

Chukat: Do History and Global Warfare Affect Redemption?

As our nation neared the doorstep of Israel, major regional wars erupted in the East bank of the Jordan river. The Torah doesn't provide the actual timelines of these conflicts in relation to our arrival, but it does juxtapose these battles to our entrance into Israel. Evidently, these wars were part of the larger divine choreography of Jewish history.

During the war, fierce battles were waged between Moav and a branch of Emori commanded by Sichon, a despotic king who was also a mighty warrior. When Sichon's forces trounced Moav, they captured huge tracts of land, including a major metropolis called Cheshbon. This was no small skirmish, but a major regional military conflagration which profoundly shaped Jewish history.

In part, these battles introduced us to divine miracles of the battlefield. Our untrained and inexperienced army's defeat of a renowned military superpower augured well for our ensuing entry into Israel, and for our upcoming battles with over 30 ferocious warlords. This preliminary miracle provided theological mettle and national faith to overcome the daunting military challenges which awaited us. Our triumph over the feared armies of Sichon was a theological "dry run" for the more difficult and bloody battles which would be waged in the mountains and valleys of Hashem's chosen land. The Sichon victory was merely an opening act in preparation for the main show, in Israel proper.

More surprising than the actual recording of these wars in the Torah, is the level of detail which the Torah provides. The Torah first reports of a diplomatic summit immediately preceding the war: על כן יאמרו המושלים: בואו חשבון. Subsequently, The Torah voices lament for the great losses of Moav "whose women have been widowed and whose children have been captured": אוי לך מואב אבדת עם כמוש נתן בניו פלטים ובנותיו בשבית. Finally, the Torah provides an extensive roster of lands ceded to the Emori victors including: the territory from Cheshbon to Divon, from Nashim to Nofach, all the way to Meidva. Quite frankly, these inconsequential details seem irrelevant and superfluous. Evidently, the wars symbolize something larger about Jewish redemption, and by detailing them, the Torah calls our attention to this larger message.

Who Will Win?

To the naked eye, these wars seemed completely unrelated to Jewish history. However, to the prophetic eye, these battles held great consequences. As Moav were our long-lost cousins, descended from Avraham's nephew Lot, we were barred from any aggression toward them. Had Moav prevailed in their war with Sichon and retained their lands, the territory would have remained, effectively, "off limits" to Jewish history.

There were no such restrictions governing the Emori. Though they didn't inhabit Israel proper, and were halachikally allowed to remain in their lands, culturally, they were part of a larger Cana'anite society whose barbaric and idolatrous behavior hindered the advance of monotheism in the region. Sichon's victory over Moav and the resulting land concessions, opened the doors for our own conquest of these lands. Though Jewish presence in the East Bank of the Jordan river always fluctuated, one day, these tracts of land will be part of Greater Israel. The wars between Sichon and Moav were not incidental. History was conspiring to advance Jewish redemption. You just need the proper lens to recognize it.

Synchronicity

We distill and propel human history and as we march to Yerushalayim humanity also advances its ideal historical reality. Consequentially, the arc of human history must veer toward the trajectory of Jewish redemption. During gallus, when we were sidelined from history, these two arcs were disconnected. However, as Jewish redemption awakens, the synchronicity between human history and Jewish redemption becomes more obvious. So it was 3300 years ago in the plains of Moav, and so it has been over the past 400 years in Western civilization at large.

Redemption doesn't occur in a historical vacuum and, certainly, our final redemption, which will rehabilitate all of humanity, didn't develop on the sidelines of history. Several major revolutions of the past four centuries paved our road back to Yerushalayim.

Democracy

Daily, after praying for our return to Yerushalayim, we pray for the restoration of "just" leaders and for ethical systems of government. One day, Moshiach will install a moral and benevolent monarchy, regulated by the fear of Heaven. Until that day, however, our return to the city of justice must be founded upon an ethical political system. Historically, monarchies perpetuated class inequality and repressed human freedom. The world hadn't yet developed a moral political system which could brace our return to Israel. Humanity hadn't yet imagined democracy.

Gradually, by the 18th century, after centuries of human suffering, humanity replaced oppressive monarchies with just and equitable democracies. We were now equipped with a relatively fair and moral political system to assure an ethical return to sovereignty. One day, a king named Moshiach will arrive, but until that day we must employ democracy to rebuild the city of justice.

Colonialism

As we left Yerushalayim for exile we were divinely sworn not to attempt a militarily uprising, but instead, to patiently await a peaceful return to our homeland. Throughout history, this oath presented an insurmountable barrier to our return to Israel. No ruler of this hotly contested land would willingly cede it back to us and we couldn't military recover it. We were dead-ended into waiting for Moshiach.

Beginning in the 16th century, Europe began to colonize much of the underdeveloped third world. Beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries it slowly became evident to the colonial powers that sovereignty must be restored to local ethnic populations. This opened the door to an internationally authorized Jewish return to Yerushalayim without any Jewish military aggression. In 1917, the Balfour declaration invited us to walk through the door of history without violating our historical oaths. Without Colonialism, we would still be barred by oaths prohibiting an armed revolution.

Pax Americana

During the same period that Colonialism was fading, the United States was emerging as a dominant global superpower. Industrialism, Capitalism, America's role in WWI, WWII and the defeat of Communism secured America's role as the preeminent international superpower,

which enjoyed widespread diplomatic and cultural influence. US support for Israel, especially during the early years of our fledgling state was invaluable to our survival. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 in Philadelphia enabled the Declaration of Independence in Yerushalayim in 1948. Once again, world history was aligning with Jewish history.

Nationalism

As organized religion collapsed during the 19th century, national identity began to dominate human consciousness. For the first time, people identified more with their state and their national heritage, and less with their religious affiliation. Inspired by this surge of Nationalism, Jews began to think of their own nationhood, land, and ethnic identity even though, unfortunately, many were abandoning classic religious behavior. The rise of worldwide Nationalism ignited the rise of Jewish Nationalism, drawing millions of Jews back home.

Redemption doesn't occur in a historical vacuum. The wars in Moav were necessary for our advance into Israel. Similarly, the rise of Democracy, the advent of Colonialism, the emergence of the United States as a world power and the popularity of Nationalism were all crucial in returning Hashem's people to their chosen homeland.

Cultural Demolition and Reconstruction

Though history, in general, facilitates redemption, wars in particular, unlock hidden redemptive potential¹. Hashem prefers a world of peace and harmony, and wars represent historical malfunction. Great wars follow severe cultural deterioration. When decayed values become deeply embedded society collapses into war. Wars expose moral corruption and social decomposition.

These cultural voids which appear in the wake of wars, requires Jewish redemption to restore moral spirit, and to repair the fallen and contaminated human condition. The horrific wars of twentieth century exposed the moral and religious decay of European culture. Around the turn of the 20th century, European capitals such as Paris, Barcelona and Vienna brimmed with bright optimism that a modern cosmopolitan Europe driven by democracy, tolerance, capitalism, science and culture

¹ See Rav Kook, Orot, Orot Mei'ofel, The War, parts 5,8,9.

would no longer experience war and hatred. Yet, as this culture was godless and constructed upon secular values, it slowly degenerated into the dark doctrines of hatred and fear, leading to both horrible wars and to appalling genocides which took the lives of hundreds of millions. The wars and mass executions of the 20th century laid bare the moral hollowness of the modern world. The resulting moral void desperately cried out for spirit, and for God.

Within this moral vacuum we were invited back to Yerushalayim, to repair the moral diseases of the 20th century and to bring Hashem back to our world. Great wars leave voids and redemptive potential is unleashed.