

Parashat Devarim

“Through the territory of your brethren the children of Esau”

- Where were the Israelites when they turned to travel towards Edom?
- What is the relationship between Israel and Edom, as described in Chapter 2 of Deuteronomy?
- What is the relationship between Israel and Edom, as described in Chapter 20 of Numbers?
- What additional distinctions are there between the two chapters? How are they to be understood?
- What do we know of the original relationship between Israel and Edom?

Moses' historic speech

In our Torah portion, *Parashat Devarim*, Moses opens his farewell speech to the Jewish people. The first address¹ is a discourse focused on history (Deuteronomy 1:1-4:40; all biblical citations are from Deuteronomy unless otherwise noted).

The address starts with the recounting of God's command to Israel to travel from Mount Sinai towards the land of Canaan; afterwards, we find the passage of appointing judges; and we then find Moses' description of the harrowing journey through the desert until they reach Kadesh Barnea, the border of the land, at which point he said: “Behold, the LORD your God has set the land before you: go up and possess it!”

Moses continues and describes the Sin of the Spies, which caused them to stay in the desert and to tarry in the area of Mount Seir, the land of Edom: “So you abode in Kadesh many days... we went around Mount Seir many days” (1:46-2:1).

Moses does not speak of the events of these “many days,” instead turning to the renewed journey towards the Promised Land, **in the fortieth year**.

A. The Journey to Edom (Deuteronomy)

¹ This first addresses raises some worthwhile questions: what events does Moses include, and what does he exclude? How does he describe these events, and what is his aim in doing so? However, we will not deal with all the events, but rather one in particular: the Israelites' journey through Edom (2:1-8).

The days of waiting in the desert for all those who defamed the land to die conclude with God's command to Moses to start going north (2:2-3):

ויאמר ה' אלי לאמר: רב לכם סב את ההר הזה פנו לכם צפונה:

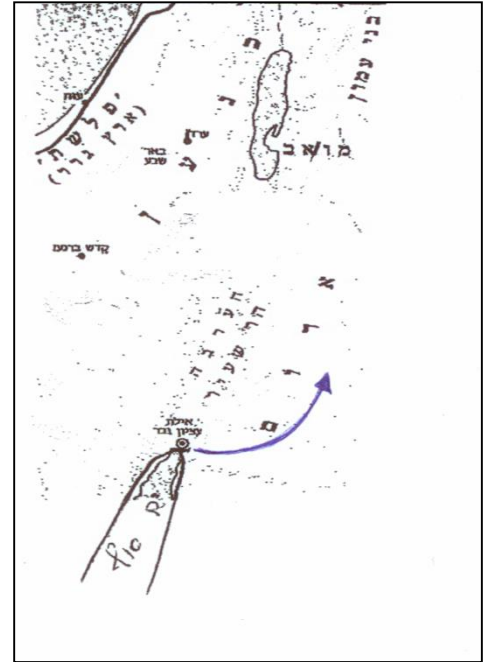
And the LORD spoke unto me, saying: You have gone around this mountain long enough: turn northward.

Turning northward means traveling near the Edomite border, and therefore God commands Moses to warn the people not to threaten the Edomites and to guide them as to how to deal with their new neighbors at the beginning of this leg (*ibid.* 4-8).

ואת העם צו לאמר, אתם עברים בגבול אחיכם בני עשו הישבים בשעיר וייראו מכם ונשמרתם מאד: אל תתגורו כם כי לא אתן לכם מארצם עד מדרך פף רגל, כי ירשה לעשו נתי את הר שעיר: אכל תשברו מאתם בכסף ואכלתם וגם מים תכרו מאתם בכסף ושתייתם: כי ה' א-להיך ברכך בכל מעשה ידך ידע לכתך את המדבר הגדל הזה, זה ארבעים שנה ה' א-להיך עמך לא חסרת דבר: ונעבר מאת אחינו בני עשו הישבים בשעיר מדרך הערבה מאילת ומעצין גבר, ונפן ונעבר דרך מדבר מואב:

And command the people, saying, You are to pass through the territory of your brethren the children of Esau, who dwell in Seir; and they shall be afraid of you: take you good heed unto yourselves therefore: Do not be hostile toward them; for I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as one footstep; because I have given mount Seir unto Esau for a possession. You shall buy food from them for money, that you may eat; and you shall also buy water from them for money, that you may drink. For the LORD your God has blessed you in all the works of your hand: he knows your walking through this great wilderness: these forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing. And when we passed by away from our brethren the children of Esau, who dwell in Seir, through the way of the plain from Elath and from Ezion Geber, we turned and passed by the way of the wilderness of Moab.

