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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

Confidence-Building Measures in Biblical Foreign Policy

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On his way back to Canaan from Aram, “Yaakov sent *mal’akhim* (messengers or angels) – before him to Esav his brother, toward Seir, the fields of Edom, as follows: “So you must say to mymaster, to Esav: ‘So says your servant Yaakov . . .’” (Bereishis 33:4-5).

On Yaakov’s descendants’ way back to Canaan from Mitzrayim, “Mosheh sent *mal’akhim* from Kadesh to the King of Edom: ‘So says your brother Israel . . .’”

(Bamidbar 20:14)

The parallel is striking. But in Bereishis it is the narrator who describes Esav as Yaakov’s brother, while Yaakov refers to Esav as his master. By contrast, Mosheh himself presents Israel and Edom as brothers and as equals.

The outcomes are also different.

While Yaakov’s *mal’akhim* initially report that Esav is on his way with 400 (presumably armed and bellicose) men, the brothers’ physical encounter ends in a rapprochement. Esav then departs Canaan in favor of Yaakov. (Esav suggests that he and Yaakov travel together, but Yaakov replies that he would come to Seir eventually. The valence of Yaakov’s reply, and its connection to the episode in Bamidbar, is beyond our scope this week.)

By contrast, when Edom responds to Bnei Yisroel’s second message with a curt “No” and a visible display of force, Bnei Yisroel change their plans and take a circuitous route to Canaan that avoids Edom.

The simplest way of accounting for these differences is to say that Edom/Esav acknowledged Yaakov/Bnei Yisroel’s absolute right to Canaan, but in turn demanded recognition of their own equal authority over Seir. This can plausibly be called “The Two State Solution”, with Esav firmly believing that good fences make good neighbors.

This approach deliberately avoids asking the kind of questions that would necessitate more nuance. For example, it assumes that Mosheh and Bnei Yisroel’s words and actions were irrelevant to Edom’s response.

We can be more imaginative. Mosheh could have copied Yaakov’s policy by sending a massive caravan of gifts along with his messengers. Bnei Yisroel might have divided their camp in half, and sent one half forward (including women and children) to kneel before the King of Edom. Would Edom have responded graciously?

Maybe Mosheh and Bnei Yisroel had real agency here.

Maybe. Or maybe Edom would have seized the opportunity for demigenocide.

Yaakov had no way around Esav. His only alternative was permanent landlessness and never reaching his father’s house again.

Risking heavy casualties was a reasonable choice for him. By contrast, Mosheh and Bnei Yisroel had the option of avoiding confrontation by taking a much less convenient route. They had no need to take large risks for the mere possibility of peace.

Netziv finds a third way. Mosheh had agency here, but he had no genuine interest in traversing Edom. Rather, his goal was to empower Edom. His message was literally a confidence-building measure. Moreover, Mosheh had to accomplish this without letting Bnei Yisroel understand his purpose. Here is Netziv, followed by my translation:

אמנם עוד יש בזה דבר עמוק,
שהרי אנו רואים דשליחות הראשון כתיב וישלח משה, ושליחות שניה
כתיב ויאמרו אליו בני ישראל,
אלא באמת ידע משה היטב כי לא יאבה מלך אדום, כמו שאמר לו ה'
כי לא אתן לכם מארצו עד מדרך כף רגל, אבל משום שאמר ה' למשה
וייראו מכם ונשמרתם מאד,
והיה בזה המצוה להשמר שלא ייראו
ויהיו בטוחים שלא בכח ישראל לעבור עליהם בעל כרחם,
על כן עשה משה זה השליחות כדי שיבין מלך אדום שתלוי ברצונו,
וכיון שענה מלך אדום פן בחרב אצא לקראתך –
ידע משה שסר פחד ישראל ממנו, ושוב לא שלח אליו,
אבל בני ישראל - הוסיפו לנסות,
ומשום הכי לא רצה משה לשלח אנשי ישראל,
שמא יראו השלוחים כמה המה נפחדים ונמוגים,
כאשר כן היה באמת,
והיו ישראל מתאמצים ללכת בלי פחד מחרב אדום,
והיה צריך למשה להלוך נגד רוחם,
על כן ראה לשלוח מאומות העולם
שלא שמו לב כי אם לדעת תשובת המלך,
והיו סבורים ישראל שבאמת לבם ברי עליהם,
ושוב לא עלה על לב להלוך בעל כרחם וע' בסמוך:

...
עבור בגבולו –

העיד הכתוב שלא בשביל איזה טעם מיאן,
אלא לא רצה שיעברו בגבולו,
והיינו משנאה כבושה לא עשה להם טובת הנאה.

There is something else deep here, because regarding the first agency it writes *And Mosheh sent*, but for the second *Bnei Yisroel said to him*. The truth is that Mosheh knew well that the King of Edom would not agree, as Hashem had said to him (Devarim 2:5) *I will not give you from his land even a foothold*. However, because Hashem said to Mosheh (D’varim 2:4): *They will be in terror of you, be very careful,*

meaning a commandment to be careful (to ensure) that Edom not be in terror,
and that they be secure that Israel would not use force to traverse their territory against their will.

So Mosheh did this sending so that the King of Edom would understand that all depended on his will. Once the king of Edom replied *lest I go out to greet you with the sword*, Mosheh knew that fear of Israel had departed from him, and he no longer sent (messages) to him.

But Bnei Yisroel made a further try.

Mosheh therefore did not want to send Jews, because he was afraid that the agents would see that the Edomites were in fact afraid and trembling,
as was in fact the case,

and then Israel would therefore be aggressive to go through without fear of Edom's sword,
and Mosheh would then have to oppose the spirit of the people. Therefore he sent non-Jewish agents, who cared only to hear the words of the king's response,

so the Jews would think that the Edomites were actually stouthearted,

and thus they no longer thought of traversing against their will. See what I write below

...

“Pass within his boundaries” –

Scripture testifies that Edom refuses not because of a genuine rationale,

but rather he simply did not wish them to traverse within his boundaries,

meaning that because of a deep-seated hatred he would not give them even a costless benefit.

Netziv argues that the *mal'akhim* that Mosheh sends to Edom are neither angels nor Jewish – rather, Mosheh sends residents of the place where Bnei Yisroel are staying: “*Mosheh sent mal'akhim who were from Kadesh to the King of Edom.*” Mosheh fully expects the Edomites to respond angrily, and chooses neutral agents in the hope that they will not suffer from that anger.

(As an aside: Talmud Pesachim 113b tells the story of a single witness who testifies in court about someone else's sin, and is whipped for defamation, since a single witness can have no legal effect. He protests: “Tovah sinned, and Zygud is whipped?” Talmud Makkot 11a suggests that this is a folk proverb rather than a historical report. Now Onkelos translates *mal'akhim* here as “*zgdin*”, because the Aramaic root z g d means “messenger”. So the proverb may actually be an early version of “Don't shoot the messenger!”)

More convincingly, Netziv notes that while Mosheh sends the initial agents, it is Bnei Yisroel as a whole who respond to Edom's refusal. His explanation is that Bnei Yisroel were unaware that Mosheh wanted and expected the negotiations to fail.

I have a suggestion that builds on Netziv.

The Torah places the dialogue with Edom immediately after the episode of the Waters of Controversy, which ends with Mosheh and Aharon being denied entry to Canaan. Chazal interpret this juxtaposition as emphasizing Mosheh's egoless leadership:

“In the ordinary way of the world, if a person engages in business with a fellow and loses thereby, he separates from him and wishes not to see him; but Mosheh, even though he was punished because of Bnei Yisroel, he did not unload their burden from his shoulders”.

This explanation pays no heed to an apparent thematic connection. Mosheh's punishment was the result of Bnei Yisroel's excessive worry about water, and the negotiations with Edom center around water. “*We will not drink well-water*”. “*If we drink your water, I and my cattle, I will pay their sale price*”. The goal seems to be to ensure that Bnei Yisroel will not ever again be dependent on miracles for water.

Perhaps the second message is from Bnei Yisroel rather than from Mosheh because his political power waned once everyone knew that a leadership transition would soon be necessary, especially regarding water. I wonder whether Netziv's portrait of Mosheh as leader casting a veil over his own actions and keeping his constituents in the dark about his goal seems proper and ethical to us.

But I'm also reflecting on Netziv's understanding that G-d commanded us not only to leave Edom's sovereignty over its land intact, but also to ensure that Edom felt secure about our intentions. I'm also fascinated that Mosheh Rabbeinu interpreted this as requiring proactive measures to build Edom's self-confidence, even though that self-confidence could be based only on security about our intentions and not on actual military parity, and that the key threat to G-d's policy came from Jews who could not understand why might did not make right so long as we were not seizing land permanently.

All this because Edom is our brother, whom we must not abominate, even though he continues to cultivate his hatred for us and expresses this hatred by choosing lose-lose over win-win propositions. Was the hatred grounded in a contention that Esav's departure from Canaan was involuntary, or at the least insufficiently considered? Do Mosheh and G-d think that their policy will eventually diminish the hatred?

Not so long ago, in our very own galaxy, even raising the last possibility might have seemed silly blue-skying. And yet the Roman Catholic Church, which our tradition often identifies with Edom, has changed dramatically, almost unimaginably, on anti-Semitism in the past 60 years. So perhaps there are lessons to learn here, and to consider applying, with enormous caution, to relationships with other relatives.

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