



Sermon Tidbits

JUNE 26, 2017

Parashat Chukat

Pushing for Peace

Let me pass in your land (Numbers 21:22)

אעברה בארצך (במדבר כא:כב)

During senior White House advisor Jared Kushner and White House lead international negotiator Jason Greenblatt's [recent visit to Israel](#) to promote regional peace, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warmly welcomed his American guests and commented during their meeting that the present moment offers an "opportunity to pursue our common goals of security, prosperity and peace." While acknowledging that creating an environment for peace will [take time](#), all parties reaffirmed the commitment to advancing the goal of reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Netanyahu echoed the commitment to advancing the peace process that he made during President Trump's visit to Israel when he remarked, "I share this desire and the citizens of Israel share this desire; we want peace." In fact, peace has been a value cherished by the Jewish people since Moses led the nation in the desert.

Parashat Chukat records two separate efforts on Moses' part to negotiate with neighboring countries and avoid violence. As the Israelite nation progressed towards the Promised Land, their shortest path traversed the country of Edom – the descendants of Esau. The Edomites refused Moses' request to cross the country and instead threatened war. We later learn in Deuteronomy that Moses was divinely dissuaded from engaging Edom in battle and the Israelites instead took the long route and avoid Edom (see 20:14-21). Later in the parashah, Moses petitioned Sichon, king of the Emorites, for similar permission to travel through their land (21:21-22). Rashi (on verse 22) explains that, "Even though [the Israelites] were not commanded to engage them peacefully, they requested peace from them." However, the Emorites not only refused Moses' request, but instead made the fateful mistake of engaging in a military attack which led to their defeat.

In 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama proposed a negotiating framework for a peace agreement that Israel accepted. When the United States turned to Palestinian President Abbas to accept the same framework, [Abbas never responded](#). Instead, he effectively ended peace talks by signing a unity deal with Hamas. Since that time, the Palestinians have refused to negotiate with Israel, instead promoting violence, extolling extremism, and attempting to exert pressure on Israel in the international community.

While the Palestinians refuse to return to the negotiating table, Israel continues to take concrete steps to better Palestinian lives and foster an environment conducive to peace. These steps include signing recent agreements with the PA on water, electricity, and communications. According to [ABC News](#), Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, speaking at a security conference in Israel on the need for economic cooperation, said he was open to promoting Palestinian development as long as it does not threaten Israeli security. "I personally believe that the most important thing between people is mutual trust," Kahlon said, promising to continue to take steps to ease daily life for Palestinians wherever possible.

Moses pursued peace with the Emorites because he understood that peace always represents the best option for coexistence and prosperity. Israel has long followed Moses' example, by pursuing and promoting the value of peace, even when it lacks a peace partner. ■

A Massive Buildup

And Og went out (Numbers 21:33)

ויצא עוג (במדבר כא:לג)

In the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration announced its intention to sell five AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia, which at the time represented the largest foreign arms sale in U.S. history. The announcement was met with strong resistance both in Congress and from Israel. According to the [NY Times](#), then Prime Minister Menachem Begin expressed the Israeli Government's "profound regret and unreserved opposition" to the arms deal. While Congress ultimately approved the agreement, strong friends of Israel in Congress made the larger point that stands to this day: When considering significant sales of armaments to countries in the Middle East, the United States must consider the effects of those sales on Israel, America's strongest ally in the region. The very presence of significant arms in proximity to the Jewish nation presents a danger that must be addressed—an idea we find in a fantastic *aggadah* connected to Parashat Chukat.

A very brief passage at the end of Chukat describes a battle with Og, the king of Bashan. "And they turned and went up by the way of Bashan; and Og the king of Bashan went out against them." (Numbers 21:33). The Talmud, in Berachot 54b, relates an incredible midrash, which describes the massive scale of Og's military threat, explaining, "[Og] said: How large is the camp of Israel? Three parasangs. I will go and uproot a mountain of the size of three parasangs and cast it upon them and kill them. He went and uprooted a mountain of the size of three parasangs and carried it on his head. But the Holy One, blessed be He, sent ants which bored a hole in it, so that it sank around his neck. He tried to pull it off, but his teeth projected on each side, and he could not pull it off....Moses was ten cubits tall. He took an axe ten cubits long, leapt ten cubits into the air, and struck [Og] on his ankle and killed him." While many commentators interpret this incredible passage figuratively, Og, the king of Bashan, represents an awesome military force whose power demonstrated a threat to the very existence of the Jewish nation.

Imagine the great strength of a giant capable of lifting a rock that could single-handedly wipe out the entire Jewish camp! While today the notion of lifting such a large rock seems implausible, the specter of a military power on Israel's doorstep presenting a mortal threat to the Jewish State still persists. It is also precisely why the United States enacted into American law the concept of Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, which guarantees that Israel retain a military advantage in any potential face-off with other states in the region. For this reason, the United States must examine the impact of the recently announced arms sale to Saudi Arabia.

Earlier this year during his visit to Saudi Arabia, President Trump announced a massive arms agreement with Saudi Arabia. While initially valued at \$110 billion, overall sales could total as much as \$350 billion over the next decade, which would dwarf Israel's defense spending over the same period. As the administration forwards its proposals, Congress must closely examine the implications of the sale and ensure that the package serves America's national security interests. Congress must also demand concrete assurances that the sale will not undermine Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, and that Saudi capabilities are oriented only toward the threats that Iran and other radical elements pose to the Kingdom.

According to the Talmud, Moses and the Israelites barely and miraculously overcame the daunting threat of a massive enemy force. Today, we must do our part to ensure that Israel today relies not on miracles, but on its ability to protect and defend itself from potential aggressors. ■

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