The Torah does not indicate the precise point of departure from which the Israelites set out on their northward journey. The only thing known to us is that before this, the Jews went around Mount Seir, as told in the previous chapter. Since the journey northward would involve crossing the Edomite frontier, it makes sense that they were located south of Edom, perhaps at Ezion Geber, and in journey northward they went around the eastern boundary of the land of Edom until they arrive at Moab, which sits north of Edom.



[Map A]

Israelite-Edomite relations — mutual respect

According to Moses’ words, Israel had no intent to pass by way of Edom. God warned Israel not to engage Edom in battle, but to honor their boundaries, because this is the territory destined for them from God, and therefore they would not succeed in conquering their land. God allowed them to have commercial relations with the Edomites and to buy from them food and water, but He stressed that will be only for money.

Below, in v. 29, the assumption is that this is what happened — Edom sold Israel food and water² — and according to this, one may take note of the relationship of mutual respect between Israel and Edom. .³

B. The Journey to Edom (Numbers)

The story of the Israelites passing through the Edomite border on the way to the land is described in Numbers, in *Parashat Chukkat* (20:14-21):

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מַלְאָכִים מִקִּדְשׁ אֵל מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם, כֹּה אָמַר אֲחִיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמְתָה יָדַעְתָּ אֵת כָּל הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מִצְּאֲתָנוּ: וַיִּרְדּוּ אֲבֹתֵינוּ מִצְרַיִם וַנָּשָׁב בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים רַבִּים וַיִּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹאֲבֹתֵינוּ: וַנִּצְעַק אֵל ה' וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ וַיִּצְאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ בְּקִדְשׁ עִיר קִצְהָ גְבוּלְךָ: נַעֲבְרָה נָא בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא נַעֲבֹר בְּשָׂדֶה וּבְכַרְם וְלֹא נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר דֶּרֶךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ גִּלְדָּה לֹא נִטֶּה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל עַד אֲשֶׁר נַעֲבֹר גְּבוּלְךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדוֹם לֹא תַעֲבֹר בִּי פֶן בְּחָרֵב אֲצִיא לְקִרְיָתְךָ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַסְלָה נַעֲלֶה וְאִם מִיָּמִיךָ נִשְׁתֶּה אָנֹכִי וּמִקְנֵי וּנְתִתִּי מִכְרָם רַק אִין דְּבַר בְּרַגְלֵי אֲעֹבְרָה: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תַעֲבֹר וַיִּצְא אֲדוֹם לְקִרְיָתוֹ בַּעַם כְּבֹד וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה: וַיִּמְאֹן אֲדוֹם נָתַן אֵת יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹבֵר בְּגִבְלוֹ וַיִּטֵּשׂ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעָלָיו:

² This is what Rashi writes *ad loc.* However, there is an argument among the commentators there.

³ Twice in this chapter, the Torah uses fraternal terminology for Edom: “your brethren” (v. 4) “our brethren” (v. 8) — in order to stress the good relations which must be maintained between Israel and Edom.

And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom, Thus says your brother Israel, you know all the travail that has befallen us: How our fathers went down into Egypt, and we have dwelt in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians afflicted us, and our fathers: And when we cried unto the LORD, he heard our voice, and sent an angel, and has brought us forth out of Egypt: and, behold, we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border: Let us pass, I pray you, through your country: we will not pass through the fields, or through the vineyards, neither will we drink of the water of the wells: we will go by the king's highway, we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed your borders. And Edom said unto him, you shall not pass by me, lest I meet you with the sword. And the children of Israel said unto him, We will go by the highway: and if I and my cattle drink of your water, then I will pay for it: I will only, without doing anything else, go through on my feet. And he said, you shall not go through. And Edom came out against him with much people, and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border: therefore Israel turned away from him.

Edomite-Israelite relations: conflict

To our surprise, the description in the Book of Numbers is very different from the description in the Book of Deuteronomy. Firstly, seeking the peace of the Edomites seems to be based in Numbers on Moses' personal initiative, unlike in our portion, in which it is stated explicitly that this was a command and admonition from God not to be hostile towards their brethren.

To this, we should add the countervailing factor to the obligation to maintain good relations with Edom: in the Book of Numbers, Moses turns to Edom and beseeches them to remember Israel's ancient fraternity with Edom and recent suffering in order to ask them to extend their hand in peace; on the other hand, in our portion, we find this: "And they shall be afraid of you: take you good heed unto yourselves therefore: Do not be hostile toward them" (in total opposition to Edom's reaction in Numbers: "You shall not pass by me, lest I meet you with the sword").

In order not to provoke Edom, in Numbers, the Israelites decide of their own initiative not to touch the natural resources and to subsist solely on the food and water in their possession. Only afterwards, when the Jews are rebuffed, do they suggest purchasing food and water in order to give the Edomites a financial incentive. However, in our portion, Israel is commanded ab initio to do so by God Himself!

Also, the reaction of the Edomites in practice differs. In our portion, the Torah ignores the Edomites' reaction,⁴ while in the Book of Numbers we are witnesses to the inflammatory response of Edom, which includes a military threat.

⁴ This lacuna may be explained differently: it may be that it implies an appropriate and mutual response from Edom which does not require a separate mention; but it may be that it implies giving Israel the cold shoulder. In any case, there is no active military response mentioned here.

Based on this, we reach another stunning distinction, which is presumably the cause of other significant variances.

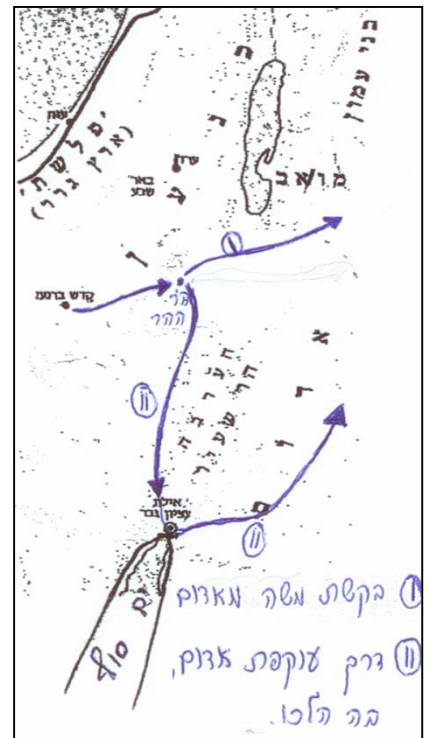
According to what is said in the Book of Numbers, the Jews want to pass **through** Edomite territory, in order to shorten their path to the land of Canaan, but they change their plans because of the opposition of Edom. However, in Deuteronomy, Israel never had plans to pass through Edom, because their command was always to pass **near** the eastern border of Edom and to circumvent it.

Changing the route due to Edom's reaction

[Map B: Compare I, Moses' proposed route, to II, the actual route which Israel takes.]

This constitutes a significant distinction: according to Numbers, the plan was to go on a certain route, and the plan was changed because of Edom's response, while according to Deuteronomy, it all is conducted according the original divine plan, with no alteration.

But it is not only the result of the Edomite refusal which differs between the two places; the original planning is also very different. In fact, the point of departure from which Israel turns to the direction of Edom is different! According to what is in Numbers, the location of the Israelites is in **Kadesh**, which is to the northwest of the land of Edom, and because of this, their route would take them through Edom in a northeasterly direction; on the other hand, as we saw above, according to what is stated in Deuteronomy, it appears that the point of departure was south of Edom (in the Ezion Geber area), and it is said explicitly that the nation moves northward — which is why there would have been no need to pass through the land of Edom, but only along its eastern border! (Compare Map A and Map B.)



We will summarize the distinctions between Numbers and Deuteronomy in the following table:

	Numbers	Deuteronomy
Initiative	Moses	Divine command
Point of Departure	Kadesh (in the mountains of the Negev)	Not explicitly stated (presumably, Ezion Geber)
Designated Route	Passing through Edom in northeasterly direction	Passing by Edom's eastern border, travelling north
Reason for Peace Offer	Israel's fear of Edom	Divine command not to be hostile
Edomite Response	Threatening Israel with the sword	Ignored (by the Torah, and perhaps by Edom as well)
Purchasing Food and Water	Israel proposes taking nothing, but the initial Edomite refusal leads them to buy provisions.	Ab initio, God commands them to purchase food and water from Edom.

Great discrepancy between the stories

These two narratives vary greatly:

According to **Numbers**, we have a presentation of **going around Edom as the fallback option** and of **great tension between Edom and Israel**; according to **Deuteronomy**, we have the picture of **circumventing Edom ab initio**, by God's command, based on the ideal that this is their land and it should not be violated. Similarly, no conflict is recorded with Edom.

Rashbam's view: different stories

This discrepancy is so great that the Rashbam (2:4) explains that we are talking about two different narratives.

"היושבים בשעיר" – לא אלה הם אותן אדום שיצאו בהרב לקראת ישראל, שהרי באלה כתיב "כאשר עשו לי בני עשו היושבים בשעיר", אבל אדום לא מכרו כלום, וכתיב בהם "ויט ישראל מעליו".

“Who dwell in Seir” — these are not the Edomites who greeted Israel with the sword, because concerning these it is written, “As did unto me the children of Esau who dwell in Seir,” but Edom sold them nothing, and concerning them it is written: “therefore Israel turned away from him.”

