do this?

The Midrash and the Zohar offer another answer: Esau merited land and power because he honored his father. The Midrash tells us:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel said: "All my life I attended to my father's needs, yet I did not do for him one hundredth of what Esau did for his father. I used to attend to my father in soiled garments and go out in the street in clean ones, but when Esau attended to his father, he attended upon him in royal robes, for, he said, 'Only royal robes befit my father's honor.'" [Genesis R. 65:16]

Commenting on our portion, Rabbi Yudan says in the Midrash:

When Israel came to wage war with [the children of Esau], the Holy One blessed be He showed Moses the [Cave of Machpelah] where the Patriarchs are buried and said to him: 'Moses, say to Israel, you may not engage [Esau] in battle, because he still deserves reward for the honor he gave to [some of] those who are buried in this mountain [i.e., his parents]. [Deuteronomy R. 1:15]

The Zohar adds:

Rabbi Yeha said: It is written [in Malachi]:

A son honors his father, and a servant his master. [Mal. 1:6]

Such a son was Esau, for there was not a man in the world who showed as much honor to his father as he did, and it is thanks to this fact that he obtained dominion in this world [through his descendants the Romans].

[Zohar, Bereshit 1:146b]

Five centuries later, in King David's day, the Edomites attacked Israel many times. Israel was, of course, allowed to defend itself, but God would not allow David to annihilate them or take their land. In the Midrash, God tells David:

I know you can [defeat Edom], but I wish to subdue My world through them [i.e., through Rome]... I need [Rome] for future generations [until the final Redemption]... Moses, your teacher, already wished to engage [the Edomites] in battle, but I said no to him. [Deuteronomy R. 1:16]

The Midrash adds:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: "When the [Roman] enemies came to destroy Jerusalem, there were 600,000 destructive angels standing at the gate of the Temple ready to engage them in battle. But when they saw the Divine Presence observing in silence ... they, too, made way [for the enemy to enter]."

Rabbi Yehudah bar Sima said: [God] saw [Esau] destroying His Temple and remained silent... [because Esau] still deserves reward for honoring his parents [and must not yet be defeated] ... The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "I am

paying [Esau his] dues." [Deuteronomy R. 1:17] ...Command the heads of [all future] generations to treat [Esau] with respect. [Deuteronomy R. 1:20]

This sure is a big reward for honoring your father and your mother! On the one hand, one can almost understand Rome being given power and influence as a reward. But on the other hand, why should this reward include oppressing the Jews for seven centuries, destroying their Temple and stealing their land? These are two different things. Nowhere in Judaism does it say that part of your reward for anything will be to get away with murder. Nowhere does it say that in civil law either.

Sometimes, in hindsight, we can recognize that God's plan requires us to suffer. Slavery in Egypt was a case in point. We didn't do anything wrong to deserve it. God simply said to Abraham:

Know for certain that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land, and will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years. [Genesis 15:13]

No reason was given. Evidently God thought slavery was necessary. But why? Many answers come to mind:

- First, for our protection. Jacob's clan in Israel was an easy target for neighbors. In Egypt, a superpower protected us, albeit to exploit us.
- Second, to build up our numbers in safety, to build up our identity and community spirit, to minimize contact with the idolatrous outside world, and to eliminate the possibility of intermarriage (Egyptians wouldn't want to marry slaves).
- Third, to allow God to show the whole world who was in charge, by performing flashy miracles when He freed the Jews.
- Finally, the gratitude felt upon liberation, coupled with the acquired slave mentality, made it easier for us to accept the Torah.

Furthermore, our tradition says that all the bad things that evil perpetrators inflict on us are punishment for our lack of observance, but it also says that that God does not choose who those perpetrators are. They choose themselves, of their own free will, and as a result for their bad choices they WILL be punished for their evil deeds. That being so, how can the Midrash say that God allowed the Romans to almost destroy Judaism as a reward for their ancestor Esau's good behavior towards his father? There is a contradiction there.

It is all very difficult to understand. I don't. Do you?

Shabbat shalom.