

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Hukat

For the Sake of Peace

From Kadesh, Moses 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 Lord and He heard our plea, and He sent a messenger who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory."

But Edom answered him, "You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword." "We will keep to the beaten track," the Israelites said to them, "and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot—it is but a small matter." But they replied, "You shall not pass through!" And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed. So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.

Because of the Edomites complete lack of hospitality to the Israelites, the book of Deuteronomy instructs us that Edomites may not join the Jewish people directly: *Children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in the third generation* (Deut. 23:9)

Despite this distancing (or perhaps because of it), the Torah instructs us: *You shall not abhor an Edomite, because he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land.* (Deut.23.7)

However, in the very same place that the Torah directs us not to abhor the Edomites, it says this about the Ammonites and the Moabites: "You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live." (Deut. 23:7).

How can the very same Torah that commands us to seek peace with our most ancient rivals instruct us to ignore the plight of these two peoples? Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that Edomites, while enemies were nevertheless our blood relations, descendants of our Father Isaac, whereas the Ammonites and Moabites were not. Or maybe because Ammon and Moab actively harassed the Israelites, whereas Edom only threatened violence, the former are treated with special disdain.

But Edom is not the only nation that the Torah warns us not to revile. Deuteronomy 23:8 also states: "You shall not abhor the Egyptian, since you were a stranger in his land." The Egyptians are no blood relatives of ours, and the cruelty and oppression of Egyptian slavery certainly exceeds anything that Ammon and Moab may have done!

The Egyptians enslaved and afflicted us. They drowned our children in the Nile. There is no lack of reasons why we should be justified in harboring an eternal hatred for the Egyptian people. The fact that we are forbidden to do so conveys a powerful lesson. The mitzvah of peacemaking runs throughout the Torah, challenging us to overcome even our deepest, most justifiable hatreds. In the words of the Rabbis: "The whole Torah exists only for the sake of peace." (*Tanhuma Shoftim* 18)