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Aharon *ben* Benzion HaKohen *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Og and Human Nature

PARSHAS LECH LECHA 5777

The celebrated giant Og makes an appearance in this week's *parshah* in connection with the world war waged by the ancient powers in the environs of Eretz Yisrael. Lot, Avraham's nephew, is captured in the course of this campaign. The news of his capture was delivered to him by what the Torah describes as a "*palit*" (escapee), as it states: וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-לוֹט... בְּרֶאֱחֵי... – "And they took Lot... the nephew of Avram... and the *palit* came and told Avram the Ivri... And Avram heard that his kinsman was abducted..." (*Bereishis 14:12-14*). The *medrash* (*Bereishis Rabbah 42:8*) identifies this figure as Og and states that in recognition of his efforts, he was rewarded with long life. Thus, he was more than 500 years old when he later confronted Moshe Rabbeinu (*cf. Bamidbar Rabbah 19:32*). In fact, so substantial was his deed that the latter feared he would be unable to prevail over Og due to his merit of having informed Avraham (*Rashi, Bamidbar 21:34*).

Ulterior Motives

All well and good so far. The only issue arises from some other pertinent information that Rashi provides (*Bereishis 14:13*). Og's intentions, apparently, were not as pure as the wind-driven snow. He did not bring the information to Avraham out of concern for Lot's welfare; rather, he hoped to lure Avraham into the war. In this way, he hoped, Avraham would be killed, and thus his wife Sarah would become available to Og himself!

Which begs the obvious question: This is the deed for which Og was so richly rewarded and whose merit caused such concern for the eminently more righteous Moshe Rabbeinu? True, the information did prove helpful to Avraham and his family; but in the end, it was little more than a nefarious plot to eliminate Avraham and take his wife.

R' Leib Chasman (*Ohr Yahel, vol. III, p. 34-36*) understands that the Torah, in relating these events, is providing us with much valuable insight. The truth, he explains, is that we should not be too surprised. Of course, Og was far from an exemplary character; nonetheless, his behavior is not so atypical of many, if not most, people. As brutal as it may sound, the reality of human nature is that people are inherently selfish, even to a point bordering on viciousness. This is, after all, the assertion of the *passuk* itself, which states: עֵינִי פָּרָא אָדָם יִגְלַד – "A person, from birth, is as a wild donkey" (*Iyov 11:12*).

The extent to which a person – barring outside deterrents – would go to secure his own interests is illustrated further by the well-known Mishnah in Avos (3:2), which states:

הָיוּ מִתְפַּלְלִים בְּשִׁלּוּמָה שֶׁל מַלְכוּת, שֶׁאִלְמָלָא מוֹרְאָה אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלֵעוּ.

"Pray for the welfare of the government; for if people would not fear it, they would swallow each other alive."

Preventing Abuse of Power

And so the Torah is clear-eyed about man's inherent nature. In fact, even the Kohein Gadol (High Priest), one of the most prestigious figures dedicated to Hashem's sacred service, is suspected of harboring some Og-like tendencies! This we see from the laws governing the lifestyle of a Kohein Gadol, who is prohibited from marrying certain women. In addition to the general injunction against marrying a divorcee – which is binding, as well, on all regular *kohanim* – the Kohein Gadol is also proscribed from marrying a widow. The Ba'alei Hatosfos (*Moshav Zekeinim, parshas Emor*) reveal the underpinnings behind this prohibition. Apparently, the Torah was fearful of how the Kohein Gadol might utilize the awesome power with which he was entrusted. Recall that he alone is granted access, on Yom Kippur, to the innermost sanctum of the Temple – the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (Holy of Holies). As he stands before the *Aron Hakodesh* (Holy Ark) officiating over the special Yom Kippur service of atonement, he might be entertaining certain thoughts – colored, perhaps, by jealousy over his neighbor's wife. Standing, as he is, in such awesome proximity to the Gates of Heaven, he might utilize this opportunity to pray for this neighbor's demise. Thus, to entirely banish this option from the Kohein Gadol's mind, the Torah proscribed his wedding a widow altogether.

Consider the tremendous irony of this circumstance. Here it is, the holiest individual, on the holiest day of the year, in the holiest location on earth, engaged in the loftiest and most sublime Divine service – atoning for the entire Jewish nation – and this is what he is suspected of doing? Utilizing the opportunity to strike dead his fellow man in order to marry his widow? But in light of the above, the answer is an unequivocal “yes.” By nature, a person is but a wild donkey.

Such musings might seem foreign to us; nonetheless, contends R' Leib, one who is honest with himself will realize that, in fact, the characterization is more apt than we might initially consider. He employs the instance of *yerushah* (inheritance) as an example. Supposing that someone had a relative in possession of phenomenal wealth – and he named you as his heir. Would thoughts of his demise really be so far from your mind? Intellectually, of course – and even, on some level, in the emotional sense – we hope for his good health and extended years. But deep down, in that eventuality... it might be somewhat difficult to cry heartfelt tears at the *levayah* (funeral).

Now the above picture could seem quite bleak, as it presents what appears to be a stark indictment of human nature. The important point to remember, however, is that that is exactly what it is – human *nature*: עֵינֵי פָּרָא אָדָם יִנְלָד. A person may have been born with such predilections; but our mission throughout our lives is to work on subduing and purifying this nature. And for this, explains R' Leib, there is only one *eitzah* (remedy): the study of Torah and *mussar* (ethical instruction). As Chazal state: בָּרָאתִי יֵצֶר הָרָע, וּבָרָאתִי לוֹ תוֹרָה תְּבַלֵּין – “I have created the evil inclination; I have created the Torah as its antidote” (*Kiddushin 30b*). Through sustained application to the words of Hashem and Chazal's sacred teachings, a person can cultivate true *yiras Shamayim* (fear of Heaven) and thus elevate his nature. He has the ability to progress beyond the level of an Og to that of Avraham Avinu.

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