YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Vayishlach**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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In loving memory of my parents   
Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger *z"l*  
- Benzion Lowinger

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**Esav in the Land of Edom**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. Introduction**

The connection between Esav and the land of Edom and Mount Se'ir is mentioned in three contexts, but the chronology between them is not clear:

a. When Yaakov and Esav reunite upon Yaakov's return from the house of Lavan, it is stated:

And Yaakov sent messengers before him to Esav his brother to **the land of Seir, the field of Edom**… And the messengers returned to Yaakov, saying: We came to your brother Esav, and moreover he comes to meet you, and four hundred men with him. (*Bereishit* 32:4-7)

Let my lord, I pray you, pass over before his servant; and I will journey on gently, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, **until I come to my lord to Se'ir…** **So Esav returned that day on his way to Se'ir.** And Yaakov journeyed to Sukkot… (*Bereishit* 33:14-17)

b. Esav married Oholibama, a descendent of one of the chiefs of Se'ir the Chorite, who ruled Mount Se'ir and the land of Edom:

Esav took his wives of the daughters of Canaan; Ada the daughter of Elon the Chittite, **and Oholibama the daughter of Ana, the daughter of Tzivon the Chivite**… and Oholibama bore Yeush, and Yalam, and Korach. These are the sons of Esav, that were born to him in the land of Canaan. (*Bereishit* 36:2-5)

**These are the sons of Se'ir** the Chorite, the inhabitants of the land: Lotan and Shoval and Tzivon and **Ana**, and Dishon and Ezer and Dishan. These are the chiefs that came of the Chorites, the children of Se'ir in the land of Edom… And these are **the children of Ana**: Dishon and **Oholibama the daughter of Ana**. (*Bereishit* 36:20-25)

c. Esav permanently left the land of Canaan, and settled in Mount Seir and in the land of Edom:

And Esav took his wives, and his sons, and his daughters, and all the souls of his house, and his cattle, and all his beasts, and all his possessions, which he had gathered in the land of Canaan; and went into a land away from his brother Yaakov. For their substance was too great for them to dwell together; and the land of their sojournings could not bear them because of their cattle. **And Esav dwelt in the mountain-land of Se'ir, Esav is Edom**. (*Bereishit* 36:6-8)

The Ramban and other commentators discuss the apparent contradiction between Esav's leaving the land because of his brother Yaakov, after his return from the house of Lavan, and the fact that Yaakov, when he left the house of Lavan, was already sending him messengers to the land of Edom – meaning that Esav was already living there, and even ruled there with the help of a battalion of four hundred warriors, before Yaakov arrived in the land of Canaan.

**II. Marriage Ties**

The crisis, the fall and the rebuilding of the house of Esav on its former ruins, are apparently related to the blessing of Yitzchak his father that had been taken away from him by his brother Yaakov. The Torah tells us in the wake of the story of the blessings that Esav had had enough of his Canaanite wives, who were not pleasing to his father Yitzchak, and he went to Yishmael, married Machlat daughter of Yishmael, and changed her name to Bosmat, that is, lady. His first wife, Yehudit daughter of Bari, he probably sent away, as she does not appear in our *parasha.* But he also married Oholibama daughter of Ana from Mount Se'ir, and in that way acquired a hold there. It is possible that he first tried to settle among the descendants of Yishmael in the wilderness but did not succeed, and then went to Mount Se'ir.

According to the verses cited above, Esav's sons from Oholibama were born in the land of Canaan, and so it seems that he retained a hold on the land of Canaan near his father Yitzchak, as long as Yaakov was in Padan Aram. It also seems, however, that already at this time he began to acquire a hold on Mount Se'ir, until he gained full control with the help of his battalion of four hundred soldiers. This is how it looks at the time of his meeting with Yaakov, the area of his influence apparently reaching as far as the Yabok stream in the north, in the mountains of Gilad. There Yaakov bowed down to him, and promised to come under his protection to Mount Se'ir, but secretly slipped away to the land of Canaan and bought himself a plot of land near Shechem, perhaps because Hebron and its surroundings, the city of his ancestors, were still under the influence of Esav.

