

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

12 TAMMUZ

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS CHUKAS-BALAK

A Giant Debt

...Og, king of Bashan, went out against them, he and his entire people, to do battle in Edrei. Hashem said to Moshe, "Do not fear him, for into your hand I have given him..." (21:33-34)

This week's *parsha* ends with the tale of the remarkable encounter between Moshe Rabbeinu and Og, the giant-king of Bashan. Og had been one of the *Nephilim* (those that fell or "fallen angels" see Rashi on *Bereishis* 6:4); a race of giants from the time before the great flood. He was known as "the escapee" because he survived the destruction of the flood (see Rashi on *Bereishis* 14:13). The *possuk* tells us that Moshe was worried about meeting Og in a war.

At first glance, this seems a little odd. Bnei Yisroel had just soundly decimated Sichon king of Cheshbon, who had a reputation as one of the mightiest warriors in the world. Why was Moshe suddenly worried about fighting Og? Rashi (21:34) explains that almost 500 years prior Og had done a favor for Avraham Avinu. Moshe was afraid that the merit of this kindness to Avraham Avinu would stand for him and, perhaps, render him invulnerable.

What kindness had Og done for Avraham? In *Parshas Lech Lecha* (*Bereishis* 14:1-12), the Torah relates some of the details of the epic war that embroiled nine kingdoms. Four kings went to war against five kings and soundly defeated them and many other nations that were in their path. One of the nations that was utterly destroyed was the Rephaim, a nation of giants, and Og was the lone survivor ("fugitive"). In addition, one of the five kings who was defeated was the king of Sodom, where

Avraham's nephew, Lot, resided. Og came to Avraham to inform him that his nephew had been taken captive by the four kings. This was the kindness that Og did for Avraham Avinu, that had Moshe concerned about meeting Og in battle.

However, this is difficult to comprehend. Rashi (*Bereishis* 14:13) very clearly states that the reason Og came to inform Avraham what had happened to Lot was for his own selfish reasons. He desired to marry Sarah, who according to the Gemara (*Megillah* 15a) was one of the most beautiful women to have ever lived. Og hoped that Avraham would feel impelled to enter the war and in the course of the fighting he would be killed; thereby clearing a path for Og to be with Sarah. Thus, Og had very selfish reasons for giving Avraham Avinu news about his nephew; so how is this act considered such a great merit for him?

Imagine for a moment that someone is attacked by a mugger and struck upon the head. Following this unfortunate event, the victim heads to the nearest hospital to be examined. The doctors decide to perform a CT scan of his head to be sure that there isn't any more extensive damage. Miraculously, the CT scan reveals that while there is no permanent damage from the mugger's blow, there is a tumor that is slowly growing inside the skull that must be removed. This tumor might have very likely killed this person and perhaps not have been caught in time had he not



been mugged. Does this victim now owe a debt of gratitude to the mugger?

Of course not. In the case of the mugger, the victim never wanted to suffer a severe blow to the head. That it, providentially, happened to work out is really just the hand of Hashem. However, in the case of Og, Avraham was well aware of risks he was taking by entering a war with the four kings. Yet, Avraham desired to have the information that Og was providing. The fact that Og had his own agenda doesn't lessen the kindness to Avraham; Og was providing Avraham a service that he wanted. Doing a kindness for someone as great as Avraham Avinu was reason enough to give Moshe pause. Therefore, Hashem had to reassure him.

The Torah is teaching us a remarkable lesson in *hakaras hatov*, and something most of us strive hard to avoid. We see from this story that we must feel indebted to someone who does us a kindness even if he has his own reason for doing it. Often, we work very hard to try to ascribe a motivation to a benefactor that would seem to paint them as self-serving, or in the very least as not totally altruistic. Naturally, we do this to lessen our feeling of obligation to this person. This is wrong. The Torah is teaching us that we must appreciate any kindness that is done for us, irrespective of the benefactor's motivation.

Ignoring the Pain

He sees no iniquity in Yaakov, nor does He see transgressions in Yisroel, Hashem his God is with him and the friendship of the king is with them (23:21).

Rashi (ad loc) explains this to mean that Hashem is not exacting in His judgement of Bnei Yisroel; in His great love for them, he disregards their transgressions even when they sin. This *possuk's* reassuring expression of Hashem's kindness in judgement readily explains why it was chosen to be included in our liturgy on Rosh Hashanah, notwithstanding that the evil Bilaam is the source of this observation.

