

THE CRIES OF OUR RIVALS

DAVID CURWIN

Throughout the Bible, the people of Israel are beset by foes. Some oppress them, and others attack them in battle. Much of biblical history can be classified by who was persecuting or assaulting Israel at that point in the story. The very nature of the biblical narrative ensures that we never forget how we were treated by these adversaries.

Therefore, it is surprising that in the book of Deuteronomy, we have commandments that instruct us to treat those same nations charitably:

And the LORD said to me: Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war. For I will not give you any of their land as a possession; I have assigned Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot (Deut. 2:9)

You shall not abhor¹ an Edomite, for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land (Deut. 23:8)

Just a generation before, the cruelty of the Egyptians to Israel was so extreme that God intervened with unprecedentedly harsh punishments. And the relationship with Edom and Moab was not much better. Edom (the nation of Esau, Jacob's brother) belligerently rejected Israel's polite request to pass through their land (Numbers 20:14-21), and Moab hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel in the desert (Numbers 22-24). So why are these nations deserving of divine limitations on our enmity toward them?

There appears to be a common thread that explains why we are obligated to take such compassionate attitudes toward these three nations.

PARALLELS BETWEEN EDOM AND EGYPT

Before we get to Moab, let's look at Edom and Egypt, since they appear in the same verse. At first glance, their mention in that verse might be nearly coincidental. While Israel is forbidden to abhor both nations, perhaps the reasons are unrelated. The verse mentions the Edomite being "your brother," whereas regarding Egypt, "you were a stranger in their land."

David Curwin is a writer living in Efrat. He writes about Hebrew language, issues on his site Balashon, and has published articles about Jewish thought in Tradition, Hakirah and Lehrhaus.

However, a closer look at the linguistic and thematic parallels between Israel's history with each of these nations will reveal a common spirit to both and explain why they are joined in the same verse.

Three leitmotifs appear prominently in both the Edom and Egypt stories: the *bekhora* (first-born birthright), the blessing, and the "great cry."

THE BEKHORA

In Genesis 25, Jacob convinced Esau, who was under the duress of starvation, to sell his birthright. From Esau's point of view, this was an unjust sale, as he later recounts (after Jacob steals his blessing): *Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing* (Gen. 27:36). Jacob, however, did maintain the status of first-born, and became the father of the nation of Israel.

In Egypt, we see a similar dispute over who was entitled to the title of "first-born." The first-born status implies dominance over the other brothers in a family, and Egypt, by subjugating Israel to slavery, acted as if they were the first-born of nations. However, this situation would not last. Speaking to Moses before he returned to Egypt, God foretold how the negotiations for Israel's freedom would transpire:

And the LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you, "Let My son go, that he may worship Me," yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.'" (Ex.4:21-23)²

The confirmation of Israel as God's first-born was linked with the killing of the Egyptian first-borns (and the saving of the Israelite ones). There would be no doubt as to Israel's status. As in the story with Jacob, the nation of Egypt, stripped of their first-borns, learned that Israel carried the birthright of nations.

THE BLESSING

In addition to acquiring the birthright from Esau, Jacob also deceived his father and stole his brother's intended blessing. After discovering the ruse, Esau begs his father for a blessing of his own:

When Esau heard his father's words, he let out a great and bitter cry, He said to his father, 'Bless me too, Father!' (Gen. 27:34)

And Esau said to his father, 'Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!' And Esau wept aloud (Gen. 27:38)

The repeated phrase, "bless me too," also appears (with minor deviations in the Hebrew) in the last words Pharaoh says to Moses, after the devastating plague of the first-borns: *Take your sheep and cattle, just as you said! Go! Bless me too* (Ex. 12:32)

After generations of subjugation, Israel was now in the position to bless others. This is a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham: "You shall be a blessing . . . all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." (Gen. 12:2-3). As Rashi in his commentary explains, the phrase "You shall be a blessing" means that the power to bless has been transferred from God to Abraham's nation of Israel. Pharaoh recognized, as Esau had done generations before, that the bearer of the divine birthright also had the potential to grant blessings and pleaded for one as well.

THE GREAT CRY

We note above that Esau let out a "great and bitter cry" (Gen. 27:34) when he learned that Jacob stole his blessing. In Hebrew, the phrase includes the words *tza'akah gedolah* (literally, "great cry").

The same phrase is found in reference to Egypt. The death of the Egyptian first-borns was followed by a *tza'akah gedolah* - "great cry" (Ex. 11:6, 12:30). This is the only other time in the Torah where the phrase appears.

Both cries arose from a feeling of great loss, and a recognition that the preeminent status they once held was gone – passed to their former subordinate.

CONNECTIONS

These three common leitmotifs, as well as the grouping of Edom and Egypt in the same verse in Deuteronomy, leads to the conclusion that there must be

something shared about the narratives of the Edom and Egypt stories as well. When we discover what that is, we will also learn why Israel was prohibited from abhorring both nations.

As noted above, Israel had sufficient grounds to despise these two nations. On the other hand, there is no blanket prohibition against abhorring every nation, so other foes from the time of the Torah, like Midian, are presumably fair game for resentment. So what is special about Edom and Egypt? Why are they specifically protected from our enmity?

EDOM

When we first consider Esau (and his nation Edom), it is instinctive to view him as a villain. However, this perception is influenced by the tension between Edom and Israel in the later biblical period, and the identification of Edom with Rome, and then later Christianity, in the rabbinic period.

Just reading the book of Genesis, Esau is actually a sympathetic character. While he is far from perfect, his flaws aren't unique to him, and can be found in the family of Israel as well. For example, he is condemned for marrying a Canaanite woman, but Jacob's sons did so as well (see Gen. 38:2 and 46:10). Esau's violence and anger are not praiseworthy but are no worse than the massacre of Shechem or the original plan to murder Joseph.

The Torah never denies that Jacob is the true heir of the blessing of Abraham and the birthright of Isaac. But Jacob didn't escape the consequences of his machinations. Looking at the sad events of the rest of Jacob's life, it is clear that he suffered for these acts of exploitation and guile. His uncle Laban tricked him into marrying Leah before his beloved Rachel, and then maltreated him for years when Jacob was in his service. And even more painfully, Jacob's own sons deceived him, by telling him that their brother Joseph was killed, when they had actually sold him as a slave.

Jacob did not treat Esau like a brother, and as a result spent much of his life in agony – his years were “few and hard” (Gen 47:9). His descendants, therefore, are ordered to remember that Edom is their brother, and are enjoined from hating them. The prohibition to abhor Edom is not simply encouragement to “love your brother,” but a perpetual reminder to Israel of the lesson that their ancestor Jacob learned.

EGYPT

While the connection between Jacob's mistreatment of Esau and its later consequences for Jacob is clear, the parallel with Egypt is far less obvious. Even the most condemnatory reading of Esau's personality will concede that he never actually did any harm to Jacob or his family. This is certainly not the case with Egypt, who enslaved and murdered the Israelites.

In light of this, the Torah's justification for the prohibition to abhor Egyptians is particularly astonishing: "for you were a stranger in his land." A stranger in their land? We were their slaves! That was certainly true for many generations, but the Israelites were at first strangers welcomed into Egypt in the days of Joseph. And at that time, we find an eerie parallel with the example of Esau we reviewed above. Just as Jacob took advantage of Esau, so too did Joseph take advantage of the Egyptians. Genesis 47 tells how, during the years of famine, Joseph drew the Egyptian people further and further into his debt, until they eventually were enslaved by the state. Joseph, however, exempted his own Hebrew family, which prospered during the same period. Additionally, we read that while the Egyptians sold all their land (Gen. 47:19-21), Israel took possession of territory: *Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly* (Gen. 47:27).

Similar to the way that Jacob suffered for his treatment of Esau, the Israelites also paid a heavy price for Joseph's decisions. By setting up the infrastructure for mass slavery, it was easier for the Egyptians to enslave the Israelites. The Egyptians surely resented the special treatment Israel had received under Joseph's regime, and this resentment shortly escalated into the oppression and butchery that we read about in the beginning of Exodus.

This is evident in the Egyptian depiction of the Israelites, which echoes the description of their prosperity in Genesis 47, *But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them* (Ex. 1:7).

But unlike the positive phrase in Genesis, "were fertile and increased greatly," in Exodus a new verb is added. Translated here as "prolific," a more precise translation would be "they swarmed" (from the root *sheretz*, a creeping or crawling animal). The Egyptians were upset by the prosperity of the Israel-

ites, and the new king was therefore able to start his cruel decrees by noting that “the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase.” (Ex. 1:9-10) His solution was forced labor, which would reduce the Israelites to the economic and social position the average Egyptian held during Joseph’s rule. The die had been cast, and it would lead to catastrophe for both nations – first Israel, then Egypt itself.

