

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Devarim

Causes for War

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אַל תִּצַר אֶת מוֹאָב וְאַל תִּתְנֶר בָּם מִלְחָמָה כִּי לֹא אֶתַּן לָךְ מֵאֶרְצוֹ יִרְשָׁה כִּי לְבְנֵי לֹטֹט נָתַתִּי אֶת עַר יִרְשָׁה.

Hashem said to me, "Do not oppress Moav and do not provoke war with them, for I shall not give you an inheritance from their land, for to the descendants of Lot I have given Ar as an inheritance."

EXAMINING MOSHE'S THOUGHTS

Commenting on this command from Hashem to Moshe not to wage war with Moav, the Gemara elaborates:¹

What thought occurred to Moshe to wage war without being instructed to do so?² Rather, Moshe reasoned a kal vachomer, as follows: If, with regards to the Midianites, who only assisted Moav in their aggression against Bnei Yisrael,³ the Torah commanded to attack them,⁴ the Moavim themselves should certainly be deserving of retaliation!

Tosafos⁵ raise a basic question on the above Gemara. Moav was not the only nation concerning whom Hashem instructed Moshe not to wage war. The same directive was issued regarding two other nations – Edom⁶ and Amon.⁷ Why, ask Tosafos, does the Gemara not likewise probe why Moshe would have seen fit to wage war against those nations, necessitating being told by Hashem not to do so?

1 Bava Kama 38a.

2 To the extent that Hashem had to command him not to.

3 Referring to the episode of Baal Peor, see Bamidbar perek 25.

4 Ibid. pasuk 17-18.

5 Bava Kama 38b s.v. *Moavim*.

6 The descendants of Esav, as described in our perek, pasuk 4-5.

7 Pasuk 19.

THREE NATIONS – TWO REASONS

In preface to his response to Tosafos' question, the Meshech Chochmah considers another possibility as to why Hashem had to tell Moshe not to provoke these nations. Let us ask: How do we know that this was in response to some reason based on which Moshe might think they deserved war? Perhaps it was simply to preempt any initiation of aggression on the part of Bnei Yisrael themselves, who would naturally assume that these nations were no different than any of the others who were opposing their entry into Eretz Yisrael and hence deserving of an aggressive response!

Indeed, says the Meshech Chochmah, with regards to the nations of Edom and Amon, it was out of concern for the people's actions that the command was given, and it is for this reason the Gemara does not ask why Moshe would think that those two nations were deserving of war. It is only with regards to Moav that the command not to wage war was in response to Moshe's thoughts, and hence the Gemara only investigates why Moshe would have thought that Moav deserved war.

The question is: How do we know that these commands derived from two different backgrounds – Moshe's reasoning with regards to Moav and the people's natural response with regards to Edom and Amon?

Not surprisingly, the answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is in the pesukim.

לאמר – To SAY OR NOT TO SAY

The pesukim in our perek where Hashem commands Moshe not to provoke Edom and Amon read:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר... וְאֵת הָעַם צִו לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים בְּגִבּוֹל אֶחָיִכֶם בְּנֵי עֵשָׂו... אַל תִּתְּנֶנּוּ בָּם.

וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר... וְקִרְבַּת מוֹל בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן אַל תִּצְרֶם וְאַל תִּתְּנֶנּוּ בָּם.

Hashem said to me, saying... You shall command the people saying, "You are passing thought the borders of your brothers, the children of Esav... Do not provoke them."⁸

Hashem spoke to me, saying... You shall approach the children of Amon, do not distress them and do not provoke them.⁹

In the first case, regarding Edom, the pasuk explicitly states that Moshe is to command the people not to provoke them. This clearly indicates that the command is coming to forestall any act that may be instigated by the people, not by Moshe. But what about Amon? There, the command is directed to Moshe! Why do we say that even in that case the concern was one of action by the people?

The answer lies in the introductory word "לאמר" in pasuk 17, regarding Amon. Although this word is commonly rendered simply as "saying", its literal meaning is "to say." This means that a message or command which is given "לאמר" is one that is meant to be said to others. Accordingly, Hashem's words to Moshe concerning Amon were likewise to

8 Pesukim 2, 3 and 5.

9 Pesukim 17 and 19.

be said to the people, for there too, the people were the concern. In contrast, looking back at our opening pasuk regarding Moav, the pasuk does not use the word “לאמר”; Moshe simply says that “Hashem spoke to me.” The absence of “לאמר” indicates that this particular command regarding Moav was for Moshe’s consideration alone. That is why the Gemara only considers what Moshe may have been thinking with regards to Moav, and that is the answer to Tosafos’ question.¹⁰

Moshe’s Blessing of Eichah

וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר לֹא אוּכַל לְבַדִּי שָׂאת אֶתְכֶם. ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּכֶם
הַיּוֹם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרַב... אֵיכָה אִשָּׂא לְבַדִּי טְרָחְכֶם וּמִשְׁאַכְּם וְרִיבְכֶם.

I said to you at that time, saying, “I cannot carry you alone.” Hashem, your God, has multiplied you and behold! You are like the stars of the heaven in abundance. How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens and your quarrels?” (1:9, 10, 12)

A simple reading of these pesukim describes Moshe recalling how, upon surveying the multitude of the Jewish people before him, he declared that it was impossible to carry all their burdens by himself. However, says the Meshech Chochmah, all of this changes when we take note of the word “לאמר” at the end of pasuk 9. As we noted in our previous discussion, the literal translation of “לאמר” is “to say.” How does that fit in with Moshe’s words here? These are things that he himself is saying to Bnei Yisrael. In what way are they also words that they, too, are “to say”?

The Meshech Chochmah illustrates with a parable of someone who is blessed with many children, a blessing that naturally brings with it the many accompanying concerns of raising them and providing for them. Yet, with all those concerns and commitments, what does that person wish for his children? That they be blessed with the very same problems! For ultimately, all of these problems are nothing other than dealing with an abundance of blessing.

Here, too, when Moshe recalls his response to the miraculous increase in the Jewish people, accompanied by the formidable and ultimately insurmountable task of carrying the burden of their wellbeing by himself, he presents it to them as something for them “to say” as well. Moshe is blessing the people that all their leaders in the future should likewise behold their innumerable issues and endless needs and be similarly overwhelmed, declaring, as Moshe did, “How can I alone carry you?”

In his reference to these future leaders, the Meshech Chochmah makes specific mention

¹⁰ Perhaps this may also explain why although there was a command not to provoke any of these three nations, it is only with respect to Moav that Hashem also tells Moshe not to wage war. Although the people might instigate aggression on a local level of their own accord, the decision to wage a war could only be arrived at by Moshe; hence, it is mentioned only in connection with the nation concerning whom Moshe felt that this was warranted – Moav.

of Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu. The choice of these two Neviim is clearly on account of the fact that, like Moshe, they too, exclaimed “eichah,”¹¹ but not of the same kind as Moshe. Yeshayahu’s “eichah” was in response to the people’s steep moral decline, while Yirmiyahu’s was in response to their terrible tragedy and exile. This means that, ultimately, Moshe’s blessing is not to the future leaders of the Jewish people, but to the people themselves, that they be worthy of having their leaders exclaim “eichah” in response to their outstanding success, not their appalling downfall.

We look forward to a time when Moshe’s “eichah of blessing” will not only be reclaimed and reinstated, but that he will be joined in its exclamation by Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, together with all of our other leaders!

11 Yeshayahu 1:21 and Eichah 1:1.