Yet, this verse doesn't seem to conform to normative Jewish thinking. On the contrary, we are taught that Hashem is extremely critical of the Jewish people; the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 50a) states that Hashem is exacting to a hairbreadth in His judgement of the righteous, and that anyone who says that Hashem disregards sin is forfeiting his life. How can Rashi then say that Hashem simply disregards our sins?

There are two dimensions to every sin. When a person sins, his actions represent a defect in his character, a flaw that must be repaired in order for him to perfect himself. With regard to this aspect of sin, Hashem is infinitely exacting; He allows no imperfection to be ignored, after all, that is why we were created and put on this earth – to perfect ourselves. Hashem, therefore, judges His people with the greatest strictness in order for us to cleanse ourselves of all flaws.

However, there is another dimension to sin, one that Hashem does disregard: The pain and insult that we cause Him, so to speak, by rebelling against Him and ignoring His demands of us. In truth, of course, Hashem is never affected by us, our *mitzvos* do not add to Him and our sins do not detract from Him. But as R' Chaim Volozhin explains

(*Nefesh Hachaim* 1:3); our actions have very real affects in the myriads of worlds that have been created. We add "light and holiness" and sustain these worlds by doing righteous acts. The whole construct of creation is an expression of Hashem's desire to have a relationship with mankind. The nature of this relationship is what is affected by our transgressions.

Thus, when Chazal say that on Rosh Hashanah Hashem ignores our sins, this is referring to the pain and hurt we have inflicted on our relationship with Him. He absolutely disregards the hurt from the pain that we have inflicted on the relationship by flouting His authority and rebelling against Him. He only judges us on the flaws in our character that have led to these transgressions; this is because He desires to see us perfect ourselves.

Did You Know...

This week's *parsha* includes the story of Bilaam (a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer) and Balak (the king of Moab). Balak feared that the Jews would attack his people and therefore employs Bilaam to curse them. Hashem forbids Bilaam from doing so and each time he tries he ends up showering the Jews with blessings instead. Here are some additional facts about this dark sorcerer:

1. One of the commonly known facts is that Bilaam was on a very high prophetic level, and there is actually a discussion comparing his prophecy to that of Moshe Rabbeinu's. The reason for this was because Hashem knew that the gentile nations would, in defense of their many sins, claim that it was only because they didn't have someone who was on Moshe's prophetic level to guide them, so he provided them with Bilaam (*Me'em Lo'ez Balak* 1 22:5).
2. Balak knew of Bilaam because they were from the same town, and Bilaam even prophesied that Balak would one day be king. Additionally, he knew that Bilaam was powerful because he had hired him before

in wars and they had been victorious (ibid).

3. At first, they tried performing various acts of sorcery on the Jews, but when those had no effect, they resorted to cursing. In actuality, Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam, and it would have been below him to consult Bilaam, but when he saw that witchcraft was ineffectual, he sent for him.
4. Another fairly well known fact is that the Gemara says that Bilaam knew the precise moment every day when Hashem is angry at the world. This precise moment is known to be in the first three hours of the day, and is debated as to whether it is 1/4 of a second, or even as little as 1/16 of a second. This tiny amount of time isn't enough for most curses, obviously, but he actually only needed enough time for the word "*kalem* – annihilate them." Interestingly, Hashem held back his anger at that time, otherwise the Jews would have been destroyed (*Me'em Lo'ez Balak* 1 22:6).
5. According to one source, Bilaam was actually Lavan (Yaakov's father-in-law). According to another source, he was Lavan's son, and yet others say that he was just metaphorically compared to Lavan

(*Sanhedrin* 105a).

6. Bilaam has no share in the world to come, and was deformed; he was lame in one of his legs, and was blind in one of his eyes (ibid).
7. As a dirty sorcerer, he performed sorcery with his loins. By means of certain phallic occult rites, he would call up spirits of the dead and cause them to settle upon it (ibid).
8. Showing an affinity for marketing, Bilaam was the architect of the plan to entice the Jews to sin with the women of Midian. He designed the tent situation in order for the women to lure the men in – old women selling silk outside, and young women selling inside for less (ibid).
9. Interestingly, all four of the Jewish ways to execute somebody (stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation) were used on him. They actually hung him over a fire, stoned him hanging there, and then cut his head off so he fell into the fire (*Sanhedrin* 106a).
10. Strangely, according to one opinion, Bilaam was only thirty-three years old when the Jewish people executed him (ibid).



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