This explanation does solve the problem of the gap between the two narratives,⁵ but the approach of this explanation may be problematic, because Moses describes the journey on the East Bank of the Jordan here, and because of this it is logical to assume that his description parallels the description of the journey described in Numbers. Similarly, in the description of traversing the borders of Moab and Ammon, there are distinctions between what is related in Deuteronomy and what is related in Numbers.⁶ Will we also explain that we are talking about two different nations of Moab and two others called Ammon? Who are those who reside in Seir, if they are not Edomites?⁷

C. The Aim of Different Descriptions

It appears that we have two descriptions of one story, and if so, we must determine the intent of each description. Moreover, why are the things presented so differently? Finally, we will perhaps succeed in understanding how these two narratives may be combined and integrated.

Setting aside the possibility of integrating the stories, which we will discuss below, we will first try to listen to each on its own and understand its aim:

1. The divine significance of the events

The natural dimension: Edom is stronger than Israel

Numbers presents the **national or natural dimension** of the journey: whom can Israel fight and whom can they not fight, and as a result of this, how did they travel? Therefore, according to this description, the initiative to turn to Edom was that of Moses, following the natural logic of the nation which is now leaving the house of slaves — to avoid extraneous wars. It is Edom's reaction which causes the plan to change.

The divine plan: the inheritance of different nations

5 See also the commentaries of ibn Ezra and Rabbeinu Bachya ad loc., who explain this in another way; Ri Bekhor Shor writes this explicitly.

6 According to Numbers 21:21-35, Israel fights the Amorites but not the Ammonites (v. 24) “for the border of the children of Ammon was fortified.” Moab is terrified and hires Balaam, despite the fact that the Israelites only encamp in the Plains of Moab and do not turn to them to pass through their land or to fight them. On the other hand, in Deuteronomy, God commands the Jews not to fight Moab and Ammon because their land is the inheritance of Lot's progeny.

7 Below, we will try to explain the Rashbam's intent.

In **Deuteronomy**, on the other hand, Moses gives the people a deep view of the events, explaining their **meaning** and justifying them from the viewpoint of **the divine plan**. Moses says to Israel that what might have appeared to be a detour out of concern about war with Edom is in fact the fulfillment of God's will to give certain nations an inheritance. According to Moses' description, there was never a change of plan per se. The divine plan was always for the Jews not to pass through Edom, certainly not to conquer it, and only the Israelites, conducting themselves as mere humans, saw this as a military struggle.

It appears that before entering the land, it is important for Moses to make this clear to the Jewish nation: they are not conquering by military might, but by God's word, because God wants to give them the land as an inheritance. By the same token, God parcels out the inheritances of other nations, and this must be known and respected.⁸

2. **Edomite-Israelite relations**

In addition, the double description emphasizes two dimensions of relations between Edom and Israel: on the one hand, fraternal closeness and mutual respect (as described in Deuteronomy) and on the other hand struggle⁹ (as described in Numbers).

Jacob-Esau relations

The complexity of the relationship between Israel and Edom does not start from this point, that of entering the land. The relations between Israel and Edom have a long and significant history, and

⁸ Rashi expresses this sentiment in his first biblical comment (Genesis 1:1):

...ומה טעם פתח בבראשית? משום "כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים" (תהלים קי"א, ו), שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם: כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו.

...now for what reason did He commence with "In the beginning?" For this reason: "The strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations" (Psalms 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, "You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations," they will reply, "**The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.**"

⁹ At least from the side of the Edomites.

they are complex and intertwined. It starts in their mother's womb,¹⁰ continues with the fights over the birthright¹¹ and later over the blessing for the firstborn,¹² resulting in Jacob fleeing to Haran.¹³

The tension between Jacob and Esau intensifies when Jacob tries to return from Haran to the land of Israel (Genesis, chapters 32-33). As Jacob **is about to enter the land** (as the Jews are here about to do after the Egyptian exile) at the Jabbok Ford, there is a pregnant encounter between him and Esau.¹⁴

What is occurring in this encounter? How is the relationship between Jacob and Esau then presented?

An encounter of war and struggle

Until this point, the relations between Esau and Jacob have been seen as a constant, vicious struggle. However, in this encounter, the interaction is more complex. **On the one hand**, Esau confronts Jacob with four hundred men, a clear indication of his intent to wage war, and Jacob understand this and is indeed quite concerned about this prospect. For this reason, he prepares him camp for war and beseeches God (32:7-12).

10 This is what we find in Genesis 25:22-23:

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבְּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבִטְנָהּ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּנִּיעֵיהָ: פָּרְדּוּ וְלֹאִם מְלֵאִם יֵאָמְרָן וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר.

And the children struggled together within her...And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in your womb, and two manner of people shall be born of you; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

11 Genesis 25:30-34.

12 In Genesis 27, the blessing given to Jacob includes a mention of his relation to his brother "You shall be master over your brother" (v. 29), as does the blessing to Esau (v. 40), "You shall serve your brother, but when you shall have dominion, then you shall break his yoke from off your neck."

