

Parashat Chukat, 5772, 2012:

No Act of Kindness Goes Unrewarded

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya, and in honor of the joyous birth of a baby girl to my children, Devorah and Zevie Burger.

We are all familiar with the popular sardonic quote: “No good deed goes unpunished.” It has been attributed to several well-known individuals including the British playwright, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the American banker and philanthropist, Andrew Mellon (1855-1937), and the Academy Awards winning Jewish Austro-Hungarian born American filmmaker, artist, and journalist, Billy Wilder (1906-2002). In essence this wry quote means that no matter how positively envisioned, a would-be good deed will more often than not have negative ramifications and, thereby, be punished.

Judaism, however, takes a decidedly different stance to even positive thoughts, let alone the performance of actual exemplary deeds:

The Holy One Blessed be He accounts positive thoughts (*machshava tovah*) as if they had achieved complete fruition (*Tosefta, Masechet Peah*, Lieberman ed., I:4)

Positive thoughts are combined with actual actions [thereby enhancing the depth and meaning of the action] (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Peah*, Chapter I)

Good intention is combined with deed, for it is said: “Then they that feared the L-rd spoke one with another: and the L-rd hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for them that feared the L-rd, and that thought upon His name.” [Sefer Malachi 3:16] Now, what is the meaning of “that thought upon His name?” — Said R. Assi: “Even if one [merely] thinks of performing a commandment but is forcibly prevented [from doing so,] the Torah ascribes it to him as though he has performed it.” (*Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 40a*, translation, *Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

Our *parasha* contains the fascinating example of Og, the King of Bashan, whose intentions regarding a particular act were steeped in evil - even though the act itself resulted in a positive outcome. We first encounter Og in *Sefer Bereishit* 14:13, where, according to Midrashic tradition, it was he who informed Avram (Avraham) of his nephew Lot's capture:

And the fugitive came and he told Abram the Hebrew, and he was living in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshkol and the brother of Aner, who were Abram's confederates. (This and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) summarized the relevant Midrashim on this verse, and simultaneously revealed Og's true intentions:

“And the fugitive came”: According to its simple meaning, this was Og, who escaped from the battle, and that is what is referred to in (*Sefer Devarim* 3:11): “Only Og survived from the rest of the Rephaim.” And that is the meaning of “survived,” that Amraphel and his allies did not kill him when they smote the Rephaim in Ashteroth-Karnaim [*Midrash Tanchuma*, Chukat 25]. The Midrash *Bereishit Rabbah* [explains]: “This is Og, who escaped from the Generation of the Flood, and this is the meaning of “from the rest of the Rephaim,” as it is said: (above 6: 4): “The Nephilim were on the earth, etc.” **And he [Og] intended that Abram should be killed and he would marry Sarah** (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 42:8).

Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19:32, re-emphasized Og's intention to have Avram killed so that he could marry Sarah, and added a crucial detail for understanding Og's story and our overall topic: “The Holy One Blessed be He gave him [i.e. Og] reward for his journey [to Avram] and he, therefore, lived an inordinate amount of time...”

Given the Midrash's portrayal of the “story behind the story,” we are now ready to examine the underlying meaning of two quizzical *pasukim* (verses) in our *parasha*:

Then they [i.e. the Jewish people] turned and headed north toward the Bashan. Og, the king of Bashan, came out toward them with all his people, to wage war at Edrei. The L-rd said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I have delivered him, his people, and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites who dwells in Heshbon.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 21:34-35)

We are initially stymied by Hashem's declaration to Moshe: "Do not fear him [Og], for I have delivered him, his people, and his land into your hand." After all, it would appear that Og was a relatively minor impediment on our ancestor's grand journey to the Promised Land, especially when viewed from the vantage points of the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds! Why, then, did Moshe need this direct statement and reassurance of Hashem's protection? Didn't he already know that the *Schechinah* (Divine Presence) was constantly protecting the Jewish people? Once again, *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* helps us to understand the source of Moshe's fear and the reasoning inherent in Hashem's declaration to him:

When Moshe came to wage war [against Og,] he was overcome by fear and he said: "I am 120 years old, and this one [i.e. Og] is over 500 years old! If he did not have [great] merit, he never would have lived for all these years!" [Therefore,] the Holy One Blessed be He said to Moshe: "Do not fear him [Og], for I have delivered him, his people, and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites who dwells in Heshbon." (Ibid.)

Here, too, Rashi's commentary on our above-stated *pasuk* further clarifies Moshe's trepidation regarding Og:

"Do not fear him": Moses was afraid to fight [against him] lest the merit of Abraham advocate for him, as it says, "The refugee came" (Sefer Bereishit 14:13) - this was Og who had escaped from the Rephaim, who were smitten by Chedorlaomer and his allies at Ashteroth Karnaim, as it says, "only Og, the king of Bashan, was left of the remnant of the Rephaim" (Sefer Devarim 3:11). - [Midrash Tanchuma Chukat 24, Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19:32]

Given all of the above-cited sources, and Rashi's trenchant analyses, let us now summarize "the story of Og":

1. Og lived a highly unusual amount of time, perhaps as long as 500 years. This length of time was unheard of after the Great Flood that had destroyed the world.
2. Og was the fugitive who survived a huge battlefield conflagration and informed Avram that his nephew, Lot, had been captured during the course of the battle.
3. Og's intention upon informing Avram of Lot's capture was diabolical in nature. His plan and goal were quite simple: Have Avram leave his stronghold, and go to war so that he could be killed in the subsequent battle. Afterwards, he would steal Sarah away and "marry her."
4. Even though Og's intentions were totally malevolent in nature, the outcome of his actual act was wholly positive: Avram saved Lot and his extended family was complete once again.
5. Hashem judged Og's act as ultimately meritorious. Thus, he was rewarded with long-life and great power as the King of Bashan.

HaRav Yaakov Moshe Charlop *zatzal* (1883-1951) was, perhaps, Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook's *zatzal* (1865–1935) greatest disciple. He developed a profound practical lesson from Og's story from which we can all learn:

There is a great lesson that may be derived from this story: Even though Og's intention was pure evil – i.e. that Avraham should be killed in the war and then he [Og] would take Sarah – nonetheless, since his action resulted in a positive outcome for Avraham, it was considered to be a meritorious act of great distinction for him (*nechshav hadavar l'Og l'zechut gadolah*). Thus, Moshe was afraid of him [Og] – since he also had the merit of Avraham on his side. As a result, the Holy One Blessed be He reassured Moshe and explicitly told him not to be afraid. From all of this we may see [i.e. derive] the greatness of any act of kindness – even if the intention behind the act was woefully wanting.

With Hashem's help, may each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to perform acts of kindness (*chesed*) that are authentic both in their intention and performance. Then, perhaps, we will finally see the fulfillment of King David's stirring words in *Sefer Tehillim* 89:3: "For I said, 'Forever will it [i.e. the world] be built with kindness; as the heavens, with which You will establish Your faithfulness.'" *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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