

To Fight or Not to Fight?

The opening verse of Deuteronomy reads, “*These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel . . .*”

Words. What ‘words’? These are the farewell speeches of Moses to the people of Israel as they stand on the plains of Moab, ready to make their final journey, across the Jordan River, to enter the promised land. They will make this journey without Moses who prepares to die as the Lord foretold (Num. 27:13).

Here, we focus on Chapter 2 of Deuteronomy, giving particular attention to how Moses recalls the Lord’s instructions to the Israelites as they journeyed through foreign lands:

The land of Seir: “Be very careful not to engage in battle with them” (2:4-5).

The land of Moab: “Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle” (2:9).

The land of the Ammonites: “Do not harass them or engage them in battle” (2:19).

How do you interpret this repeated command to refrain from warfare? Remember: in traditional Jewish approaches, repetition in the Bible is a signal to pause, to creatively ponder the spiritual depths of God’s word.

It is helpful here to engage the voice of Maimonides.¹ He points to the forty years spent in the wilderness as God’s way of preparing the Israelites for the promised land. Emerging from slavery, they lacked courage and confidence in their own resourcefulness. The wilderness provided a schooling to toughen character.

Yet the Israelites addressed in Deuteronomy were not raised in slavery. They are the next generation, raised in the desert, full of strength and confidence. The character challenge for them is not lack of courage but the need to curb their aggression. This is one traditional Jewish interpretation as to why Moses’ speech contains the threefold reminder of the importance of restraint.

But if restraint is the issue, what are we to make of the next scene where God calls for war

against the King of Sihon? “Begin to take possession by engaging him in battle” (2:24).

Especially puzzling to the sages is the way Moses responds to this new command in 2:26-29.

Instead of declaring war he sends messengers of peace! He would appear to be repeating the non-violent actions discussed earlier. Surely he has placed himself in a predicament, says Abravanel.² For if the King of Sihon were to accept peace (which in fact he doesn’t, v.30) then Moses would be either disobeying God by making peace, or breaking his word to the King by then declaring war. How do you interpret Moses’ actions?

One of many answers is cited in the Midrash:³ Moses is not disobeying God, he is being faithful to another aspect of God’s Torah where it is written: “Seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14). Ultimately Moses does engage in battle against the King of Sihon (as per God’s instruction), yet he does so while in the pursuit of peace (also God’s instruction!) Perhaps this midrash reminds us of our own juggling of diverse teachings. E.g., if my child refuses to go to church, how do I as a Catholic parent respond? The Church teaches the Sunday obligation, and parental responsibility, and the values of gentleness, compassion, and...

Further reflection

The wilderness journey held different lessons for different generations of Israelites. In our day, too, the character-building challenges faced by our children are often the reverse to those of our grandparents. E.g., perhaps our grandparents battled poverty in the Great Depression, but our children now struggle to resist materialism. If our grandparents struggled with a rigid moral code, our children struggle to avoid the moral relativism rampant in society. Continue this discussion.

1. 12th c. Torah scholar. 2. 15th c. Torah scholar

3. Midrash Tanhuma (Chukat).

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York: Lambda, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.

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