

Geulas Yisrael #57: Chukat

The Isaac Accords

Moshe Taragin

The time had finally come. After forty miserable years of wandering through sandy dunes, we arrived at the doorstep of Israel, ready to claim our ancient birthright. There was only one problem- several other empires lined the borders of Israel. Unless one of them granted us passage, history would stall.

Our first request was posed to our brother, Esav, who had established the formidable kingdom of Edom on the southern border of Israel. While we suffered centuries of Egyptian persecution, our older brother had fashioned a mighty nation. As we were arriving to Israel from the Sinai desert, a route through Edom would have provided the most direct access to our homeland.

Sadly, our request was flatly denied, and we were forced to circumvent the southern flank of Israel, crossing into the East bank of the Jordan river. Rattling their sabers, the Edomites amassed a huge army along the border, in a aggressive display of defiance. Thankfully, no hostilities broke out, and we went along our way, peacefully. Unlike the subsequent wars with a mighty warrior king named Sichon and a Titan named "Og", this faceoff had no long-lasting impact.

Yet, this standoff feels eerily familiar to Ya'akov's first encounter with Esav, in Breishit. Moshe dispatched מלאכים or messengers, just as Ya'akov had previously sent מלאכים to Esav. We generously offered to purchase Esav's water, even though we had ample supply. This gesture was reminiscent of the lavish gifts which Ya'akov presented to his alienated

brother. The term מלאך , which can refer to a messenger or to an angel, is mentioned twice in the current negotiations. This recalls the angels who Ya'akov encountered on his way to meet Esav and, of course the heavenly visitor who Ya'akov wrestled the night before his rendezvous with Esav. The current meeting feels more than just *diplomatic*, it feels *historical*. Evidently, this interaction is a sequel to Ya'akov's first confrontation with his brother. Evidently, we had some unfinished business.

Prior to entering the land of history, we wanted to "patch up" history. What better way to repair our historical rupture with Esav, than to solicit his help in entering our historical homeland. This isn't *negotiation but rapprochement*.

For this reason, Moshe refers to our shared heritage with Esav. Before submitting our request for passage, Moshe reviewed the past 290 years of Jewish history since our last meeting with Esav. Much had transpired, Moshe announced, since "*our parents descended to Egypt*". By casting the Egyptian experience as the exile of *our parents*, Moshe signals that Hashem had originally selected the *entire family* for mission. Esav had opted out, leaving Ya'akov to wrestle with harsh historical challenges and to face a crushing exile, alone.

This historical mission was now concluding and here was an opportunity for Esav to support the broader family project. Here was an opportunity for Esav to sign-on to the "Yitzchak Accords".

Unfortunately, history wasn't yet ready for mending. Old battle lines had been drawn and the parties couldn't reconcile. Moshe reported that, under duress in Egypt, we prayed to Hashem for liberation. In response, Edom threatened to assault us with their swords. It was the "same old same old": the voice of

Ya'akov's prayers clashing with the bellicose sword of Esav. On this day, Esav and Ya'akov would not reunite. Time wasn't ripe.

Yet, hope for future reconciliation was not totally lost. For this reason, we were warned against any hostility, or even provocation of our recalcitrant brother: אל תתגרו בם כי לא אתן –לכם מארצם עד מדרך כף רגל כי ירושה לעשו נתתי את הר שעיר “do not hassle [Edom] ..for the land of Se'ir is their inheritance.” Unlike the Emori and Bashan nations, Edom was not to be antagonized. We were not to burn any bridges.

Esav is different from other nations. Esav was raised in the house of Yitzchak, which was built upon the monotheistic traditions of Avraham. That background provided a basis, which could, one day, develop into pure monotheism and moral lifestyle. At this stage Esav wasn't yet ready to be educated and History wasn't yet ready for reconciliation. Everything was suspended. No merger, but no hostility. The future was still wide open, it would just take a while. Just not now.

About 1900 years later, in the 4th century, the “Esav shift” would be launched. Esav's descendants, now residing in Rome, would turn away from the ancient world of crass paganism and adopt a monotheistic-infused religion of Christianity. That monotheism would still be contaminated by vestiges of ancient paganism, but it would be preferable to outright idol worship. The potential redemption of Esav had begun.

About 1000 years later, Esav's descendants- now dominating Western Civilization-would begin to reimagine their society and their government. A feudal world of oppression and poverty would be replaced by a world of democracy and equality. A savage world would yield to one of greater civility. Not only was Esav veering toward monotheism, but he was now becoming more moral. The reclamation project continued.

Would Esav pass the next stage? Though he had advanced religiously and morally, he had still mercilessly persecuted Ya'akov, in particular over the last millennia. Slowly but surely though, much of the Christian world has begun to abandon its discriminatory views of Judaism and formally ban antisemitism. The rapprochement was almost complete.

Which brings Esav to the final step of historical reclamation: assisting the return of Ya'akov to their homeland. On November 29th, 1947, many of Esav's descendants voted to allow the Jews to pass into Israel. Since then, we have received significant support from many parts of Esav's family. The rapprochement was delayed thousands of years, but it has occurred – at least for many segments of Esav's family.

Not all of Esav's descendants have made the shift. One day Hashem will purify all monotheistic religions of their adulterations. Furthermore, He will judge the residents of Se'ir, Esav's "capital". Those who reconciled with Ya'akov will be redeemed, those who did not will be disciplined.

We never "gave up" on Esav. It just took some time and a lot of patience.