

B'reishit 36:6-8

Esav took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the souls of his household, his flocks and all his cattle, and all the possessions he acquired in the Land of Canaan.

He went to a land because of (mipnei) his brother Yaakov.

For their possessions were too vast to allow settling together, and the land they sojourned in was incapable of sustaining them because of (*mipnei*) their sheep.

Esav settled in Mount Seir, which is Edom.

Questions

- 1) How does this account of Esav's actions relate to the dramatic encounter at the beginning of this week's parashah?
- 2) Why doesn't the Torah identify the land to which Esav went?
- 3) Did Esav leave because of Yaakov, or their possessions were too vast to allow them to stay together, or because the land couldn't bear their sheep?

Commentaries

Targum (pseudo)Yonatan – Esav left because he was afraid of yaakov.

Rashbam – because Yaakov had a legal right to the Land because of the birthright

Rashi (a) – because he feared being caught up in the decree upon Yitzchak's descendants of “for your children will be aliens in a land not their own)

Rashi (b) – he was embarrassed to face Yaakov because he had sold the birthright

Rashi – he left for anywhere

Radak – he left to find the “fat land” his father had blessed him to have

Bekhor Shor – he left for Seir, which is identified in verse 8

My Comments

None of the explanations of “because of Yaakov his brother” explain the presence of verse 7 adequately – the claim advanced by some that Esav realized it was time to leave because of the practical issues is at best insufficient. Furthermore, I haven't seen an adequate account of the difference in tone between the opening episode and that given here, even if one accepts the various attempts at resolving the apparent contradiction with regard to the chronology of Esav's presence in Seir.

Note that the language and content of verse 7 is strongly reminiscent of B'reishit 13:6, which provides the rationale for the separation of Avraham and Lot. In the aftermath of that episode, however, G-d makes it clear that Lot's departure was a positive thing, whereas here we are not given Hashem's reaction.

Possibly, however, the reasons are each valid, but the verse 6 is from Hashem's perspective and verse 7 from Esav's. This has the advantage of preserving the metahistorical dimension of the encounter without requiring us to believe that Esav lived in constant awareness of that dimension.

Possibly, then, the entire episode at the beginning of the parashah should be treated not as an objective account but as Yaakov's perspective. This would enable a new, if radical, resolution of all the ambiguities in that episode as to Esav's intentions. We do not know whether he ever intended to attack Yaakov, or whether he intended to kiss or bite him when they embraced. We do know, however, that Yaakov himself was unsure.

If readers find this explanation convincing, I'd be interested in hearing how you think it affects our understanding of the relationship and of Esav overall.

Shabbat Shalom

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