

# Haftarot Unrolled: Chukat

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## The Diplomatic Solution

Parshat Chukat describes a political incident that is referenced in the Haftarah of Chukat, which took place some three hundred years later. As the Jewish People approached the Land of Israel from the south-east, they needed to pass through lands belonging to other nations. Moshe sent his diplomatic envoys to ask for permission to do so. Edom, the nation on the south, refused to let them pass, and, per G-d's instructions, they respected their wishes and Moshe led them on a long detour around their lands. However, when they approached the land of the Emori, G-d told Moshe:

קומו סעו ועברו את נחל ארנון ראה נתתי בידך את סיחון מלך חשבון האמרי ואת ארצו החל רש והתגר בו מלחמה: היום הזה אחל תת פחדך ויראתך על פני העמים תחת כל השמים אשר ישמעון שמעך ורגזו וחלו מפניך:

Go, travel, cross the river Arnon. See, I have given over to you Sichon king of Cheshbon the Emori, and his land; begin occupying and start a war with him. Today I will begin putting the fear and awe of you upon all the nations under the sky, that will hear your tale, and will fail before you." (Devarim 2:24)

Part of G-d's plan for the conquest of the Land of Israel is to have the Jewish People win a decisive war against one of the strongest nations in the area. They would thus earn a reputation for being so strong and powerful that it would utterly destroy the morale of all the nations in the area, and make conquest much easier.

One would expect that, given this insight into G-d's plan, that Moshe would seek a pretext for attacking the Emori in order to start this war and carry out the plan. However, that is not what he does. Our Parsha tells us:

וישלח ישראל מלאכים אל סיחון מלך האמרי לאמר: אעברה בארצך לא נוטה בשדה ובכרם לא נשתה מי באר בדרך המלך נלה עד אשר נעבר גבלך:

**Israel sent messengers** to Sichon king of Emori, saying, let us pass through your land. We will not trespass in fields or vineyards, we will not drink well water. We will walk on the highway, until we cross your territory. (Bamidbar 21:21)

Moshe sent diplomatic envoys to the Emori even though he knew that they would refuse his overtures. Even though he was told by G-d Himself that there will be a war, a war that is necessary for the ultimate success of the Jewish People, he nevertheless first attempted a diplomatic solution.

The diplomatic effort failed – as G-d had predicted – and Moshe fought the Emori and won that decisive victory that they needed.

Similarly, in the Haftarah, Yiftach was appointed to fight a war against the nation of Amon, who had attacked Israel unprovoked. However, instead of immediately gathering his army

and planning the campaign, he sends diplomatic envoys to the enemy, not only once, but twice:

וַיִּזְכֹּף עוֹד יַפְתָּח וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָכִים אֶל מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן

**Yiftach once again sent messengers** to the king of B'nei Amon. (Shoftim 11:14)

One might wonder how the Torah views Moshe's actions. Being that he was told that the war with the Emori is both inevitable and necessary, what was Moshe's motivation in sending those envoys? Was it a matter of propriety? Was it a lack of faith in G-d's plan? Was it a waste of time?

Yiftach, too - being that he was appointed to be a military leader and not a negotiator, what was his motivation in sending several sets of envoys? Was it a necessary first step, a waste of time, or even a show of weakness?

The Midrash gives its value judgment of their actions in pursuing a diplomatic solution:

גדול שלום שאפי' בשעת מלחמה צריכין שלום שנאמר (דברים כ) כי תקרב אל עיר וגו' ואומר (שם דברים/ב) ואשלח מלאכים ממדבר קדמות וגו' ואומר (שופטים יא) השיבה אתהן בשלום  
Great is peace that even at a time of war, we need peace, as it says, "When you approach a city to do war upon it, you should first call to her in peace", and "I sent messengers from the eastern desert...", and "Return them for peace". (Midrash Bamidbar Rabba 11:6)

The Midrash says that diplomacy is necessary even "at a time of war", even when war is inevitable. The two examples it brings are that of Moshe sending envoys to the Emori, and that of Yiftach sending envoys to the king of Amon.

Thus, according to the Torah, one must always seek a diplomatic solution. One must always seek dialogue and attempt to resolve disputes using logic and reason. This is a value in and of itself, even when its failure is inevitable. The ideal of civilized discourse between nations must not be put aside due to pragmatic considerations and the cynicism of experience.

Therefore both the Parsha and the Haftarah go out of their way to show us that the leaders of the Jewish People sent diplomatic envoys to their enemies.

And yet, when diplomacy fails – as it does in both the Parsha and the Haftarah - and war becomes necessary, we fight to win.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל