

The Israelite Encounter with Edom and Xenophobic Policy

In his article, “Reimagining the Israelite-Edomite Encounter,” Dr. David Glatt-Gilad explores two versions in the Torah of the Israelites and their attempt to pass through Edomite territory. The seeming contradictions between the versions inspire interpretations throughout Jewish tradition that reflect different responses for how to engage with policy rooted in fear and xenophobia. Gratitude to Dr. David Glatt-Gilad for the inspiration for this text study.

Version 1: The Israelites Turned Back from Edom (Numbers 20:14-21)

From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us; 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. We cried to יְהוָה who heard our plea, sending a messenger or angel, that is, “[divine] messenger.” who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. 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.” But Edom answered him, “You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.” “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.” But [Edom] replied, “You shall not pass through!” And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed. So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מַלְאָכִים מִקָּדֵשׁ אֶל־מֶלֶךְ אֱדוֹם כֹּה אָמַר
אֶחָיד יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר
מָצָאנוּנוּ:
וַיֵּרְדּוּ אַבְתִּינוּ מִצְרִימָה וְנָשַׁב בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים רַבִּים
וַיַּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא־אֲבֹתֵינוּ:
וְנִצָּעַק אֱלֹהֵי וַיִּשְׁמַע קִלְנוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ וַיַּצֵּאנוּ
מִמִּצְרַיִם וְהִנֵּה אֲנִינִנוּ בְּקֹדֶשׁ עֵיר קְצָה גְבוּלָה:
נִעְבְּרָה־נָא בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא נַעֲבֹר בְּשָׂדֶיךָ וּבְכָרְמְךָ וְלֹא
נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר דְּרֹךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ נִלְךָ לֹא נִשָּׂה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל
עַד אֲשֶׁר־נַעֲבֹר גְּבֻלָּה:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֱדוֹם לֹא תַעֲבֹר בִּי פֹר־בְּחֶרֶב אֵצֶל
לִקְרֹאֲתְךָ:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַסְלָה נַעֲלֶה וְאִם־מִיָּמִינֶךָ
נִשְׁתֶּה אֲנִי וּמִקְנִי וְנִתְּתִי מִכָּרֶם רֶק אִיוֹ־דָבָר בְּרִגְלִי
אֲנַעֲבְרָה:
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תַעֲבֹר וַיֵּצֵא אֱדוֹם לִקְרֹאָתוֹ בָּעֵם כְּבֹד וּכְבֹד
חֲזָקָה:
וְאֱדוֹם נָתַן אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹבֵר בְּגִבְלוֹ וַיֵּט וַיִּמָּאֵן
יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַלָּיו:

Version 2: The Israelites Went Forward in the Seir Region of Edom (Deuteronomy 2:2-8, 29)

Then יְהוָה said to me: You have been skirting this hill country long enough; now turn north. And charge the people as follows: You will be passing through the territory of your kin, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. Though they will be afraid of you, be very careful not to provoke them. For I will not give you of their land so much as a foot can tread on; I have given the hill country of Seir as a possession to Esau. “*You may obtain food from them to eat for money; and you may also procure water from them to drink for money.*” What food you eat you shall obtain from them for money; even the water you drink you shall procure from them for money. Indeed, your God יְהוָה has blessed you in all your undertakings. [God] has watched over your wanderings through this great wilderness; your God יְהוָה has been with you these past forty years: you have lacked nothing. We then moved on, away from our kin, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the road of the Arabah, away from Elath and Ezion-geber; and we marched on in the direction of the wilderness of Moab... As the descendants of Esau who dwell in Seir did for me, and the Moabites who dwell in Ar—that I may cross the Jordan into the land that our God יְהוָה is giving us.”