13 *Ibid.* vv. 41-43:

וַיִּשְׂטֹם עֵשָׂו אֶת יַעֲקֹב עַל הַבְּרִכָּה אֲשֶׁר בָּרַכּוּ אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו בְּלִבּוֹ: יִקְרְבוּ יָמֵי אָבִי וְאֶהְרֹגָה אֶת יַעֲקֹב אָחִי: וַיִּגַּד לְרַבְקָה אֶת דְּבָרֵי עֵשָׂו בְּנֵה הַגָּדֵל וְתִשְׁלַח וְתִקְרָא לְיַעֲקֹב בְּנֵה הַקָּטָן וְתֹאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנֵּה עֵשָׂו אָחִיךָ מִתְנַחֵם לָךְ לְהַרְגֶּךָ: וְעַתָּה בְּנֵי שְׂמֵעַ בְּקִלְיִי וְקוּם בָּרוּחַ לָךְ אֵל לָבֵן אָחִי חַרְנֵהּ.

And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob. And these words of Esau her elder son were told to Rebekah: and she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said unto him, Behold, your brother Esau, concerning you, does comfort himself, purposing to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; and arise, flee to Laban my brother to Haran.

14 Yona Bar-Maoz, in *Daf Shavui* #348 (2000: Bar-Ilan University), points to a number of linguistic similarities between the two narratives: references to sending messengers, brotherhood, meeting, passage, swordsmanship, etc.

וישבו המלאכים אל יעקב לאמר באנו אל אחיך אל עשו וגם הלך לקראתך וארבע מאות איש עמו: וירא יעקב מאד ויפצר לו ויחז את העם אשר אתו ואת הצאן ואת הבקר והגמלים לשני מחנות: ויאמר אם יבוא עשו אל המחנה האחת והכהו והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה: ויאמר יעקב א-ל-הי אבי אברהם וא-ל-הי אבי יצחק... הצילני נא מיד אחי מיד עשו כי ירא אנכי אתו פן יבוא והפני אם על בניים:

And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to your brother Esau, and also he comes to meet you, and four hundred men with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed: and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks, and herds, and the camels, into two bands; And said, If Esau comes to the one company, and smites it, then the other company which is left shall escape. And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said unto me, Return unto your country, and to your kindred, and I will deal well with you: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which you have showed unto your servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I have become two bands. Deliver me, I pray you, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children.

Here as well, there is a **national** concern of Jacob about waging war against Esau, which finds expression in a **spiritual** struggle (v. 25), wrestling with the anonymous man until daybreak. The Sages identify this individual as Esau's angelic representative.

An emotional encounter of brothers

On the other hand, Jacob prepares gifts for Esau,¹⁵ and at the end of the day, when Esau arrives, the worries disappear, and we find a touching scene (33:1-4):

וישא יעקב עיניו וירא והנה עשו בא ... והוא עבר לפניהם וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים עד גשתו עד אחיו: וירץ עשו לקראתו ויחבקהו ויפל על צווארו וישקהו ויבכו.

And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came... And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept.

The description of this encounter is one of intimacy and fraternity, as we might expected from two brothers who have been separated for decades.¹⁶

The brotherly relations are strengthened by Esau's proposal (33:12-17):

15 Of course, this tribute is designed to appease Esau, but ultimately it represents an unwarlike approach.

16 Granted, the Sages see the kiss as an attempted bite, but this does not seem to reflect the simple meaning of the text.

וַיֹּאמֶר נִסְעָה וְנִלְכָה וְנִלְכָה לְנִגְדֶךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדֹנָי יְדַע כִּי הַיְלָדִים רַכִּים וְהַצֹּאן וְהַבְּקָר עָלוֹת עָלַי וּדְפָקוּם יוֹם אֶחָד וּמָתוּ כָּל הַצֹּאן: יַעֲבֹר נָא אֲדֹנָי לְפָנַי עִבְדוֹ וְאֲנִי אֶתְנַהֵלָה לְאַטִּי לְרִגְלֵי הַמְּלֹאכָה אֲשֶׁר לְפָנָי וּלְרִגְלֵי הַיְלָדִים עַד אֲשֶׁר אָבֹא אֶל אֲדֹנָי שְׁעִירָה: וַיֹּאמֶר עֲשׂוֹ אֲצִיגֶהָ נָא עִמָּךְ מִן הָעַם אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶה אֲמַצָּא חֵן בְּעֵינַי אֲדֹנָי: וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יַעֲשׂוֹ לְדֶרֶכּוֹ שְׁעִירָה: וַיַּעֲקֹב נִסַּע סַפְתָּה וַיִּבֶן לוֹ בַּיִת וַיִּמְקְנֶהוּ עֲשֵׂה סַפְתָּה עַל כֵּן קָרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם סַפּוֹת.

