

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Devarim**  
**August 13, 2016**

**פרשת דברים**  
**ט' באב תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 1:1-3:22

In this *parasha*, Moshe recounts to the Bnei Yisrael different episodes from the 40 years in the wilderness; he gives them encouragement as they look ahead to their upcoming conquest of the land of Canaan.

One of the episodes Moshe recounts is the defeat of Og, King of the Bashan. The original story occurs in *Bemidbar* (Numbers) chapter 21, and is quite simple. Og goes out to meet the Bnei Yisrael with his armies; Hashem tells Moshe not to fear him; and the Israelites rout Og and his men.

Moshe retells the story in this week's *parasha* (3:1-3):

א וּנָפְנוּ וַנֵּעַל, דְּרֹךְ הַבָּשָׁן; וַיֵּצֵא עֹוג מֶלֶךְ-הַבָּשָׁן לְקָרְאתָנוּ הוּא וְכָל-עַמּוֹ,  
לְמִלְחָמָה--אֲדָרְעִי. ב וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי, אֶל-תִּירָא אֹתוֹ--כִּי בְיָדְךָ נִתְּתִי אֹתוֹ  
וְאֶת-כָּל-עַמּוֹ, וְאֶת-אֶרְצוֹ; וַעֲשִׂיתָ לוֹ--כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי,  
אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב בְּחֶשְׁבוֹן. ג וַיִּתֶּן ה' אֶל-לִהְיוֹנוּ בְיָדֵנוּ, גַּם אֶת-עֹוג מֶלֶךְ-הַבָּשָׁן--  
וְאֶת-כָּל-עַמּוֹ; וַנִּכְהוּ, עַד-בִּלְתִּי הַשָּׂאִיר-לוֹ שְׁרִיד.

**1** Then we turned, and went up the way to Bashan; and Og the king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. **2** And Hashem said to me: 'Do not fear him; for I have delivered him, and all his people, and his land, into your hand; and you shall do to him as you did to Sichon king of the Amorites, who dwelt at Cheshbon.' **3** So Hashem our God delivered into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan,

and all his people; and we smote him until none was left to him remaining.

Moshe then goes on to talk about other things, but eight verses later returns to the subject of Og (3:11):

יֵא כִּי רַק-עוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן, נִשָּׂאֵר מִיְתֵר הַרְפָּאִים--הִנֵּה עָרְשׁוֹ עָרֵשׁ בְּרִזָּל,  
הָלָה הוּא בְּרִבַּת בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן : תִּשַׁע אַמּוֹת אָרְכָּהּ, וְאַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת רְחִבָּהּ--  
בְּאַמַּת-אִישׁ.

**11** For only Og, King of the Bashan, remained of the remnant of the Rephaim [purportedly, a race of giants]; behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron; is it not in Rabbah of the children of Ammon? Nine cubits was the length thereof, and four cubits the breadth of it, after the cubit of a man. [A cubit is equivalent to between 18 and 24 inches.]

Why this focus on the size of Og? Perhaps it is to point out the “David versus Goliath” character of some of the Israelites’ conquests. Here was a man that the Torah describes as being at least 12 feet tall, but the Bnei Yisrael defeated him and his army nonetheless.

The Rabbis of the Midrash do not like Og very much. Often the Midrash speaks in hyperbole, using biblical characters to emphasize positive and negative personality traits. At least four different *midrashim* identify Og as the *palit* (fugitive) who told Avraham that his nephew Lot had been captured in war (*Bereshit* [Genesis] 14:13). This sounds like a good thing, but the *midrash* in both *Bereshit Rabba* and *Devarim Rabba* attribute an ulterior motive to him: “Og said, ‘This Avraham is a zealot. Now I will tell him that his nephew has been captured, and he will wage war to free him. He will be killed in battle and I will take his wife Sarah.’ Said Hashem, ‘Because you thought to kill the righteous Avraham, by your life, you will see hundreds of thousands of his descendants.’”

Another *midrash* (Babylonian Talmud Tractate Niddah 61a) explains why Hashem needed to tell Moshe not to fear Og, a statement that does not appear when the Bnei Yisrael faced other adversaries: “Moshe thought, ‘Perhaps the merit of our ancestor Avraham will protect Og, for Og had informed him of Lot’s capture.’” According to these *midrashim*, Og is over 500 years old when he encounters the Bnei Yisrael. The *midrash* in *Bamidbar Rabba* says that this is why Moshe feared him: “I am 120 years old; he is over 500. If he had no merit, he would not have lived so many years.”

Various *midrashim* describe Og attempting to lift a mountain and throw it atop the Bnei Yisrael to destroy them all; Hashem then foils this plot in a variety of ways, such as having a worm bore through the mountain, or having Moshe toss a pebble at the mountain, causing an avalanche to descend upon Og.

The authors of all of these *midrashim* seem to present Og as a complex person: one who does something correct, but for the wrong reason, and then needs to fight off intruders, descendants of the man he tried to wrong, who must seem as grasshoppers to him. In the end, despite his great size, he is defeated by the people of God, as they have God on their side. Perhaps a moral of the story may be that “right trumps might.”

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- When the Torah says that Og’s bed was “nine cubits tall and four cubits wide,” do you think it means this literally or figuratively?
- What is the point of the Torah describing how big Og was, and where his bed could be found at that time?
- What other moral messages might the Torah be giving us in the story of the defeat of Og?