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:
רַב־לָכֶם כִּב אֶת־הַהָר הַזֶּה פָּנּוּ לָכֶם צָפֹנָה:
וְאֶת־הָעָם צֹו לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים בְּגְבוּל אֶחָיֶכֶם
בְּנֵי־עֵשָׂו הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּשַׁעִיר וַיִּירָאוּ מִכֶּם וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם
מֵאֵד:
אֲלִי־תִתְּנוּן לָם כִּי לֹא־אֶתֶּן לָכֶם מֵאַרְצָם עַד מְדִינָה
כַּף־רֶגֶל כִּי־יִרְשָׁה לַעֲשׂו נְתַתִּי אֶת־הָר שַׁעִיר:
אֲכַל תִּשְׁבְּרוּ מֵאֲתָם בַּכֶּסֶף וְאֲכַלְתֶּם וְגַם־מַיִם
תִּכְרוּ מֵאֲתָם בַּכֶּסֶף וּשְׁתִּיתֶם:
כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בִּרְכָךְ כָּל־מַעֲשֶׂה יָדְךָ יִדַּע לְקַבֵּל
אֲרֻבָּעִים שָׁנָה יְהוָה וְאֶת־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה הִגִּיד לְךָ
אֱלֹהֶיךָ עֹמֶד לֹא חִסְרָת דָּבָר: וְנַעֲבֹר מֵאֵת אֶחָינוּ
בְּנֵי־עֵשָׂו הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּשַׁעִיר מְדִינָה הָעֶרְבָה מֵאֵילָת
וּמֵעֵצֵינוּ גִּבֹר וְנַעֲבֹר דֶּרֶךְ מְדִינָה
מוֹאָב:
כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ־לִי בְנֵי עֵשָׂו הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּשַׁעִיר
וְהַמוֹאָבִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעֵר עַד אֲשֶׁר־אֲעֹבֵר אֶת־
הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ נָתַן לָנוּ:

Reconciling the Accounts: Did Edom Let Them Pass Or Not?

Rashi on Deuteronomy 2:29- Aid in the Absence of Humane Policy

עשו לי בגי עשו — כאשר עשו לי בגי עשו — This does not refer to passing through their land (רק אעברה ברגלי) for Edom refused this, (Numbers 20:18) but to the matter of selling food and water.

Rashbam on Deuteronomy 2:4- Difference in Regional Response

These were not the same Edomites who had come out with drawn swords when the Israelites had wanted to traverse their territory (Numbers 20). The Edomites mentioned in Deuteronomy 2:29 had at least sold food and drink to the Israelites.

Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 2:29- Civil Disobedience Against the Administration's Policy

I believe that Israel's request refers to, *I will go along by the highway, Israel asked Sihon to permit them to go on the highway*. As the children of Esau did, for Israel went around Mount Seir by the highway. Indeed, Scripture reads, *Ye are to pass through the border of your brethren the children of Esau, that dwell in Seir* (v. 4). However, the king, that is, the king of Edom, did not allow them to pass through his country, which was near Canaan. Israel therefore passed by Ar, as Scripture records (v. 18). [The king refused but the people allowed passage]

Dr. David Glatt-Gilad “Refashioning the Edomite-Israelite Encounter”- Policy Change After 38 Years

Thus, Deuteronomy 2's own upbeat presentation of the Edomite-Israelite encounter in an unmistakably fortieth year context serves as a kind of *tikkun* (corrective) of the negative experience of Num 20:14–21. The author of Deuteronomy assumes that Moses did make the failed request in the second year, but he chooses to skip over this event—to bury it as it were—and continue with the second request with its positive outcome. Only once the 40th year had arrived could Moses redo what had gone awry long before, albeit from a different location, and this time receive permission from the Edomites to cross their territory. Thus, after thirty-eight years of punishment, skirting the border of Edom, the people were finally able... to resume the direct march toward the Promised Land unimpeded. (torah.com)

- When governmental policy fails to uphold the dignity of the most vulnerable, these different interpretations offer different possible responses. Which appeal to you? Do any provide inspiration or hope?

Compiled by Rabbi Sarah Bassin