

CHUKAS (NUMBERS 19:1-22:1)

The Bigger They Are...

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

War is nothing new to the Nation of Israel. We've been fighting them for millennia. There we were, in the desert, minding our own business, seeking to co-exist peacefully with our neighbors. The Amorites had other ideas.

Moses sent a message to Sichon, the Amorite king, requesting permission to pass through his land. An "environmental impact statement" accompanied the request:

"We will not turn aside to the fields and vineyards, and we will not drink any well water. We will follow the king's highway (i.e., we will stay off the local streets where our animals might be tempted to nibble on food in someone's field) until we pass through your land." (Numbers, 21:22)

Sichon, a powerful giant, responded to this request by attacking them. That was a mistake. Sichon and his fortified city of Cheshbon (in what is now Jordan) were defeated by the divinely protected Nation of Israel. Cheshbon was now a Jewish neighborhood!

Next, Israel proceeded to Bashan. (The Golan Heights) Og, the king of Bashan, was also a giant, and the brother of Sichon. Og, too, organized an army against Israel, and once again, we were forced to fight off an aggressor. This time, however, Moses needed some encouragement:

"G-d said to Moses, 'Don't be afraid of him. I have given him, along with all his people and territory, into your hand. You will do to him the same as you did to Sichon...'" (21:34)

G-d doesn't waste words. He told Moses not to be afraid to fight Og. That reassurance was apparently unnecessary in the war against Og's brother Sichon. What was different about Og? Rashi explains that Moses was afraid that Og would be rewarded for a Mitzvah he had done many years before.

Not only was Og a giant, he was a very old giant. When Lot, Abraham's nephew and brother-in-law, was captured, Og reported this news to Abraham. (Genesis, 14:13) This information made it possible for Abraham to save Lot from his captors. Og had performed this Mitzvah so many years before, and Moses feared that the merit of this Mitzvah would protect him from Israel. Therefore, says Rashi, G-d had to assure Moses that didn't have to worry about Og.

There is a difficulty with this interpretation. Rashi, in explaining a verse in the Book of Numbers, appears to have forgotten what he wrote in Genesis!! Back in Genesis, Rashi tells us WHY Og provided Abraham with the news about Lot. Was it an altruistic desire on Og's part to see Lot saved? Not at all, explains Rashi. The reason Og informed Abraham that his nephew was in danger was that he knew that Abraham would spare no effort to save him. Og was hoping that Abraham would go to war to save Lot and be killed in battle. This would leave Sarah available to become Mrs. Og!!!!!!

What a Mitzvah!! Og tells Abraham to go save Lot so he can be killed and Og can marry his widow! With friends like Og, who needs enemies?! How could Moses actually suspect that G-d would reward Og for such a deceitful, treacherous act?

The Torah teaches us that we are obligated to express our appreciation to those who are kind to us. One good turn, they say, deserves another. However, if someone is kind to us, we may be tempted to carefully sift through the evidence to determine whether there might be ulterior motives that led to the favor. Maybe she only lent me a cup of sugar today because she plans to borrow something from me tomorrow. So why should I be appreciative of such a manipulative person?

Moses refused to think in those terms. Og did us a favor, Moses reasoned. He helped Lot by sending Abraham to save him! Why shouldn't G-d reward him, thought Moses. Ulterior motives are not my business; they are G-d's. Only when G-d himself told Moses not to worry about Og, that his intent in doing that Mitzvah was not to help Abraham, was Moses comfortable in knowing that Israel would not be defeated.

If someone does you a favor, don't scrutinize it for background information; that's G-d's job. Just say "Thank you."

Have a great Shabbos

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