



Parashat Devarim

In Parashat Devarim, Moshe recalls in his address to *Benei Yisrael* their recent battles against the Emorite king Sichon. The conflict began when, after *Benei Yisrael* encamped along the Emorite kingdom's eastern border, Moshe sent a delegation to request passage through the kingdom to shorten their trip to the Land of Israel. As Moshe recalls, "Sichon, king of Cheshbon [the Emorite capital city], refused to allow us passage through it, because the Lord your God hardened his heart and toughened his spirit, in order to give him in your hands, as on this day" (2:31). Sichon not only refused *Benei Yisrael's* request, but led his army in an attack against them. *Benei Yisrael* responded by defeating and destroying the Emorite kingdom, seizing the entire territory, which it ultimately annexed as the eastern region of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Maimonides cites the aforementioned verse, which speaks of God "hardening the heart" of the Emorite king Sichon, as an example of a Scriptural reference to what appears to be the negation of human free will. The Torah writes explicitly that God did not allow Sichon to make the correct, rational decision to grant the Israelites peaceful passage through his kingdom, suggesting that God interferes with free will. Maimonides famously explains *Hilkhos Teshuva* 6:3):

It is possible for a person to commit a grave sin or many sins until the judgment passes from the True Judge that the sinner shall be punished for these sins that he committed willfully and intentionally by having *teshuva* [repentance] withheld from him, and he is not granted permission to repent for his wrongdoing...

Maimonides most famously applies this theory to Pharaoh, whom God denied the possibility of making the rational decision to free the Hebrew slaves. But Maimonides brings other examples, as well, including the incident involving Sichon: "The same was true with Sichon: because of the sins he committed, it was necessary that he be prevented from [performing] *teshuva*..."

Several writers have noted the apparent difficulty in applying this theory to Sichon, about whom we know virtually nothing prior to this incident. As opposed to Pharaoh, whom the Torah describes as a ruthless oppressor who subjected an entire nation to slavery and infanticide, Sichon has no prior history of cruelty against *Benei Yisrael*. On what basis, then, did Maimonides assert that his free will was suspended on account of his prior sins?

We might speculate that Maimonides refers here to the Emorite conquest of the northern territory of Moav, of which the Torah tells in the Book of Bamidbar (21:26-31) as the background to the Emorites' defeat at the hands of *Benei Yisrael*. The Torah finds it necessary to digress onto the history of the region, informing us that Sichon had seized the region of Cheshbon from the Moavites, and it even records an ode to Sichon composed by the ancient poets describing his rout of Moav. Maimonides perhaps understood this unusual digression as intended to emphasize Sichon's ruthless aggression. The verses there describe the sheer destruction Sichon wrought upon Moav and the capture of its cities and women. Maimonides quite possibly viewed this Emorite offensive as the "grave sin" on account for which Sichon was deprived of the power of

free will. God denied him the possibility of repenting from this evil tendency, and He "hardened" Sichon's heart to launch a similar unprovoked offensive against *Benei Yisrael*, a battle that led to his and his nation's utter destruction.

Indeed, the Torah displays little tolerance for wanton, unprovoked military aggression against innocents. In presenting the *mitzva* to destroy the nation of Amalek, the Torah stresses *Benei Yisrael*'s state of sheer helplessness when they came under attack, that they posed absolutely no threat whatsoever to Amalek at the time: "...that they caught you frozen along the road and cut down all those who straggled behind, while you were tired and weary..." (Devarim 25:18). God responded to Amalek's cruelty by ordering *Benei Yisrael* to harbor eternal hatred and resentment towards them, and to work towards this nation's complete elimination. According to Maimonides, Sichon and the Emorites were similarly condemned for this crime, of assaulting a peaceful nation without provocation.

Today, too, the Jewish people are forced to wage a relentless war in response to an unprovoked offensive against the citizens of *Eretz Yisrael*. We hope and pray that the Almighty will grant His people the strength, courage and wisdom to defend their lives and their right to a peaceful existence in their ancestral spiritual homeland, and that He will grant us victory against our enemies of today as He did in the days of Sichon king of the Emorites.