

Parasha Devarim

Why is the Torah Filled with War?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

As I'm reading the first parasha in the Book of Devarim, I'm abhorred! Isn't universal peace and brotherhood the highest value? Then why does the Torah – which is supposed to be a 'Tree of Life' promulgate cruelty and war which causes bloodshed and death? Why do we have to "wipe out" Amalek and the Canaanites? I'm embarrassed in front of my non-Jewish friends to be a member of such a warmongering religion. Even today, it seems from the media, that the Israeli soldiers are the cruelest army in the world. Please help me understand, why we need all these wars and the dispossession of the original inhabitants of the land of Israel. Why can't we just live peacefully side by side with the other nations who also have historical rights to the land?

Shleima Cohen (name changed)

Dear Shleima,

I totally understand where you are coming from. I too am a peacenik at heart. When I read in the Torah about all the battles and about how Hashem commands us to go to war and kill, I too cringe inside. War is indeed horrible, and it's the greatest tragedy when our young men lose their lives or limbs to defend our land. The ultimate ideal of the Torah will take place at the end of days when our Temple will be rebuilt and all the nations will come running to bask in the light of the Jewish people. That time will be the end of war as it states:

ספר ישעיה פרק ב פסוק ד וְשָׁפַט בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם וְהוֹכִיחַ לְעַמִּים רַבִּים וְכָתְתוּ חַרְבוֹתָם לְאַתִּים וְחַנְיֹתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמַזְמְרוֹת
לֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה:

“He shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (*Yesha'yahu 2:4*).

If world peace and harmony indeed is the ideal in the Torah why does G-d command the Israelites to wage war numerous times in the Torah?

Delivering the Land into Their Hands

At the opening of *Parashat Devarim*, Moshe reiterates to the Israelites that they are to conquer the Land of Israel:

ספר דברים פרק א פסוק ח רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיכֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ בְּאוֹ וַרְשׁוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם
לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְתֶתְ לָהֶם וּלְזֶרְעָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

“See, I have set the land before you; Come and possess the land that G-d swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'acov, to give them and their descendants after them” (*Devarim 1:8*).

The land can be compared to a body, and its people to the soul of the land. Just as each body is connected to its particular soul, so does each land have a particular people to which it belongs. The Land of Israel is created specifically for the people of Israel. Only in this land can the soul of the Children of Israel flourish to its fullest, both on an individual and national level. The original Divine intent was that, when the Israelites would enter their Promised Land, the Canaanite inhabitants would recognize that the land belonged to them and they would simply get up and leave or accept the Israeli government, stay and live in peace with us. No war would have been necessary:

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רש"י על דברים פרק א פסוק ח

באו ורשו - אין מערער בדבר ואינכם צריכים למלחמה אילו לא שלחו מרגלים לא היו צריכין לכלי זיין:
 “No one will contest the matter, and you will not need to go to war; if they had not sent spies, they would not have needed weapons” (Rashi, *Devarim* 1:8).

Not only would the nations living in the Land leave on their own, without a fight, they would do so without the Israelites even displaying any military might. The usual tactics of intimidation would not be necessary, for G-d would miraculously cause the nations to flee. Had they not sent the spies, Israel would have merited Divine miracles that would have prevented even the smallest measure of war (Rabbi Alon Anava, <http://www.atzmut.com/war-what-for/>).

Men of War

The fact that conquering the Land of Israel depends on our merit is illustrated by the sad story of the *ma'apilim* – who went ahead into the land to fight without accepting the decree of an additional 38 years wandering in the desert. Moshe recalls how these men rebelled against G-d's decision:

“Then you answered and said to me, we have sinned against Hashem. We will go up and fight, according to all that Hashem our G-d commanded us. And you girded on every man his weapons of war, and ventured to go up into the hill. But Hashem said to me, Say to them: Neither go up, nor fight, for I am not among you, else you be smitten before your enemies. So I spoke to you, but you would not hear, you rebelled against Hashem's commandment and went presumptuously up into the hill. However, the Emori, who dwelled in that mountain, came out against you, and chased you, and they crushed you at Chorma in Se'ir” ([Devarim 1:41-44](#)).

These men are the prototype of the people referred to by Moshe as “men of war.” They include the entire generation of Israelites, who cried with the spies in their lack of emunah and inability to believe in Hashem's forthcoming miraculous conquest of the Land of Israel.

פסוק דברים פרק ב פסוק יד והימים אשר הלכנו מקדש ברנע עד אשר עברנו את נחל זרד שלשים ושמנה שנה
 עד תם כל הדור אנשי המלחמה מקרב המחנה כאשר נשבע יהוה להם:

“The days when we went from Kadesh Barnea, until we crossed the brook of Zered, numbered thirty eight years, until all the generation of the men of war expired from the midst of the camp, just as Hashem swore to them” (*Devarim* 2:14).

Moshe teaches us that inheriting the land is dependent upon the moral situation of the nation. Only when we are completely worthy as a nation will G-d be in our midst and we will merit to live peacefully on our land “under our grapevine and in the shade of our fig tree.”

Offer of Peace

Moshe understood that war is only the last resort after having employed all peaceful means, as it states, “When you approach a city to wage war against it, you shall propose peace to it” (*Devarim* 20:10). “The deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children.” Just as Avraham entered the First World War – between the four and the five kingdoms – woefully undermanned and Hashem turned his dust into swords, so can Hashem wage war for us to redeem the Land of Israel and return it to its rightful owner. Although Hashem explicitly commanded Moshe to launch a war against Sichon to conquer his

land, Moshe still sent messengers to him with words of peace. However, Sichon hardened his spirit and refused to let the Israelite pass his land peacefully, forcing the Children of Israel into war in order to fulfill Hashem's command (Rabbi Shimon Klein, <http://etzion.org.il/en/parashat-devarim-morality-and-world-politics>). This is an example of how the wars that Israel wage are repeatedly initiated by the enemy.

Wars of Defense

Unfortunately, the basic relationship between the Jewish people and the world is one of struggle and combat. This relationship was established from the minute that Avraham set foot in the Land of Canaan and was epitomized by the war between the four and the five kings. Avraham entered the war only in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive. Since then, almost all of Israel's wars have been wars of defense – wars for the sake of saving Jewish lives from harsh and cruel enemies. The Arab nations initiated four wars against Israel: 1948 War of Independence, 1956 Sinai War, 1967 Six Day War and 1973 Yom Kippur War. Israel defended itself each time and won. After each war, the Israeli army withdrew from most of the areas it captured. (see [Camp-David Accords](#)). This is unprecedented in World history and shows Israel's willingness to reach peace even at the risk of fighting for its existence each time anew. I heard the following anonymous quote: "If the Arabs put down their weapons today there would be no more violence. If the Israelis put down their weapons today there would be no more Israel. Think about it..."