And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before you. And he said unto him, My lord knows that the children are frail, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. Let my lord, I pray you, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on slowly, according as the flocks that go before me and the children are able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir. And Esau said, Let me now leave with you some of the folk that are with me. And he said, What need is there? let me find grace in the sight of my lord. So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir. And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him a house, and made booths for his cattle: therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

Esau suggests going together, or at least accompanying Jacob, and apparently there is an opening for renewing brotherly relations.

Nevertheless, Jacob rejects this. Why?

Keeping distance

Jacob understands that despite the brotherly relationship, he must keep his distance, because there are many significant struggles intertwined which do not allow him and Esau to truly dwell together.

Confrontation on the border of the land

This is the case with the encounter of Jacob and Esau, when Jacob is about to enter the land,¹⁷ and the same occurs when Israel and Edom meet, as the Jewish people are about to enter the land. There is an internal struggle between the two, and in both places the fight remains one of principle and not one of physical war. At the end of the day, in both cases, there is no decisive resolution,¹⁸ and the covert struggle ends with the rivals parting.

17 There are also many other similarities between them; see R. Meir Spiegelman's lecture on *Parashat Beshallah* in Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash.

18 These points of friction do lead to a resolution, generally speaking:

- A) **In establishing the monarchy:** Saul fights Edom (I Samuel 14:47) and David subjugates them (II Samuel 8:4).
- B) **At the destruction of the Temple:** Edom jubilantly takes part in Israel's downfall.

Consequently, in these two cases, there is a complexity to the relationship between Israel and Edom: on the one hand, there is a constant struggle, dating back to their time in the womb, and it has spiritual significance; on the other hand, there is an experience of mutual respect. God stresses that Esau's territory is his own, and Jacob will not inherit it, even though he has received the blessing.

To this point, we have tried to make clear the significance of the distinction between the narrative in Numbers and the narrative in Deuteronomy, and we have seen that the gap between the different descriptions sharpens the complexity of Israelite-Edomite relations. Similarly, it represents the gap between human observation and the divine plan, which gives significance to processes happening in the human world.¹⁹

D. Forging the Two Narratives into One

Up to this point, we have explained the different aspect which is stressed in each one of the stories, in Numbers and in Deuteronomy, but we still have to explain how to resolve the details of the narrative in a practical way.

Preventing struggle by God's word

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- C) **In the future:** The Prophets mention in many places the downfall of Edom in the future. The connection between Israel's rise and the fall of Edom is clearly emphasized, though this is in the far-off future. Indeed, Rashi references this both in his comments to our Torah portion (2:5) as well as *Parashat Vayishlach* (Gen. 33:14):

עד מדרך כף רגל – אפילו מדרך כף רגל, כלומר אפילו דריסת הרגל איני מרשה לכם לעבור בארצם שלא ברשות. ומדרשי אגדה, **עד שיבוא יום דריסת כף רגל על הר הזיתים שנאמר (זכריה יד, ד) "ועמדו רגליו..."**

“Not so much as a foot step” — meaning, even only for the sole of the foot to tread a single step, I do not permit you to enter their land without permission. An aggadic interpretation is: until the day arrives when the foot will tread upon the Mount of Olives as it said: “And His feet will stand [on that day upon the Mount of Olives]” (Zech. 14:4).

עד אשר אבא אל אדני שעירה – ואימתי ילך, **בימי המשיח**, שנאמר (עובדיה א כא) ועלו מושיעים בהר ציון לשפוט את הר עשו.

“Until I come to my master, to Seir...” So when will he go? In the days of the Messiah, as it is said (Obadiah 1:21): “And saviors shall ascend Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esau.” There are [also] many midrashic interpretations of this section.

¹⁹ We have cited two different explanations for these differences, but one should take note of an interesting point: the narrative in Numbers represents the human angle, describing the struggle between Israel and Edom, while the story of Deuteronomy presents the divine plan, describing the mutual respect and the fact that Israel would not try to conquer Edom, as this is the latter's inheritance, and Edom gives to Israel food and water as compensation. It appears that this is not coincidence: the struggle between Israel and Edom is one the natural-human dimension, but according to the divine plan each of the nations has its place, inheritance and purpose. Therefore, the nations must respect each other.

It may be that the Israelites turned to Edom with a request to pass through their territory, and when Edom did not consent and went out to wage war against them, the possibility arose that Israel would fight them and conquer them, as they did to the Amorites, but God told them not to do this because this is Edom's territory, and they would not succeed in conquering it, because God would not help them.

It may also be that even though Israel did not have the possibility to fight Edom because of Edom's strength, its strength was not coincidental, limited to human or military terms, but sprang from God's will to give them this inheritance.

Two different points in the journey

Another possibility to integrate the stories is to understand that in Deuteronomy, Moses starts to describe the events of a previous time, from a different point of view in Israel's journey in the desert.

