

# CHUKAS

## OUR BROTHER EISAV

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### **Edom and the Western Exile**

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In Parshas Chukas, Moshe and the people send a message to the King of Edom, who was the scion of the kingdom of Eisav, asking for permission to go through his land on their way to Eretz Yisrael. They remind him of their brotherhood and request passage as a brotherly favor. The king of Edom refuses and even organizes his army in response to Moshe's request. Hashem tells Bnei Yisrael not to pass through the land.

In this story, the Shem Mishmuel sees an important lesson for us as a nation and as individuals.

According to Chazal, the Jewish diaspora in the West is an interaction of the Jews with Edom, the descendants of Eisav. The Roman Empire is descended from Eisav either physically or spiritually. There are Jewish sources that develop the physical relationship. Certainly, at least spiritually and culturally, the West is the modern analogue of Greece and Rome, who styled themselves after the examples of Eisav and Edom. This story of the Jewish approach to the land of Edom is important to understand. Using the Chassidic method of understanding, we will study this episode with the goal of applying the ideas to our personal lives and our

national experience. We will see that the Shem Mishmuel's analysis of this story is very relevant to us today.

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### Yaakov's Precedent

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Moshe sent a message to the King of Edom. He said, "We, the Jewish People, are descendants of Yaakov, your brother, and we were slaves in Egypt. Now, we are on our way home. Let us pass through your land, adjacent to the land of Canaan." The King of Edom refused. Rashi notes that this interaction with Edom had a negative influence on the Jewish People and they sinned. As a result, they were punished with the death of Aharon on the outskirts of Edom.

Eisav, the progenitor of Edom, was such a wicked person that our Sages call him Eisav Harasha. Edom was equally wicked. Why would Moshe even try to bring his people through that land? Didn't he know that this could lead to negative influence on the people?

The Shem Mishmuel explains that Moshe was following the model of Yaakov Avinu. Throughout much of his life, Yaakov struggled with Eisav. This struggle was, perhaps, the primary struggle of Yaakov's life. Even though Yaakov purchased the birth-right from Eisav, Eisav was still furious with him. Especially after Yaakov received the blessings from Yitzchak, Eisav was so upset with him that Yaakov had to flee to Charan to avoid a possible assassination attempt by Eisav.

After being away for so many years, when Yaakov finally set out to return to the land of Canaan, he sent a message to Eisav asking for reconciliation. Eisav refused to accept these messengers of peace. Instead, he came with 400 soldiers to attack Yaakov. Terrified, Yaakov prepared three strategies: war, gifts, and prayer. Along the way, he continued sending gifts until he finally met

Eisav. When they met, Yaakov bowed down seven times as he approached Eisav. At that moment, they embraced and kissed, only to part to go their separate ways. Eisav then went to Edom and Yaakov to Canaan.

In the times of the Gemara, Jewish leaders would study the *parsha* of Yaakov and Eisav before they would visit Rome. Since the Romans were the spiritual heirs of Eisav and the Jewish People are the descendants of Yaakov, this *parsha* would inspire them to devise wise ways of interacting with the powerful Roman rulers.

What exactly does this story of Yaakov's messengers to Eisav teach us?

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### Angelic Messengers

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According to the Midrash, Yaakov was hoping that Eisav would repent from his wicked ways. How did Yaakov intend to influence Eisav?

The Torah refers to Yaakov's messengers as *malachim*. This word can mean messengers, but it can also mean angels. Rashi says that Yaakov sent real angels who had taken on human form. Who were these angels?

Yaakov Avinu was a great *tzaddik* and had done many *mitzvos* in his life. The Mishnah says that with every *mitzva* a person does, a positive angel is created to protect him in heaven (Avos 4:11). Yaakov had created many thousands of angels. As a prophet, he was able to harness these angels and sent them in human form to Eisav. He hoped that when Eisav encountered these angels—the products of Yaakov's good deeds—his heart would be penetrated, and then Eisav would choose to do good. This is the power of coming into the presence of *kedusha*.

Many of us have had that experience when we come to the Kotel, the last place of *kedusha* remaining from the Beis Hamikdash.