Once again, the echoes of the past are heard in the commandment in Deuteronomy. The Israelites were welcomed into Egypt but did not act with the appreciation expected of such guests. And so while hating the Egyptians might be the easiest reaction to their treatment of us, God insists that we refrain from hating them because initially we were strangers in their land. If it was only an issue of recognizing the good the Egyptians had done for Israel initially, then it would be clearly outweighed by the evil deeds they later committed. But since Israel’s exploitation of the hospitality was a factor in the events that later transpired, the Egyptians are permanently exempt from the complete loathing we would expect to follow.

This is not to say that the Egyptians were justified in their abuse of the Israelites. God punished them severely for their actions, which is evidence that they were fully culpable for their actions. And the Passover holiday is testament that Israel is never to forget their cruelty. But the Torah is consistently nuanced when it comes to responsibility. There can be more than one factor that leads to an event, and even if, as in this case, one party might bear more responsibility than the other, it will not let either side forget the lessons that need to be learned.

LESSONS

A midrash captures this message well. It compares the use of *tza’akah gedolah* by Esau with that of Mordechai in the Book of Esther:

“Whoever maintains that the Holy One Blessed Be He is a foregoer (of His just claims), may he forego his life! He is merely long-suffering, but (ultimately) collects His due. Jacob made Esau break out into a cry but once, and where was he punished for it? In Shushan the Palace, as it says (Esther 4:1): *And [Mordechai] cried with a great and bitter cry*” (Bereshit Rabbah 67:4)

This midrash jumps from Jacob and Esau to their descendants Mordechai and Haman. But by presenting the “great cry” as a key phrase and acknowledging that God held Israel responsible for the mistreatment of Esau, the precedent is set for us to make the same comparison regarding Egypt and their “great cry.”

Putting all the above together, we see a template for lessons to learn.

In both cases, we have a nation (or the progenitor of the nation) that lost their *bekhora*, and Israel bore responsibility for that loss. The defeated one begged for a blessing from the transmitter of divine blessings and let out a great cry expressing their pain. Both Edom and Egypt are included in the same verse because they followed the same pattern.

It is easy and understandable to focus on the grievances we have toward these nations. But if the Torah included these stories that we are intended to continually study, and particularly if it used repetitive language which creates parallels, it is urging us to learn the lessons, and apply them in other analogous situations as well. Let’s see how the example of Moab is such a situation.

MOAB

The prohibition against harassing Moab is also tied to a story, and it also includes the familiar elements of birthright, blessing and crying out. The connection may be more subtle than that of Edom and Egypt, and some components express themselves differently than in the previous stories, but an examination of the verses will show why empathy is deserved by this rival of Israel as well.

The justification the Torah provides for this law in Deuteronomy is associated with the allotment of the land: *For I will not give you any of their land as a possession; I have assigned Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot* (Deut. 2:9).

The story of Israel’s travel to the land of Canaan is repeated by Jephthah in the Book of Judges. In a message to the King of Ammon (also a descendant of Lot, like Moab), Jephthah recounts:

Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, ‘Allow us to cross your country.’ But the king of Edom would not consent. They also sent a mission to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel,

after staying at Kadesh, traveled on through the wilderness, skirting the land of Edom and the land of Moab. They kept to the east of the land of Moab until they encamped on the other side of the Arnon; and, since Moab ends at the Arnon, they never entered Moabite territory (Judg. 11:17-18)

However, the Moabites did not respond to the Israelite restraints graciously. Balak, the king of Moab, accused Israel of being a “horde [which] will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field” (Num. 22:4) and hired Balaam to curse them, so he can *drive them out of the land* (22:6).

Considering Israel’s prohibition against taking Moabite land, Balak’s allegations seem unjust, and hiring Balaam so he can *engage* [Israel] *in battle* (22:11) can be seen as a *casus belli*. So why should there be a prohibition on harassing Moab?

Just as with Edom and Egypt, the Torah is encouraging us to see the Moabite perspective, to empathize with them. Evidence for this can be found in the chapter preceding the story of Balak and Balaam, which includes verses whose purpose in the Torah is puzzling.

In Numbers 21:21-25, we read that Israel asked to pass through the land of Sihon, king of the Emori, just as they had done in the previous chapter with Edom. When Sihon refused, and fought Israel, Israel conquered his land. Following the description of that conquest, the Torah provides additional historical background: *Now Heshbon was the city of Sihon, king of the Amorites, who had fought against a former king of Moab and taken all his land from him as far as the Arnon* (Num. 21:26).