Later in Numbers, in *Parashat Masei*, the Torah describes Israel's circumvention of Mount Seir, and they reach the southern point, until Ezion Geber, from which they turn north and return to Kadesh. But according to Numbers, this circumvention was part of the forty years of wandering in the desert.

In Deuteronomy, Moses begins to describe passing through the **border** of Edom before they reach Kadesh. According to this, turning northward was along the length of the **western** border of Edom (unlike the map above) in the desert of the Negev, and because of this, it is considered to be part of the wandering of Israel in the desert. At that time, Israel's movement in the desert was circuitous, which characterizes the desert nomads, and because of this, they did not represent a threat to the Edomites; specifically, the Jewish people did not have any intention of going through their border, but only to go along its length. Nevertheless, Moses warned them by God's word not to provoke the Edomites for no reason. Because of this, there was not any reason for the Edomites not to sell food and water to Israel, and certainly not to meet them with the sword.

However, when Israel reached Kadesh and they started to plan to enter the land, they wanted to pass **through** the land of Edom, and here starts the description of Numbers: the Israelites thought that the brotherly relations would continue as they had been originally, and therefore they were brazen enough to suggest passing through the land of Edom. However, Edom could not accept this, which

is why they threatened them with war.²⁰ As a result, the Israelites were compelled to repeat the detour around Mount Seir, to turn south once again, until Ezion Geber, and from there northward to the **eastern** side of Edom.

E. The Purpose of the Journey on the East Bank

Why did they not enter through the Negev?

From our portion, it is clear that the circuit which Israel made over the course of “many days” around the land of Edom in the fortieth year was after the generation of the desert had expired, and this travelling was part of the process of entering the land. The question is asked: why did the Israelites standing at Kadesh in the mountains of the Negev not turn north to enter the land in the shortest way? (This would be similar to the route taken 38 years later by the Spies when they left Kadesh Barnea.²¹) Why do they need to wander eastward, to go around all of Edom and Moab to the north, in order to cross the Jordan by going westward once again opposite Jericho?

Fighting Canaanites in the Negev

Ab initio, we might say that it was because of the military threat of the Canaanites in the Negev and the difficulty of fighting them, as in Numbers 21:1:

וַיִּשְׁמַע הַכְּנַעֲנִי מִלֶּחֶם עָרַד יִשָּׁב הַנֶּגֶב כִּי בָא יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּרֹךְ הָאֲתָרִים וַיִּלְחָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשָּׁב מִמֶּנּוּ אֶשְׁבִּי.

And when king Arad the Canaanite, who dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the road to Atharim; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners.

However this is difficult, because the Torah goes on to say (vv. 2-3):

וַיִּדַר יִשְׂרָאֵל נָדָר לֵה' וַיֹּאמֶר אִם נָתַן תַּתֵּן אֶת הָעַם הַזֶּה בְּיַדִּי וְהִתְרַמְתִּי אֶת עָרֵיהֶם: וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' בְּקוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַכְּנַעֲנִי וַיִּתְּרֵם אֹתָהֶם וְאֶת עָרֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם חֶרְמָה.

20 Perhaps this is what the Rashbam means to suggest by saying these are another people: in the Book of Numbers, Israel turns to Edom who lives in the north, while in Deuteronomy, Israel turns to Edom who lives in the south, and these may have been different tribes descended from Esau.

21 It seems that Kadesh Barnea, from which the Spies left in the second year, is not to be identified with the Kadesh which the Israelites reach in the fortieth year, where Miriam died. Nevertheless, they seem to be close, and both are on Canaan's southern border, at the point of preparing to enter the land, and it appears that not by coincidence are their names the same (see the lesson on *Parashat Masei*).

And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If you will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities. And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah.

Why did Israel not trust God to be on their side and help them in the conquest of the land, even if they would enter from the south?

Travelling east by God's word

It makes sense that passing through the East Bank was not coincidental, not because of logistical or strategic considerations, but rather because of God's desire for Israel to pass specifically this way, by way of the East Bank. This may be understood in Moses' description in Deuteronomy: "And the LORD spoke unto me, saying: You have gone around this mountain long enough: turn northward" — this means that all the movement to the north and east was by God's command!²²

Why does God choose to lead them by this lengthy path?²³

1) The Sin of Mei Meribah

The detour of the Spies

It may be that the sin at Mei Meribah caused the route to be lengthened.

When the Israelites are at Kadesh Barnea, about to enter the land, in the second year of the Exodus, they commit the Sin of the Spies, and as a result it is decreed that they must die in the desert and must not enter the land. This sin causes another circuit in the desert, over the course of many years.