Many of us feel inspiration and awe when are in the presence of the holy wall. Many of us feel that way when we come to the Land of Israel or the city of Yerushalayim. People often feel this very strongly when coming face to face with a Torah leader. Yaakov thought that Eisav would be affected by the *kedusha* of the angels and would repent. Yaakov cared for his brother and wanted him to do *teshuva*.

But things didn't work out the way Yaakov wanted. Instead of repenting, Eisav actually became worse. When he came into the presence of these angels, he gained a greater feeling of superiority, which he further directed towards evil.

We have a strong belief that evil can be changed and converted into good. This is the idea of *teshuva*. No matter what kind of evil a person has gotten into, he can repent and attain forgiveness and leave the sins behind. We do not believe in what the Christians call "original sin," a sin that is inescapable. Our Torah teaches us that when a person does *teshuva*, he is forgiven for his sin. Dovid committed a sin of terrible licentiousness, yet he did *teshuva* and attained forgiveness. Nevuzaradan was the chief executioner for Nevuchadnetzar. He killed hundreds of thousands of Jews, yet he did *teshuva* and was accepted by God. Indeed, every kind of sin is redeemable.

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### Dark Clouds

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The Zohar writes, though, there is a certain intractable and incorrigible evil that is almost impossible to be redeemed. Pharaoh represents this level of sin. Amazingly, plague after plague blasted Pharaoh and his people, yet he did not change. Each time a plague stopped, Pharaoh would go back on his word and keep Bnei Yisrael in Egypt.

The Zohar compares Pharaoh's brand of evil to dark clouds.

There are certain clouds that are so dark that even on a shiny summer day they turn the sky black with the rainstorms they bring. Just moments before the clouds come the day is bright but, suddenly, the black clouds block out the light. These clouds represent an evil so bad that it is irredeemable. No matter how much light you shine on this evil, it stays black as night. The Zohar relates this idea to the seven lean cows of Pharaoh's dream, which remained skinny despite swallowing the seven healthy cows. In other words, even if goodness gets into this evil, it will be absorbed and disappear within it, just as the summer sun gets lost in the black clouds of the thunderstorm.

What kind of sin is the Zohar referring to? This is the sin of supercilious haughtiness, of self-centered pride and ego. When a person fills himself with this kind of excessive pride, it is a great sin indeed. It is almost impossible to fix, as we will explain.

The best way to get a person to repent from doing bad things is to have him do good things. It is difficult for a person to directly confront his evil side and to change. The human ego has great difficulty doing that. It is easier and more effective to start by doing good. *Sur mei'ra va'asei tov*. One method of getting away from evil is to just start doing good things. By doing good things, a person weans himself from evil.

As parents, we can apply this method to involve our children in positive behaviors. When a child is doing bad things, a direct confrontation with the child to force him to stop will engender strong resistance and resentment. People, even children, often feel insulted when they hear, "You are bad and you need to change." A better approach would be to give the child a productive project. If, for example, a child misbehaves in school and you want him to behave, don't confront him directly. Instead, give him something else to do. Don't say, "You're terrible, you have to change and behave nicely in school." Instead, inspire the child to start a new project. Have him get involved in a charity project or bring food to the homeless and to the sick. Let him fix things in local

playgrounds or help children in the neighborhood. Motivate him to do good things. Once the child gets involved in good things, he will simply leave the bad things. He will say, “I see how important it is for kids to get an education, so I’ll get an education too.” As a teacher and parent, I have seen this happen many times. When children get involved in good things, they naturally move away from bad ones.

Doing good things is a very powerful way to change a person. When Yaakov sent those angels, those *mitzvos*, he gave Eisav the message of doing good things. If Eisav would get involved in doing good things, he would abandon his evil ways.

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### The Sources of Sin

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Sins can have many sources. *Ta’ava*, passion, is one source. People can have passion for physical pleasures or for honor. Other sins come from a personality of *ga’ava*, an excessive ego. When a person constantly caters to his own ego, he feels that he has to assert this self-centeredness. This is a difficult trait to straighten out. Even if he does good deeds, they will just nourish his ego. He will then say, “Wow! Look, I’m even greater than I thought!” If a person is sinning because of his *ta’ava*, he can learn to redirect the passion to good things. We’ve seen people who have passion for evil switch even that same passion to one to do good things. But if a person’s drive is his ego, that he is better than others, then when he does good things, he only reaffirms his ego. Even his *mitzvos* serve an evil purpose. This is the meaning of the Zohar’s analogy to opaque black clouds. Even light cannot pierce these clouds. This is the sin of *ga’ava*.

