

## Chukas - Rabbi Lerner - June 26, 2011

### The Battle Against Sichon and Og

21:21 *Yisrael sent out messengers to Sichon, the king of the Emori.* Earlier in the parsha in 20:14 messengers were sent to the king of Edom and there it says that Moshe sent them. Why the difference? **Rashi**: elsewhere in another account of this story in Devarim 2:26 Moshe says *I sent out messengers*; these pasukim are codependent and interchangeable - Moshe and Bnai Yisrael are interchangeable in this context - he is equal to all of Yisrael.

21:22-30: What was the message? *Let us pass through your lands, we will not take your water or pass through your fields; we will stay on the highway and not pass through your land. Sichon not only refuses permission, he initiates warfare. Bnai Yisrael wins the battle and inherits his lands. Bnai Yisrael take all of the land and dwell in all of the large and small cities, including Cheshbon which was the city of Sichon. Sichon had fought against the first king of Moav and had captured these lands from Moav. That is why it says that poets say "come to Cheshbon which will be built and established as the city of the Emori, etc."* What is this all about?

The Jews told the Emori that they were not part of their intended conquest. When we look at this version in Devarim 2:24-36 it says that "*Hashem said we should go, arise and take the lands of the Emori - I have delivered Sichon's land to you - go conquer it; go provoke a battle with him; today I will incite fear into all of the nations of the lands. I then sent the messengers to Sichon and proposed peace to him, that we would just stay on the road, we would buy food and water from him, it would be profitable for them; we just want to get to the Jordan River. Sichon did not say yes because God hardened his heart, since God wanted to give these lands to the Jewish people. Hashem said to me that I have begun to give over Sichon's land to you, go take the land.*" **Ramban**: If Hashem tells Moshe to initiate a war, why does Moshe send messengers to propose peace instead? How can he contradict God's command? These pasukim are out of place (an uncharacteristic approach by the Ramban); Hashem said these words to Moshe after he had sent peace feelers. Moshe first sent the delegation, and after they were rebuffed, then Hashem tells him to go to war; it could not be the other way around where Moshe ignores the command of Hashem.

Why does Hashem want the nation to capture these lands? In Chukas we first see the Jews attempt to have a peaceful transit through the land; we don't see Hashem harden Sichon's heart at it says in Devarim. Furthermore, **Rashi** comments on Moshe's message to Sichon that even though Moshe wasn't commanded to ask for peace by God, he did it anyway. **Ramban**: Rashi is wrong; later on, in Devarim 20:10-17 where it discusses how to conduct war against other nations, that first you should send out messengers to make peace and offer to have these nations subjugated with taxes; but if they do not listen, then you can kill all of the males; but this is only for distant lands, an optional war - for the seven nations of Canaan you kill all of the people. **Rashi** says that only in optional wars do you sue for peace, but the seven nations are to be destroyed completely. The **Ramban** says that Rashi is wrong - with every country you start off by offering peace and you subjugate them and they have to follow the seven mitzvos of bnai Noach - this was even the protocol with the seven nations of Canaan, a milchemes mitzvah; then if they don't accept, the distant lands you kill only the males, but in Canaan you kill all the people. So how does that work in this battle against Sichon? What kind of war was it?

**Ramban**: Sichon is an Emori and is one of the seven nations; Moshe offers peace first of his own accord; he didn't have to do this; the land of Sichon and Og are ultimately conquered

and settled, and all of the people were killed. That land was in God's plan to be part of Eretz Yisrael that was to be captured. But Moshe didn't initially want it because had they agreed to the peace plan, the Jews would have had to rule over all of these people; he felt the Jews would have their hands full with conquering the rest of the land and couldn't rule over these people as well. Hashem wanted them to have a Greater Israel, while Moshe wanted a smaller, more concentrated Israel from the sea to the river. Moshe had a right to take these additional lands, but it was not his ambition - he wanted the Jews to be more concentrated, closer together; in addition, these additional lands don't have the same degree of holiness as Eretz Yisrael. We see this after the conquest - had the two tribes of Reuven and Gad not wanted to settle there, Moshe would have left these lands desolate, and would have had all of the people settle on the other side of the Jordan. Moshe asked Sichon for peace, without insisting on making them subservient - he just wanted rights of passage; he did not want to conquer and control additional lands and peoples, even though he had the right to do that since they were one of the seven nations. Hashem had not said anything first to Moshe about these lands - this was Moshe's agenda. He wanted to prioritize Eretz Yisrael.

