



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Devarim: Do You Believe in Giants?

Have you ever heard of Og the Giant? Here is one tale from the Talmud in Berakhot 54a:

What is the story of Og King of Bashan and the stone he wanted to throw at Israel?

Og said: How large is the camp of Israel? -Three parasangs (Persian unit of distance).

Og said: I will uproot a mountain the size of three parasangs and throw it upon them and kill them. He went and uprooted a mountain ... and carried it on his head.

But the Holy One, blessed be God, sent ants which bore a hole in it.

It fell around his neck.

He tried to pull it off his head, he pulled with his teeth to the right and left, but could not tear it off. This is what Scripture means, "You break the teeth of the wicked" (Ps. 3:8).

As Resh Lakish explained, quoting Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish: What does "you break (*shibbarta*) the teeth of the wicked" mean? Do not read it as *shibarta*, rather as *shirbavta*, "you entangled".

How tall was Moses? Ten cubits. He grabbed hold of a spear ten cubits long, leaped ten cubits, struck Og in the ankle and killed him."

I love this story. It seems the stuff of children's cartoons, it almost has a slapstick quality to it. One can almost picture the giant, whose ankle is 30 cubits (15 meters) off the ground, uprooting a mountain and then getting outsmarted by God with a mountain which gets stuck around his head and lodged in his teeth!

Who is Og? Is he a real biblical character? Was he a giant? Many cultures have legends about giants, but what basis does this legend of Og have in our tradition?

Og was the king of a powerful province in what is today the Golan heights, the “Bashan”. His story is narrated in Bamidbar/Numbers 21:33-35 and Devarim/Deut 3:1-11.

The Lord our God also delivered King Og of Bashan and his people into our hands... sixty towns, all were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars—apart from a great number of unwallied towns. Only King Og of Bashan was left of the remaining Rephaim. His bedstead, an iron bedstead, is now in Rabbah of the Ammonites; it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide, by the standard cubit! (3:3-5,11)

So Og had a kingdom with sixty fortified cities. He was a survivor of an ancient people, the Rephaim, who are described as *anakim*, giants!

Rephaim, a people great and numerous and as tall as the giants. The Lord wiped them out... (Deut 2:21-22)

But how large was Og? We read above about the size of his bed, which was made of iron possibly to hold his weight. It was 9x4 cubits; that is 4.5x2 metres or 13 by 6 ft. Rambam writes:

A person's bedstead is not the same size as the person ... usually a person's bed is about one third longer than the person. If the length of this bed was 9 cubits, then proportionally, the person who slept in it would have been six cubits (3 metres or 9 ft) or a bit taller... "by a person's forearm," meaning the forearm of an average person... that is to say that Og was twice the height of average people or a bit more. This is undoubtedly rare in the human race, but in no way impossible." Guide 2:47

So Og was a tall, extraordinarily tall, but not a giant who could uproot mountains! The only way to sustain the Midrash would be to translate the word *eres*, bedstead differently. In Modern Hebrew, and *Eres* is a baby's crib. Indeed, this is Rashbam's reading:

His bedstead: His crib, when he was a baby

If he was 3 meters when he was a baby, we can only imagine what size he would have reached as an adult! Where do the legends come from? Maybe it was influenced by this unusual reading of the verses. Alternatively, wider themes from folklore made their mark on the rabbinic imagination. As a result, Og takes on colossal dimensions way beyond the details of the biblical text.

Rav Kook in his interpretation of Talmud Berachot reads this Midrash metaphorically. Here is his interpretation:

For time immemorial, [this midrash explains] how physical might seeks to uproot spiritual strength. The worldly symbol of physical might is Og King of Bashan, survivor of the Rephaim. The Rabbis explain that he survived the great Flood [of Noah]. As a king, he measured achievement as a function of power and material gain, and he was deeply irritated to see a small, lowly nation – Israel – weak and powerless, whose only strength was its elevated spirit, the spirit of God which was their true strength – “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit—said the Lord of Hosts”. (Zecharia 4:6).

He wanted to throw a mountain, to show to all that there is no standing to the spirit when it is confronted by force; that it cannot endure. Thus, this mountain which Og wanted to cast upon Israel is a permanent symbol that Jacob will rise despite his small size (Amos 7:5) ... The fall of Og, the acclaimed strongman, in the hands of Israel – the recipients of the Torah whose name “Tushia” denotes physical weakness, portrays the message that mere physicality and muscle is unequipped to bring mankind to its victory.

It is true that material strength will be victorious in the short term ... but physical fortitude is also susceptible to shatter by the most infinitesimal of attacks from natural forces [- the ants -] small forces which spread contagion can bring down and destroy even the tallest and strongest... then all that might will weigh on his neck ...but when he wishes to discard that load, he will find his teeth stuck in, and that is the way of history, that nations who rely only on brute force will feel, as time flows and history continues, that their force and grandeur become a trap and a weakness. The addiction to desires of a physical nature ... will eventually drive people against one another and eventually base desires will consume physical sturdiness.

Please discuss:

- How do you relate to legends of this sort, with larger than life details that are not recorded biblically? Are they to be interpreted literally or metaphorically?
- What are the origins of legends of giants which feature in the mythology of almost every culture?
- What do you think of Rav Kook’s reading? Are Jews the carrier of the “spirit” confronted by other empires and civilizations that rest on a culture of strength and power?
- This week we commemorate Tisha B’Av. In the morning, we read the haftarah from Jeremiah chapter 8 and 9 in which Jeremiah decries a political culture based upon deceit and exploitation and warns of its demise. The Haftarah ends:

Thus said the Lord:
Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom;
Let not the strong man glory in his strength;
Let not the rich man glory in his riches.

But only in this should one glory:
In his earnest devotion to Me.
For I the Lord act with kindness, Justice, and equity in the world;
For in these I delight —declares the Lord. (Jer 9:22-23)

How does Jeremiah's words relate to Rav Kook's ideas?

Shabbat shalom!