

*Torah Table Talk*  
**Edom and Israel:**  
**Brothers, Nations, and Civilizations**  
 Parshat Vayishlach  
 Genesis 32:4 – 36:40 / Obadiah 1:1 – 21



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt  
 in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.  
 "He was the perfect child."*

This week's prophetic portion consists of the entire book of Obadiah, made up of only 21 verses. It is one "Minor prophets" or the "Trei Asar" (twelve in Aramaic). These twelve prophets are only 'minor' in length, not in importance or significance. Obadiah lived some time after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish people by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. His prophecy is almost entirely a condemnation of Edom, a nation that stood by passively when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and then took advantage of Israel's destruction. Obadiah condemns Edom/Esau because this is not the way "brothers" should treat one another. He predicts that Edom will be punished for its actions in the same way in which Israel has suffered during its exile and destruction. Haftorot express both symmetry and asymmetry in relation to the themes in the weekly Torah portion. While the Haftarah often echoes themes, this one seems to stand in sharp contrast to the Torah portion. In Parshat Vayishlach, Jacob/Israel is reunited with his brother Esau/Edom after years of separation and anger. Edom and Israel are brothers as the sons of Isaac and as nations – this makes Edom's betrayal all the more horrific.

**Obadiah 1:21**

For liberators shall march up on Mount Zion to wreak havoc on Mount Esau; dominion shall be the Lords.

**Obadiah 1:21 (another translation)**

And saviors shall come up on Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lords.

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein [www.uscj.org.il/haftarah](http://www.uscj.org.il/haftarah)**

Why did the Sages choose the book of Obadiah as the Haftarah for Parshat Vayishlach? The answer to this question is to be found in the rabbinic approach to the stories about Jacob and Esau. The tension which existed in the relationship between Jacob and Esau even before their birth served as the backdrop for the rabbinic understanding of the relationship between the Jews and their Roman oppressors. They projected the tension between these two conflicting civilizations onto the conflict between these twins. For them, the conflict was cosmic in proportions. Rebecca's prophecy concerning the birth of her two sons implied to the sages that the battle between Jews and Judaism, on the one hand, and Roman imperialism and its world view, on the other, was primordial in nature. This conflict informed the rabbinic interpretation of every Biblical passage that dealt with this pair. Even the famous wrestling match between Jacob and the angel, found in this week's parshah, was interpreted in this light. *Weekly commentary on the Haftorot sponsored by the Fuchsberg Center of the USCJ in Jerusalem*

**Genesis Rabba 78:14**

"Let my Lord go on ahead of his servant while I travel slowly at the pace of the cattle before me and at the pace of the children until I come unto my lord unto Seir" (Genesis 33:14). R. Abbahu said: We went through all of Scripture to and fro, and did not find that Jacob ever went to the mountain of Seir to see Esau. Is it possible that Jacob, the truthful one, would have deceived Esau? So when is Jacob to

come to Esau? (This refers to) the time-to-come, when "liberators shall come up on Mount Zion to wreak judgment on Mount Esau" (Obadiah 1:21).

### **Rabbi Mark B Greenspan, My Brother Esau – A Sermon**

With a few rare exceptions, the sages described Esau as wicked. This image flies in the face of the stories in this week's Parshah. While Esau is depicted by the Torah as somewhat boorish and simple minded, he is hardly an evil man. While he tends to be impulsive, he doesn't hold a grudge for long. Sure, Esau threatens to kill Jacob after his younger brother steals his birthright, but we can certainly understand his anguish and anger. Esau is a dutiful son who not only tends to his father's needs but even divorces his Hittite wife when he realizes that she is not the type of girl that his parents have in mind for him.

So what happened to Esau? How did the very human Esau of the Bible turn into the personification of evil? Esau, as he is depicted in the rabbinic tradition is a stereotype - he has lost all of his unique humanity. So why is it that our tradition has been so unfair to him? It is a long story but let me see if I can simplify it. The Bible already acknowledges that Esau was the father of two great nations: Edom and Amalek. Because these two nations were the bitter enemies of the Jewish people, our ancestors read history backwards and placed all of their anger and animosity toward the Edomites and Amalekites on Esau. And even later in history when these two nations no longer existed, the Jewish people came to associate Esau with the Roman Empire. The more bitter the conflict between Israel and Rome was, the more wicked Esau became.

### **Malbin, Rabbi Meir Loeb ben Yechiel Michael (1809 – 1879)**

The Liberators shall march – at that time the war of Gog and Magog (the messianic war to end all wars) shall begin and the two Messiahs shall be revealed – the Messiah from the house of Joseph and the Messiah from the house of David, and the seven shepherds who shall save Israel. They shall go up and judge the Mount of Esau and God's kingdom shall be established – and everyone shall accept the kingdom of God speedily in our days. *(This is all references to the eschatological ideas of Judaism including the idea of not one but two messiahs!)*

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. When the sages speak about Edomites they refer to them as Esau, the founding member of this nation. Do you think the rabbis are unfair in connecting Esau with the later actions of Edom? To what extent do our actions as descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob reflect on our forefathers?
2. Look at the two translations of the verse above. How are they different from one another? Which one do you prefer and why?
3. Do you think this Haftorah casts a positive or a negative light on the way we read the story of Jacob and Esau in this week's Torah portion?
4. Why was it so important to the sages to read both Rome and Christianity back into the Bible as part of our tradition?
5. While the Bible judged Edom harshly, it does so because he is our "brother." Since we associate Edom with Rome and later with Christendom in the rabbinic tradition what implications does this have for our actions? What responsibilities do we have to Edom in all its permutations if we think of them as "our brother?" What responsibilities do they have to us?

6. Do you think the book of Obadiah and later rabbinic images of Esau creates an attitude of hate and intolerance toward non-Jews on the part of Jews?
  7. Malbim speaks of all nations “accepting the kingdom of God.” What do you think this means. What is the Messianic vision for non-Jews as envisioned by the Jewish people according to this interpretation?
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### **A Special Passover Request**

Believe it or not but I am already working on this year’s Haggadah Commentary. As many of you know over the last several years I have translated a traditional commentary on the Haggadah in time for the Seder. In memory of my dear father in law, Bernie Parl, I am doing something different this year. My daughter Naomi and I are creating a unique commentary on the Haggadah which weaves together a contemporary explanation as well as some of the wonderful humor associated with Passover. If you have a favorite Passover joke or a personal Passover story that is humorous that you are will to share, please send it to me for consideration for the Ha – Ha – Haggadah (yea – that’s what we are calling it!) Submissions should be under seventy five words... should be sent to Naomi at - [negreens@gmail.com](mailto:negreens@gmail.com)

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*