Parshat Devarim

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National Events Serve as a Corrective for Individual Ones

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Many events in the book of Bereishit (Genesis) repeat themselves in Devarim (Deuteronomy) with one major difference. Whereas Genesis is a narrative which focuses on individuals, Devarim focuses on the nations who have emerged from these individuals.

Consider for example the story in this week’s portion of the children of Yaakov (Jacob), Am Yisrael, asking the children of Esav (Esau) for permission to go through their land on their way to Israel. It is a reversal of the story of the confrontation between Esav and Yaakov as found in the Genesis narrative.

In Bereishit Esau comes from the field tired and buys food from Yaakov. (Genesis 25:34) Here in Devarim, it is the Jews weary from years of wandering in the desert, who try to buy food and water from the children of Esav. (Devarim 2:6)In Bereishit, Yaakov rejects traveling with Esav, but promises to rendezvous with him one day in Seir. That promise is never fulfilled in their lifetime. (Genesis 33:14) Yet, here in Devarim, the Israelites finally connect with the children of Esav in Seir, and are rejected. (Numbers 20:21; Devarim 2:8)

Note also the similarity in language. In preparation for his meeting with Esav, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger and is struck in the hollow (kaf) of his thigh (Genesis 32:26). In Devarim, God tells the Jews not to antagonize the children of Esav, “For I shall not give you of their land, even the right to set foot (kaf) there.” (Deuteronomy 2:5) Rabbi Yitzhak Twersky notes that the use of the uncommon term kaf in both places point; the reader to a similarity between these episodes.

Indeed, both stories also intersect in that they deal with fear. In Genesis it is Yaakov who is afraid before meeting Esav. In the words of the Torah, “Yaakov became very frightened.” (Bereishit 32:8) Here, in Devarim it’s the children of Esav who are frightened as the Israelites draw near. As the Torah states: “The Lord said to me (Moshe)…command the people saying ‘you are passing through the boundary of your brothers, the children of Esav, who dwell in Seir; they will fear you.’” (Devarim 2:4, 5)

One can’t help but note that the parallel stories in Devarim are often the reverse of the Bereishit narrative. Thus, events in Devarim could be viewed as a corrective to what unfolded in Bereishit. A real appreciation of feeling the pain of another only comes when one feels that very pain. Perhaps Am Yisrael, the children of Yaakov, had to learn this lesson before entering the land of Israel.