**III. The Hunger**

The Torah relates that at a certain point, Esav abandoned the land of Canaan and moved permanently to Mount Se'ir. He did this due to economic hardship, when "the land of their sojournings could not bear them because of their cattle." We cannot ignore the similarity between Esav's abandonment of the land of Canaan and Lot's abandonment of that same land:

And Esav took his wives, and his sons, and his daughters, and all the souls of his house, and his cattle, and all his beasts, and all his possessions, which he had gathered in the land of Canaan; and went into a land away from his brother Yaakov. For their substance was too great for them to dwell together; **and the land of their sojournings could not bear them** because of their cattle. And Esav dwelt in the mountain-land of Se'ir, Esav is Edom. (*Bereishit* 36:6-8)

And Lot also, who went with Avram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. **And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together;** for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Avram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle… And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere… So Lot chose him all the plain of the Jordan; and Lot journeyed east; and they separated themselves the one from the other. Avram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the Plain, and moved his tent as far as Sodom. (*Bereishit* 13:5-12)

The quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram and the herdsmen of Lot was in a year of famine, at the beginning of which Avram and Lot went down to Egypt. They were forced to return against their will, after Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, expelled them. The famine caused the pastures and water sources to dry up, and Lot decided to leave with his family for a more fertile land. Esav later did the same. Mount Se'ir and the territory of Lot are adjacent to each other.

We do not know of a famine in the time of Yaakov and Esav, apart from the seven years of famine that existed in Egypt and the surrounding countries in the days of Yosef. The famine began in the land of Canaan a few years after Yitzchak's death.[[1]](#footnote-1) Esav probably went to Mount Se'ir at that time, while Yaakov and his sons went down to Egypt:

And I gave to Yitzchak Yaakov and Esav; and I gave to Esav Mount Se'ir, to possess it; and Yaakov and his children went down into Egypt. (*Yehoshua* 24:4)

It is possible that this is what prevented a violent clash between them, for Esav had promised to kill Yaakov after Yitzchak's death.

**IV. Esav’s Portion in the Makhpela Cave**

Despite the above, *Chazal* tell us about a violent conflict that did take place between Esav and the sons of Yaakov, when Yaakov's sons came to bury him in the Makhpela Cave. According to a *midrash*, Esav challenged Yaakov's right to the cave, and Chushim the son of Dan killed him:

Chushim son of Dan… pulled out his sword and cut off Esav's head and his head entered the Makhpela Cave. (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 38)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Some have suggested that Esav's head entering the Makhpela Cave should be understood in connection with Rabbi Meir, who came from a family of Edomite converts and nevertheless was known to “enlighten (*meir*)” the people of Israel with his Torah (*Eruvin* 13b). This was Esav's reward for fulfilling the commandment of honoring one's father with great devotion. It turns out then that even Esav has a part in the world of holiness, which is expressed in the *midrash* of his head entering the Makhpela Cave.

Rabbi Meir had a Torah scroll that included certain clarifications and corrections:

In Rabbi Meir's Torah scroll they found it written: "And behold it was very good (*tov me'od*)," "And behold death is good (*tov mot*)." (*Bereishit Rabba* 9, 5)

"And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins (*or*, with an *ayin*), and clothed them." In Rabbi Meir's Torah scroll, they found it written: "garments of light (*or*, with an *alef*)." (*Bereishit Rabba* 20, 12)

Rabbi Meir finds light and goodness even in the rough sides of human existence, in skin and in death.

This was also Rabbi Meir's approach to his heretical teacher, Elisha ben Avuya, "the other," who strayed from the Torah and its commandments. Rabbi Meir, his disciple, granted him entry into the world to come, because he knew how to find the light in him. Even Esav, as the progeny of Avraham and Yitzchak and as one who honored his father, has a part in holiness!

1. According to calculations, Yitzchak died a year before the seven years of plenty. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Arabs claim to have a tradition regarding "the prophet Yusof" in the Makhpela Cave, despite the fact that explicit verses attest that he was buried in Shechem. My revered father suggested that "the prophet Yusof" is a corruption of "the prophet Esav," and that the tradition refers to the head of Esav that is buried in the Makhpela Cave. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)