It even goes on to recall a poem recited about that defeat, which includes these plaintive lines: *Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Chemosh! His sons are rendered fugitives and his daughters are captives to the Amorite king, Sihon* (Num. 21:29).

Moab had lost its lands to Sihon, and beyond the pain of defeat, they also likely believed that their land was divinely promised to them, as mentioned in Deuteronomy 2:9.

What was the status of Sihon’s land? From Israel’s point of view, they did not conquer Moabite land, only Amorite territory.³ And they would not do so in the future since they had a divine commandment to respect the Moabite borders.

But from the Moabite perspective, Israel had already begun the conquest of their land, promised by God to their ancestor Lot.⁴ They considered Sihon's invasion as illegitimate and Israel too as possessors of Moabite land. For Moab, Israel was already on the warpath, and therefore remained a serious threat⁵.

The Torah does not concede to Moab's claims, and the tribes of Reuben and Gad went on to settle in that territory. But critically, it does show sympathy for Moab's feelings. In the last verse before the story of Balak and Balaam, the Torah says that *The Israelites then marched on and encamped in the steppes of Moab* (Num. 22:1). Much of the remainder of the Torah takes place on these "steppes of Moab," and more directly, in the beginning of Deuteronomy, Moses began his speech, *in the land of Moab*.

This stands in contrast with Jephthah's claim that Israel avoided "the land of Moab." While Jephthah was correct that Israel did not conquer territory controlled by Moab, the Torah wants us to remember that from Moab's perspective, the land of Sihon was still "the land of Moab."⁶ Remarkably, even in a situation where Israel wasn't responsible for the birthright being confiscated, their Torah still contains both a sympathetic narrative dedicated to Moab's claims and a prohibition against harassing them or taking further land.

Just as in the stories of Edom and Egypt, Moab is a people who regard their birthright as stolen from them. A birthright of land, not of status, but a birthright nonetheless. Once again, Israel is the possessor of blessing – a situation Balaam was hired to reverse⁷. And like the "great cry" of Esau and the Egyptians, Moab too cries out in lamentations. Therefore, Israel is prohibited from taking Moabite land, and Moab is deserving of compassion, not harassment.

MANDATED EMPATHY

On the one hand, the Torah engenders empathy for Moab's loss of territory. On the other, the Torah does not deny Israel's right to possess the land of Sihon. How do we reconcile these two opposing positions?

The same can be asked about the Torah's perspective on Edom and Egypt as well. There is a verse instructing Israel not to hate them. But the Torah is also replete with narratives that remind us of Egypt's cruelty to us, and Edom's belligerence. What are we supposed to feel?

It appears that by maintaining the tension between compassion and grievance, the Torah is acknowledging that both feelings are understandable and justified. But since bearing a grudge is much easier than identifying with the pain of another, the Torah includes commandments that push us in the direction of empathy.

This idea was captured well by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In a 2001 lecture entitled “Jewish identity: The Concept of a Chosen People,”⁸ Rabbi Sacks examines the nature of chosenness. This is a difficult concept, for how can God be the Creator of the entire world, and still choose one nation for a special covenantal relationship? Aren’t universalism and particularism contradictory? And yet, Genesis is full of stories of selection and rejection.

Rabbi Sacks brings a number of proofs to show that the Torah progresses from the universal to the particular, because “God loves particulars.” But he acknowledges the difficulty with this proposition. Addressing the audience, he states:

“You are going to ask me the question. God is singling out one particular nation from many may show how nice it is to be particular, which is great if you’re chosen. But what about all the people there who aren’t chosen, right?”

He then goes on to show how the narratives of the Torah pushes us in the direction of empathy:

“Let me ask you a very simple question . . . Here is a scene. Sarah has asked Abraham to send Hagar away. Abraham gets terribly upset because Hagar has given birth to his child called Ishmael. . . . Now tell me – you remember what happens? – she goes out into the desert. She’s carrying him. It’s hot. There’s no water. He’s about to die. . . . Tell me, when you see that scene, when you read that scene, who are your sympathies with? Hands up. Abraham? Sarah? Ishmael? We get a vote for Ishmael.”

