

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Chukas 5768

And Edom refused to let Israel pass through its borders, and Israel turned aside from him. (20:21)

Why did Israel not fight Edom over the right to pass through its borders, as they fought Sichon and Og? The Torah explains in Devarim (2:5) that they were commanded not to: "Do not fight them, for I will not give you even a footstep of their land."

The Midrash says that this command was a lesson for future generations of Jews in exile: "If you see Esav trying to start a fight with you, do not stand up against him, but hide yourselves from him." (The word "hatzfinu" (hide yourselves) is a play on the word "tzafonah" (northward) in Devarim 2:3: "Turn yourselves northward.")

Regarding this Midrash, the Chofetz Chaim writes: "The Torah teaches us not to resist the nations even when they fight against us. We must follow in the footsteps of Yaakov Avinu in his encounter with his brother Esav. As the Ramban writes in Vayishlach, all that happened between Yaakov and Esav happens to us constantly with Esav's children. We must adopt the methods of that tzaddik, to make the three preparations that he made: prayer, a gift, and escape through war, that is, to flee and take refuge."

As long as we walked on that well-tread path, the Holy One, blessed is He, saved us from their hands. But since we have strayed from the path and new leaders have arisen who chose new methods, leaving behind our ancestors' weapons and adopting the methods of our enemies, we have fared worse and worse, and great travails have befallen us. May Hashem have mercy on our people and restore our judges as of old." (Chofetz Chaim Al Hatorah, Devarim)

The literal translation of the Ramban is, "saving through war, to flee and take refuge." Clearly the Chofetz Chaim understood the Ramban to mean that actual war is never permitted during exile; the Ramban wrote the words "to flee and take refuge" as an explanation of the word "war". According, we have added the words "that is" in the translation above.

Recently, Artscroll published a translation of the Ramban's commentary on the Torah, in which the above passage was rendered as follows: "That we should prepare ourselves for the three items for which he prepared himself: for prayer, for gifts to appease Esau, and for saving himself by means of war, including fleeing and thereby being saved." This translation implies that real war is also a possibility, which would be against the Chofetz Chaim.

However, a careful reading reveals that the Artscroll translators were not going against the Chofetz Chaim in practice, only in understanding the Ramban's words. They understood the Ramban's words to be referring to Yaakov himself; this is evident from the fact that in the phrase "for saving **himself** by means of war" they added in the word "himself" and not "ourselves". Yaakov Avinu definitely did consider real war as a possibility, as the Torah says (Bereishis 32:8), "And Yaakov was very afraid, and he was in distress," and Rashi explains that he was afraid lest he be killed, and in distress lest he kill others. However, when it comes to the lesson for Jews in exile, all agree that "war" only means "to flee and be saved".



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