

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



What to tell the Goyim

Chukat

Growing up in a non-observant, but fiercely proud Jewish family, there were a few Yiddishisms which were often heard. One was GEI SHLUFEN (Go to sleep!), but more fascinating was it's a SHANDE FAR DI GOYIM (It's an embarrassment before the Gentiles). We (and all Jews for thousands of years) were very concerned what the surrounding Gentiles thought about us and our behavior. So, this week's Torah reading is very enlightening on this topic, because Moshe Rabbeinu sends messengers to the rulers of countries which our ancestors would like to pass through.

The first group which we encounter on the southernmost reaches of the Trans-Jordan territory, is our cousins the Edomites, descendants of Eisav, our uncle. Here's what Moshe wants their rulers to be told:

From Kadesh, Moshe sent messengers to the king of Edom: "Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us; that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors. We cried to the Eternal who heard our plea, sending a messenger who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in

Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. Please let us cross through your land. We won't pass through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will walk on the King's Highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have crossed your border.' (Bamidbar 20:14-17)

Okay, there are a few obvious points. First, we do identify ourselves as family. Second, we give a short history of how we got to the present situation. Then we finally get to our specific request, which we present with tremendous respect and deference. As you can imagine, there are a plethora of ways to parse this little presentation. We will explore just a few.

There is a point of view, which I believe is important to know, but I totally reject. That position is that we didn't care whatsoever what Edom thought. The entire message was a secret message about how the world works, and only Jews were supposed to get it. The Ma'or V'Shemesh writes:

I believe that this entire issue is related to God's intent when creating Humanity in this world: Which is to free the sparks of KEDUSHA in everything. This redemption is achieved by attaching oneself to the supernal root of one's soul. This is accomplished through visits to the TZADIK.

In other words, this famous Chassidische Rebbe (or TZADIK) is telling us that the information in the message was for

future Jews (especially Chassidim) who must realize that any reference to travel describes the Chasid's trek from his tiny Shtetel to the court of his Rebbe. We're not talking to gentiles and we're not on the road to Eretz Yisrael. Fascinating, but not helpful in understanding the issue at hand for us and our ancestors.

Clearly, the Rebbe (Reb Kalman Kalonymus HaLevi Epstein) is not interested in telling his non-Jewish neighbors in Cracow anything.

On the other hand, most commentaries do have ideas which can inform our relations with our neighbors. Let's begin with the discussion about who were the messengers. Some suggest that they were actual angels, because the Hebrew MAL'ACHIM can mean either earthly or heavenly surrogates. Others suggest that Moshe went himself to underline the importance of the mission.

However, I find the opinion of the Netziv (living in the Russian Empire towards the end of the 19th century) interesting: it teaches us that he didn't send men of Yisrael. Rather the messengers were from Edom or Amon. The reason for this is that Jews shouldn't be alone amongst gentiles. We also saw what happened to the messengers sent by David to Amon... (Shmuel Alef 10, the messengers were slaughtered).

Clearly, the Netziv had a standoffish approach to gentile authorities. Probably with good reason.

Next, we should understand why Moshe

thought it important to call the Edomites 'brethren'. There are a number of authorities who emphasize that our 'brothers' should feel some empathy for us, because the original prophecy (or 'promise') of the inevitable exile in the Covenant between the Parts was given to Avraham Avinu who was their ancestor, too. So, therefore, the message was: Be nice to us because we suffered, and you were spared.

Rav Yitzchak Eitzshalom emphasized that we should call them brethren because they are bound to our fortunes. In the Messianic Age, the descendants of Eisav will pay for any evil intentions towards us, as pointed out by the prophet Amos (9:11-12). Our fates are intertwined whether you like it or not.

Finally, why is it important to tell them 'Eternal who heard our plea'? Didn't they know the story of the Exodus and the Crossing of the Sea? It's mentioned in Shirat HaYam: The chiefs of Edom will be terrified (Sh'mot 15:15). So, what new info is being told? The Edomites might have thought that the Exodus and aftermath happened through human enterprise. It's critical that they know it was Divine intervention.

So, what does all this mean for us? How should it affect our relations with non-Jews, and what we tell them? First of all, ignoring the Mystics, it is clear that we should feel the need to inform the world of our intentions and ideas. But what should we expect?

Rav Yehuda Amital wrote: I remember when Prime Minister Golda Meir visited Gush Etzion. People asked her why Israel did not engage in better public relations (hasbara) overseas. She replied: "You don't understand our problem. The gentiles are incapable of understanding us - not because of faulty public relations, but because our entire enterprise here is absurd. A person has to be Jewish to understand our hasbara."

Because they won't listen, should we refrain from the enterprise? No! Rav Amital concluded: We are entrusted with the task of strengthening people's confidence in the continued existence of the State of Israel. Israel is not a transient episode. For "God's word is forever, and not a single word of His will return unfulfilled." Had the state been a human creation, the work of Ben Gurion and his comrades, it could have been a transient phenomenon. But it is a Divine work, the fulfillment of a prophetic vision, and we must say this openly!

In spite of the fact that they won't listen, we must try and tell our story. So that we can live to see what Rav Nethaniel Helfgot described: Edom's message then was clear: You shall not pass! ... Edom has not learned the lesson of what God did to the Egyptians, which we commemorate every Pesach. May all the Edomites; re-learn this lesson speedily, in our days.

This whole scenario reminds me of when I taught and gave sermons. Educate like

crazy, but keep expectations low. We teach the story to all, and don't ignore the gentiles. But don't expect them to pay attention until Redemption! 🙏