**Rashi:** Moshe was not commanded to sue for peace. Rashi says that these lands are part of Eretz Yisrael and therefore, how could Moshe offer peace? They were supposed to be killed as part of a milchemes mitzvah? **Maharal:** Moshe thought that now was not the time to conquer them even though it was part of Eretz Yisrael; they would just pass through first because Eretz Yisrael on the other side of the river was his priority - he had the rights to go through them with force, but he didn't want to - he didn't want to start trouble at this time. **Netziv:** David did something like this as well with Syria, and it was a mistake - he conquered Syria before he completed the conquest of the heartland of Israel - he should have conquered the complete holyland first, including Yerushalayim which was still under the control of the Yevusi. This is what Moshe is thinking, that the land on the west of the river is top priority and then the other side where Sichon resided would follow. But in this case, it was not what Hashem desired.

**Abarbanel:** there are a number of reasons Moshe asked for peace from Sichon. One reason is that Moshe was a lover of peace; he already knew from earlier in this parsha that he would not be allowed to cross the Jordan and conquer Eretz Yisrael; because of that, he was not as enthusiastic about starting preliminary battles now, since he was not going to be involved in the main battle against the seven nations; he was doing something against Hashem's desire. But Hashem doesn't want what Moshe has planned; He wants Moshe to fight and conquer these lands; that is why He hardens Sichon's heart and forces the battle, having him come out belligerently to fight. Hashem had wanted to appease Moshe's heart; He wanted Moshe to experience part of the victory against the seven nations; He wanted Moshe to taste the fruits of victory against the seven nations. Sichon and Og were much stronger than the rest of Canaan. Hashem wanted to destroy these two, and then Midian as well; He wanted Moshe to rejoice with these victories, because they were promised to Avraham, even though they live on the other side of the Jordan River. In addition, Moshe thought that since Sichon was strongest, if he bent and let them through, the other nations on the other side of the Jordan would be frightened and let the Jews in, and then pack up and leave. God did not want this; He initiated a war to terrify all of the other nations after the fall of these strongest of nations.

21:26: *Cheshbon was the city of Sichon....* Cheshbon was originally part of Moav, and had it remained part of Moav, Moshe and the Jews would not have been able to conquer it because it was promised as an inheritance for Lot's descendants; as part of Moav they could

never have touched it, but Sichon fought against the first king of Moav and took the land away; Sichon had laid waste to Cheshbon in his war and then rebuilt it as his capital city.

*21:27: Come to Cheshbon, the city rebuilt and known as the city of Sichon. A fire and flame had come forth from there; Woe to the people of Moav who had been defeated by Sichon.* Who were these poets? Bilaam and his father - it was a mocking song, derisive of Moav and the god of Moav. **Ramban**: Chemosh was their god - they placed all of their faith in this god, and they were made into fools; the Torah is making fun of this god, with all of their sons killed or on the run, and all of their daughters captured; their god could do nothing for them, their nation was lost.

Gemorra in Bava Basra (78) - what do these pasukim mean? These poets are the people who rule over their evil inclinations. This language of the city being called Cheshbon can mean something else entirely - Cheshbon means calculation, introspection - it was called this to teach a lesson to look at what is going on and make a calculation. **Maharal**: if Sichon had not had such power to capture part of Moav and build this city, he wouldn't have been so arrogant to consider defeating the Jews and would not have gone out to fight against the Jews. He did not make the right cheshbon, the correct calculation of where his victory had come from; he attributed it to his own power instead of God, and was therefore arrogant enough to think he could take on God's nation and win.