

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

Not Playing the Victim

After 40 years of wandering, our ancestors were along the borders of the Promised Land. Though exhausted and short on provisions, they simply asked of the neighboring tribes to give them safe passage. Nearly all refused. Most disheartening was the harsh rejection by our brothers, the Edomites. The encounter is recorded in this week's Torah portion, *Chukat*:

¹⁴ From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: "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 Eternal and God heard our plea, and 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." ¹⁸ 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** (*yad chazakah*). ²¹ So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them (Numbers 20:14-21).

Note that the description of the Edomites hearkens back to the violent actions of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Just as the Egyptians oppressed us with a *yad chazakah*, a strong hand, so too, God freed us from slavery with a strong hand.

In reflection on the hard heartedness of the Egyptians and the Edomites, you would think that we would be eternally sworn enemies. Indeed, both nations victimized us, oppressed us, and dehumanized us. But we are explicitly commanded in the Torah NOT to hold a grudge against the Egyptians and the Edomites. We are instructed not to play the victim:

⁸ You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land (Deuteronomy 23:8).

One can formulate a number of reasons for the commandment not to dwell on our pain. What comes to my mind is the necessity to focus on the important work today and the challenges for tomorrow. If we dwell too much on the past, if we obsess on the wrongs we have suffered, on how we have been victimized, then we diminish our energy on our present needs and goals. The Torah instructs our ancestors to remember the experiences from Egypt and the harshness of Edom, but the real task was to reclaim our ancestral homeland and secure the future.

This challenge is for our generation as well. Modern Israelis have endured unrelenting attacks from Palestinians and their Arab neighbors. Brutal acts of terror, murder and murderous incitement have become synonymous with Palestinian culture. And yet, the vast majority of Israelis stand ready to make a lasting peace with them. Most recently, Israel and her Arab neighbors have joined to begin negotiations that will end the relentless cycle of violence and lay the foundation of a two-state solution that will grant Palestinians sovereignty and prosperity. Sadly, the reaction from the current Palestinian leadership has time and again been to reject every overture and effort toward peace. However, the encouraging word is that recent polls among the Palestinian people indicate that a growing percentage wants to break the self-defeating myth of blame-victimization-grudge and violence in order to take a chance and take advantage of the economic, social and moral benefits of peace.

Each of us, in our own way, can play the role of victim or we can recommit ourselves to our present needs and positive possibilities. May this Shabbat be a time of reflection and renewal for all.

Shabbat Shalom,

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