

# ALL PAIN, NO GAIN

*by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

It is not so easy having a brother like Esav. We ask one little favor, it wouldn't cost him a dime. We wanted to pass through his land on the way to Canaan. In fact, he would be able to make some money off the venture. But he says no. And he does not just say no the way they tell you to just say no, this no is a resounding exclamation that warns of war. If you follow the chain of events, it is important to note that the Jewish pleas for mercy and understanding were met with such vociferous antagonism.

Moshe first sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom - "So said your brother Israel - You know all the hardship that has befallen us. Our forefathers descended to Egypt and we dwelled in Egypt many years, and the Egyptians did evil to us and to our forefathers. We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice; He sent an emissary and took us out of Egypt. Now behold! we are in Kadesh, a city at the edge of your border" (Numbers 20:15-17).

After Moshe defines the hardships and trials that the Jews endured he makes one small request. "Let us pass through your land; we shall not pass through field or vineyard, and we shall not drink well water; on the king's road shall we travel -- we shall not veer right or left -- until we pass through your border."

The commentaries explain that Moshe promised not to use the water from the miraculous well, rather they would purchase water from the Edomites. In fact, Moshe was willing to pay for any amenity that the Jews used. But it did not help. Edom was not satisfied and turned his back on his cousins. More so, he responded with a threat. "The king of Edom said to him, "You shall not pass through me -- lest I come against you with the sword!" (ibid v.18) The Children of Israel said to him, "We shall go up on the highway, and if we drink your water -- I or my flock -- I shall pay their price. Only nothing will happen; let me pass through on foot." Edom replied, "You shall not pass through! Then Edom went out against him with a massive throng and a strong hand." The Torah concludes that Edom refused to permit Israel to pass through his border, and Israel turned away from near him. (see Numbers 20:18-20) Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanchuma Beshalach Esav was irked by that detail of the Jew's narrative, "We prayed to Hashem and he heard." And so he responded: You pride yourselves on the "voice" which your father bequeathed you as a blessing, saying, "And we cried unto the Lord and He heard our voice" (cf Rashi on v 16); I, therefore, will come out against you with that which my father bequeathed me when he said, (Gen :27:40) "And by thy sword shall thou live." It seems that despite the story of oppression, once the Jews mention their spiritual proficiency, Esav

balks. Why is there a vehemence directed at Yaakov's declaration? What irked Esav when he heard about Yaakov's successful supplications?

I heard this Soviet Union story during the height of Brezhnev's reign back in the 1970s.

After a two month hiatus, the monthly potato shipment to Moscow was supposed to finally arrive the next morning. Two hours before dawn, a throng of people began queuing up in the Russian winter's frostiness, in front of the market. After half an hour the official stepped out of the shop. I am sorry we will not be getting enough potatoes to service all of you. All Jewish comrades must return home. There will be none for you.

The rest of the crowd smirked as they continued waiting in the bitter cold for the anticipated delivery. Two hours later, the proprietor emerged. "One of the trucks broke down. All non-communist party members should go home. They too trudged off into the cold. It was only another three hours later when the storekeeper emerged again, this time breaking the news to the remaining party faithful. "I apologize, but the trucks have broken down and will not be delivering potatoes this month. All of you should go home.

This time there was only frustration, "Those cursed Jews have all the privileges!"

The Torah tells us how Edom reacts to Yaakov's misfortune. When the Jews talk about their long captivity, there is no emotion. When they mention the torture and affliction there is no compassion.

But the minute the Jews allude to even a minor success, one that alleviated their torture and pain, "we prayed to G-d and he stopped the oppression," Edom snarls.

He retorts, "Jew are you boasting about your spirituality. I, too, have my talents I live by the sword and I will greet you with it!" He forgets that our prayers did not advance our position. It did not cause us to inflict undue harm on other nations. It just let true justice be served on our tormentors. One thing our enemies ought to learn. If you don't appreciate our pains, at least admire our gains!

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