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## The Failure of Yaakov's Angels

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This is where the messengers that Yaakov sent to Eisav failed. Yaakov sent Eisav the message, "You can do great things, you are a great man!" Eisav said, "Yes, I am a great man, even greater than you think. And I will attack you."

This is a powerful and troubling lesson. It's not simple to fix *ga'ava* just by doing good things. When a person has an attitude of *ga'ava*, even the good things he does can turn into an unfortunate expression of destructive ego.

Even though it seems that Yaakov failed to reach his goal by sending these messengers to Eisav, the Shem Mishmuel says he did not fail completely. According to the Midrash, Eisav kissed Yaakov sincerely and lovingly at their meeting as a result of those messengers. Originally, the messengers indeed failed. In our conceptualization according to Chassidus, giving egotistical Eisav the ability to do good things just gave him more power to twist those good things to suit his terrible ego. But good is still good. Initially, Eisav brought 400 soldiers to attack Yaakov. After receiving those messengers, Eisav became even more aggressive. But when he saw Yaakov, he had a change of heart. He felt an affinity towards Yaakov and kissed him. At that moment, they were close friends. Even though this did not last, the moment was unchangeable. Eisav experienced an appreciation for the goodness that he had seen in Yaakov.

It is difficult to change a *ba'al ga'ava* into a *tzaddik*. *Ga'ava* creates dark clouds that are almost impenetrable. It seems that even good deeds cannot have an immediate desired effect on the egoist. However, this is only at the first level. Eventually, the light will pierce even the darkest cloud. These dark clouds will open up and allow the light to shine through them. Even the egotistical Eisav repented in some way because he met Yaakov. Albeit in a small measure, Eisav was indeed affected by Yaakov's overtures.

## Moshe's Proposed Brotherhood

Moshe understood this concept. Yaakov had sent messengers to Eisav because he felt it was an important part of his mission in this world. Eisav was a powerhouse and could join the Jewish People in the mission of improving the world. He later created a great kingdom that controlled much of Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and North Africa. Eisav is the spiritual and possibly even the physical founder of Rome, from which came Western civilization, including today's Europe and America. Eisav is the father of human development over thousands of years. We cannot ignore this. As descendants of Yaakov, we have a responsibility. We have the message of Torah, holiness, and *mitzvos*. We have a responsibility to our brother Eisav to help him do *teshuva* and get on the right path. He has the potential to be a *tzaddik*.

Although Yaakov ultimately failed, Moshe tried again with a different strategy. Hundreds of years later, Moshe sent a message to the kingdom of Edom, the descendants of Eisav. In this message, Moshe said, "*Ko amar achicha Yisrael. I am your brother Yisrael. I went down to Egypt. This was a decree told to Avraham, our great-grandfather. I paid the price while you, my brother Eisav, stayed in the land of Edom. Now that I have come back, let us develop a brotherly relationship. I have no intention of harming your country. I am going to Canaan, the country promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We will get our country, and you will keep your country. At least let us renew our brotherhood. Let us pass through your land.*"

When Yaakov sent his messengers to Eisav, Yaakov used the term *avd'cha Yaakov*, saying, "I am your servant, Yaakov" (Bereishis 32:5). Our Sages say this was a mistake. Yaakov was pandering to Eisav's pride. He was saying, "You are my superior, my older brother." Maybe this came from his fear, but it was a failure. Even though Yaakov sent messengers full of holiness and *mitzvos* to

inspire Eisav to a life of goodness, when Yaakov called himself Eisav's servant, he essentially motivated Eisav to do more bad deeds, since he acknowledged Eisav as superior.

We have much to teach the world through the Torah. Imagine if we would say to the world of Rome and Western civilization, "You are our superior, we are your servants. But we still have some good ideas for you to learn." This would be a failure! The Eisav-world would not respect us. Our message would be lost in their ego. They would look at the Jew as an inferior being, and they would think, "How can an inferior being teach us?"

Why did Moshe think that his message would succeed where Yaakov's message failed? Moshe understood that Yaakov Avinu had made a mistake in using the term *avd'cha*. Moshe didn't use the term *eved*. Instead, he used the term *achicha*, your brother. The term brother indicates equality. "We have an equality, you and I. Both of us have something important. We can pool our contributions and efforts. I have the spiritual message of the Torah, and you have the ability to build the physical world and imbue it with the spirituality of our teachings. We can be partners in our endeavors to fix the world."

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### Equal Partnership Rejected

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A brother is an equal, not a slave. Moshe thought there was a difference between Yaakov's personal situation and Moshe's. Yaakov was alone, a powerless refugee fleeing from Lavan. However, reasoned Moshe, we came out of Egypt through miracles; we walked through the Red Sea with Hashem's help and defeated the mighty Amalek. With Hashem's help, we have demonstrated our strength. Now, we can be brothers with Eisav.

But this also failed, Eisav and the kingdom of Edom wanted neither partnership nor brotherhood with the Jews. Their pride

was so strong that they wouldn't even recognize the miracles of the Exodus. They even had the audacity to think that if they organized their army, they could fight and win against the Jews and the God of Israel. Hashem told Moshe, "I am not interested in a war against Eisav. Move away from them."

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### The Hidden Success of These Initiatives

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In both of these encounters, the Jew initiated a rapprochement with the outside world. Yaakov was even ready to let Eisav lead, but Eisav refused to be leader of Yaakov. Moshe said we would join forces, but again Eisav refused. This was due to his intense *ga'ava*. In his exaggerated self-concept, Eisav refuses to give any credit to the Jewish People. Eisav thinks he can do it all on his own, even in the spiritual dimension.

The Shem Mishmuel says something very surprising here. We shouldn't think that these approaches of Yaakov and Moshe were total failures. Our Sages have taught us that, over the centuries, many righteous converts have come from the world of Eisav. There have been *geirei tzedek*, such as Onkelos, the nephew of the Caesar of Rome. We all know other righteous converts, too. They came as a result of the outreach of Yaakov and Moshe. Even though the *ga'ava* of Eisav led him to reject Yaakov and Moshe and, in general, the world of Rome and Western civilization has rejected direct recognition of the Jewish contribution to the spiritual side of the world, many gentiles have chosen the path of righteousness. There will be a part of the Roman world that will ultimately recognize the Jewish contribution of Torah to the world. They will then become brothers in the advancement and enhancement of spirituality in this world.

We live in tumultuous times. Not long ago, we experienced the Holocaust. This was the worst expression of the supercilious

superiority complex of Eisav, the Roman and European attitudes towards the Jews. This was the ultimate rejection of the Jewish contribution to the world. In the last seventy years, however, much has changed. The State of Israel was born. Many of those same Western nations that attempted to destroy the Jews, from the time of the Roman Empire until the Holocaust, turned around and supported the Jews in Israel. They helped the people return to the Land of Israel. Today, many of these nations are supporters of Jews, not just of the State of Israel. Today, there is a different attitude toward Jews as Jews. Many of these gentiles speak highly of Jews and of our contributions to world culture and spirituality. There are even some Christian clergyman who think that the Jewish religion is valid for Jews. This is a dramatic change, completely different than the historically common inimical Western approach to Jews. These are the rays of light that can penetrate the clouds of Edom and Eisav.

Is this a harbinger of the world to come? Is this a sign of Mashiach's approach, when the world at large will recognize the truth of the Torah as the true light for the whole world? Or is this a passing, temporary phenomenon? Is it just as when Yaakov and Eisav met, when their momentary embrace tragically faded?

Only time will tell if the fundamental change Yaakov and Moshe dreamt of and worked for will finally materialize. Let us pray and hope that as we live through these tumultuous times, with the Jewish return to Israel and growing recognition of the gentiles of the Jewish contribution to mankind, this will be the beginning of a permanent change for the good. May we see the permanent reconciliation between Yaakov and Eisav, for the betterment of the world and all humanity.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. What is the best way to do *teshuva*?
2. What sin resists *teshuva* the most?
3. Why did Yaakov's approach to Eisav fail?
4. What was the difference between Yaakov's and Moshe's approaches?
5. Did Yaakov and Moshe fail totally?
6. What is the status today between Yaakov and Eisav?
7. What is the hope for the days of Mashiach?

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## EXERCISE

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1. Do you have any stories of positive spiritual interactions with gentiles?