The detour of Moses and Aaron

Now, the Israelites are once again at the threshold of the Promised Land; they have reached Kadesh once again, and once again a sin is committed. This time it is the sin of Moses and Aaron, the leaders, and once again the result is being condemned not to enter the land (this time, only Moses and Aaron). It may be that in light of this, the Israelites are ordered to once again go around the

²² This is opposed to the description of Numbers, according to which the circumvention is done by compulsion, since the nations do not let Israel pass through their territory.

²³ This wearying journey causes, at a certain stage, the Israelites to be dispirited (Numbers 21:4-6).

desert instead of entering directly through the Negev, a circuit during which Aaron will die at Mount Hor, and afterward Moses will die at Mount Nebo.²⁴

2) Relating to the Surrounding Nations

“When He wished, He gave it to them”

However, it may be that the journey through the East Bank is not because of the sin of Mei Meribah, but rather part of the original divine plan,²⁵ with an important goal: on the threshold of entering the land, before the Jews receive permission to conquer the land and settle it, God brings them into contact with neighboring nations, in order to stress what the appropriate relationship to every one of the surrounding nations is: who can be conquered and who must be respected.

The border of Edom

In this lesson, we have analyzed the relations of Israel and Edom, and we have seen that specifically here, on the threshold of the land, God desires to bring Israel into conflict with Edom, a confrontation which has the complexity of relations with Edom (brotherhood and contention). Similarly, this confrontation makes clear the fact that God has chosen to give the Edomites a territory fit for them. Israel must respect their boundaries and not conquer them without permission to do so.

The borders of Ammon and Moab

In the same manner, the Israelites are prohibited from attacking Moab and Ammon, in 2:9 and 2:19 respectively.

24 According to this, entering the land by way of the eastern border is part of the punishment. However, it may be that this is also to Moses' credit, that after he was condemned not to enter the land, Israel went around Mount Seir for his sake, to allow him to reach Mount Nebo, from which he could at least see the land before his death. Thus, entering the East Bank of the Jordan, Moses merits tasting the greatness and holiness of the land of Israel.

25 They enter the land from the East Bank, and it is interesting to note that Abraham and Jacob also enter from this direction. It may be that directing Israel specifically via this route emanates from the divine will for the Jewish people to pass by the way of their ancestors, in whose merit they inherit the land (“what befalls the parents is a sign for the children”). This point stresses the thread which ties Jacob to his descendants in the contention with Esau and Edom.

See M.D. Cassuto, *Genesis* (Jerusalem: 1965), pp. 207-209; see Yehuda Kil, “*Neum Ha-peticha shel Moshe le-Sefer Devarim Ve-he'arot Le-hora'ato*,” ch. 14, in *Hegyonot Ba-mikra U-va-chinnukh*, Israeli Ministry of Education, Religious Education Directorate, 1996.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אַל תִּצְרַר אֶת מוֹאָב וְאֶל תִּתְגַּר בָּם מִלְחָמָה כִּי לֹא אֶתֵּן לָךְ מֵאֶרֶצוֹ יְרֵשָׁה כִּי לְבְנֵי לוֹט נָתַתִּי אֶת עַר יְרֵשָׁה.

וְקִרְבַּת מוֹל בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן אַל תִּצְרָם וְאֶל תִּתְגַּר בָּם כִּי לֹא אֶתֵּן מֵאֶרֶץ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן לָךְ יְרֵשָׁה כִּי לְבְנֵי לוֹט נָתַתִּיהֶם יְרֵשָׁה:

And the LORD said unto me, Distress not the Moabites, nor be hostile toward them, for I will not give you their land for a possession; because I have given Ar unto the children of Lot for a possession.

And when you come near the border of the children of Ammon, distress them not, nor be hostile toward them: for I will not give you of the land of the children of Ammon any possession; because I have given it unto the children of Lot for a possession.

Conquering the land by God's word

These commands to honor the borders of Edom, Moab and Ammon show the proper relation to these nations, but beyond this, they teach Israel the proper view of conquering the land: they are not conquering the land like any other nation which is looking for a place to live and thus captures a given area. Rather, they are entering the land designated for them by God, the Master of the Universe, Who decides who will inherit a given territory.

Before the Israelites begin to conquer the land, they must internalize that God is the Lord of the land: He parcels to each nation its lot. When the Jewish people come to their land, they will conquer it in God's name.²⁶

Rashi expresses this sentiment in his first biblical comment (Genesis 1:1):

...ומה טעם פתח בבראשית? משום "כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים" (תהלים קי"א, ו), שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם: **כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו.**

...now for what reason did He commence with "In the beginning?" For this reason: "The strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations" (Psalms 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, "You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations," they will reply, "**The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.**"

²⁶ In addition, specifically as they are about to enter the land, Israel must determine that their historical struggle with Edom is the spiritual struggle which emerges from their different purposes in the world. Thus, it is incumbent upon Israel to know that Edom also has a place and purpose in the world. Then, the Jews may fulfill their unique role without fearing Edom.