The Torah tells the story in such a way that the reader certainly empathizes with Ishmael. Rabbi Sacks continues with another example:

“Esau comes in. He’s just made the venison. He’s just about to give it to his Dad, Isaac, who is just about to give him the blessing. And he comes in and Isaac says: . . . You know, I’ve just given the blessing. – And Isaac trembles. And he says: Your brother came and he’s taken your blessing. – And Esau cries a deep and bitter cry. Tell me, who are your sympathies with at that moment? Are they with Jacob? They’re with Esau, ok?”

These stories and others come to teach us an important lesson:

“In every case where there is a chosen one – Isaac against Ishmael, Jacob against Esau, Rachel against Leah – God takes the side of the unchosen. When human beings choose, then they choose x – meaning they reject y. When God chooses, He does not reject y. He is constantly telling us – *Gam hu!* – he also will be blessed⁹. He also will become a great nation. – Go and read it! God is actually, through the extraordinary literary finesse of the Torah, making us see that the one who is rejected is not rejected.”

The Torah does not deny that Isaac is the rightful heir of Abraham. Nor does it ever challenge Jacob’s claim to the legacy of Isaac, regardless of the methods he used to acquire it. As Rabbi Sacks points out, the Torah is focused on the particular. Choices will be made. Some will hold the birthright and possess the blessing. That is inevitable.

But the Torah never will allow particularism to deteriorate into chauvinism. We need empathy for those not chosen. This is a principle woven into the stories of Genesis.

Yet it does not end with those stories. It stands behind so many of the Torah’s laws as well. Some members of society, while perhaps not literally firstborns, have inherent advantages over people with a weaker standing. The Torah ensures that they are not ignored. The outcast and the stranger must be treated as fairly as the native citizen. The landowner must include the poor and the powerless in his harvest celebrations. The Torah is not opposed to power or wealth. But those who receive those blessings must remember those who remain in need.

The same applies to how Israel should relate to its rivals – Edom, Egypt, and Moab. We are under no obligation to surrender our national memory or excuse the heinous crimes done by our foes. But at the same time, we need to be sensitive to those who lost their portion and remember their cries as well.

NOTES

1. Some translations, following Onkelos, offer the less emotional (and more practical) "reject" for the Hebrew *ta'av*. However, "abhor" is preferable, seeing that *ta'av* is paired with the synonymous *sana*, "hate" in Amos 5:10 and Ps. 119:163. See also Rashi on Gen. 43:32, who identifies *ta'av* with "hate."
2. Rashi comments on "Israel is my firstborn" (Ex. 4:22), noting that this is where God confirmed Esau’s sale of the birthright to Jacob.

3. See TB Hullin 60b, which justifies the inclusion of the seemingly unnecessary verse of Numbers 21:26 by pointing out that it teaches that the Amorite conquering of Moabite land “purified” it for Israelite conquest, rendering the prohibition against taking Moabite land (in Deuteronomy 2:9) inapplicable.
4. Perhaps this is why Balak chose to hire Balaam. Since this was not merely a military conflict, but possession of a divinely promised land, it was necessary to involve a prophet, who could change Israel’s status from “blessed” to “cursed” on a supernatural level.
5. Hizkuni on Numbers 22:3 writes that Moab expected Israel to restore the land taken from them by the Amorites, and when that did not happen, they were afraid that Israel had plans to conquer the rest of the Moabite lands.
6. This may have been the perspective of Moses as well. By calling the eastern side of the Jordan “the land of Moab,” and begging God to let him cross the Jordan to the western side, he expresses a lack of certainty that the land conquered from Sihon should be considered part of the ancestral land of Israel.
7. Unlike Esau and Pharaoh who asked to receive the Abrahamic blessing, Moab tried to reverse it, and have Balaam curse Israel. This failed, for as God told Balaam, Israel cannot be cursed, “for they are blessed.” Perhaps this explains the reason that while both Edom and Moab did not act hospitably to Israel in their journey to Canaan, only Moab has a permanent ban on marriage with Israel, while Edomites can marry after three generations. As Deuteronomy 23:5 notes regarding Moab, there are two reasons for the marriage ban: “because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.” If they rejected the Abrahamic blessing, they could never enter any covenant with Israel - marriage or otherwise: “You shall never seek with their peace or their good as long as you live.” (Deut. 23:7).
8. <https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/faith-lectures-jewish-identity-the-concept-of-a-chosen-people>
9. This appears to be a reference to Genesis 48:19, where Jacob gave precedence in his blessing to Ephraim over his older brother Manasseh. Despite Ephraim being “chosen,” Jacob insists that Manasseh “will also” become a great nation.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style
can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>

