

# A SHOWDOWN OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

by Nechama Stampler

## A Showdown of Epic Proportions <sup>1</sup>

*Og, king of Bashan went out against them, he and his entire people to do battle at Edre'i. They smote him and his sons and all his people.*

Rashi: Moshe was the one who killed him, as stated in Berachos.

Maharal: The Mishnah there <sup>2</sup>instructs a person to make a berachah of thanksgiving upon seeing the place where various miracles were performed. One of those places is the bolder that Og wished to launch at the Jewish people. The gemara offers further details, which it possessed by tradition. Seeing that the Jewish camp measured three parsas on a side, Og reasoned that he would uproot a mountain measuring the same, and hurl it upon them. He in fact took such a mountain, and placed it on his head. HKBH brought ants, which bore through the mountain, causing it to fall on Og's shoulders. Trying to cast it off, his teeth elongated on either side, not allowing him to free himself of the burden. Moshe, who stood ten amos tall, took an axe of the same size, leapt upwards an equivalent distance, and struck Og in the ankle. This killed him.

The passage does not allow for an allegorical explanation. Chazal instructed us to make a berachah upon a particular place. Clearly, they believed that Hashem had miraculously saved them from Og at a specific location. This, however, hardly absolves us from understanding the deeper meaning of the event. If Chazal preserved and recorded the details of the episode, we must labor to find their fuller significance, beyond the fact that it is an awesome story of Hashem's intervention on behalf of His people.

We detect enormous diversity in the objects Hashem created. Oftentimes they can be placed on a continuum, meaning that they exhibit more or less of a particular characteristic. There are end points to that continuum, representing the extremes of that concept. Og and Klal Yisrael drew their respective strengths from two end points. On a continuum of physicality and spirituality, Og represents the end point of physicality; all of his strength drew from it, and it alone. Klal Yisrael, on the other hand, finds its strength entirely in the spiritual. Physical things always have dimension. Og, therefore, evidenced extreme dimension. He thus was a giant in height and bulk. The power of Klal Yisrael, however, is sourced in its clinging to spirituality, which know no place or measurement. This is the real meaning of Klal Yisrael being called small, as in "How shall Yaakov endure, because he is

small?" <sup>4</sup> We do not lack importance or significance. We lack an essential connection to the physical. It is that physical component that is described as small. (The real intent of the word "small" here is non-existent. When describing something that clearly exists - like the Jewish people - the best way to convey the downplaying of the physical is simply to call it "small.") It also accounts for the reference to "the worm of Yaakov." <sup>4</sup> We ought not to feel insulted by these descriptions. Their intent is quite the opposite. They mean to convey that our source of power is unlike anything else we observe. The strength is there - but it comes entirely from a transcendent place, not a physical-material one.

Moshe feared Og; would he not fear him, Hashem would have had no reason to tell him not to be afraid. <sup>5</sup> Chazal<sup>6</sup> tell us that Moshe feared that the "merit of Avraham" might assist Og. (Og had been the one to inform Avraham that his nephew Lot had been taken captive.) It is unthinkable that Moshe could believe that the reward due Avraham would somehow accrue to Og and not to his actual descendants!

Og was fully a giant. Avraham is called the same: "The biggest man among the giants." <sup>7</sup> If both were giants, perhaps, thought Moshe, Og's power was not as superficial as we might think. The Lot incident brought their lives and worlds together. Avraham was a spiritual giant. What if Og's physical greatness was a physical manifestation of some kedushah in him?, even if not apparent to Moshe? Hashem's reassured Moshe that Og was all physicality, whose root was in nothing holy at all.

When the Bnei Yisrael left Egypt and became a people, they acquired the lofty stature of Divine detachment from the physical. The number three often reflects this detachment. The number two expresses dimension, the hallmark of anything physical. It is the smallest number that shows distance - the separation of one point from another. By contrast, three brings us to a point that knows no veering in one direction or another - a kind of existence not saddled with physical position. That point-that can't be localized, that place that really has no physical place, stands for the spiritual. Note that Yaakov/Yisrael, from whom we take our name, was a third son. Moshe was the third-born to his mother. The process of a three-fold nation (Kohanim, Leviim, Yisraelim) receiving a three-fold Torah (Torah, Neviim, Kesuvim) began on the third day of the third month. <sup>8</sup> And the Jewish camp in the Wilderness was three parsas on a side.

This set them up for conflict with their polar opposite: the unmediated physicality of Og. Uprooting a mountain is a feat of incredible strength. Contemplating his enormous power (i.e. placing the mountain on his head, his highest point, and the locus of thought and contemplation), Og believed that he could destroy Klal Yisrael through irresistible force.

Tiny creatures bored through the mountain. Once again, "small" is used to denote the opposite of something with real physical presence. That which cannot be measured, that which does not really function in the material world, but belongs to a spiritual existence, can tear the physical asunder. It

can almost invisibly bore through a mountain.

The mountainous strength that Og wished to focus upon the Jewish people came crashing down upon his shoulders. Og's great power, now that he was unable to use it as he had wished, would not simply be extinguished. It is a truism that any force that is unleashed will not simply disappear, but will find something to act upon. Og's mountain-missile would need to express itself somewhere - and the closest target was Og himself. Og stood imperiled by his own strength that he had attempted to unleash against Klal Yisrael.

Much as he tried, he couldn't rid himself of the mountain, the power he had stirred up. There is no good reason why a person would not be able to rid himself of an appendage that has become useless - like Og's excess of power. But Og could not. His teeth elongated, and blocked Og from letting go of the mountain. Although entirely counterproductive to his interests, Og could not drop the mountain. He became consumed with the notion of destroying the Jews. He could not let go. The evildoer wishes to bite and to consume; from this comes the expression "the teeth of the wicked."<sup>9</sup>

He could not have let go even had he tried. His great power was not granted or licensed to him in order to inflict harm upon Klal Yisrael. Such use was a complete violation of the bounds of propriety, of the built-in harmony of things. Since Og had so blatantly transgressed a natural boundary, Hashem stretched the boundaries of another of His laws. Og's teeth grew beyond their natural limit, locking the mountain in place.

All that remained was for Moshe to deal the fatal blow. It was necessary for him to maximally prepare for the encounter by building up his own strength, even if it came from a very different place than Og's. Moshe did so, preparing his own person, choosing the proper weapon, and energizing his zeal - his emotional energy. Thus, we learn of Moshe's stature, the weapon that he chose, and his jump. He focused those three on Og's ankle, meaning Og's foundation, the place upon which he stood.

All three reflect the number ten, which is really the integer "one" taken to a higher order. Moshe had feared that Og's power was somehow connected to a higher place, to Avraham's kedushah. He thus prepared himself to fight Og on some presumed higher level. (In the thought of Chazal,<sup>10</sup> the worldly domain extends only ten tefachim from the ground, above which is a "higher" domain.) Og's displayed power was physical, meaning that it showed length, breadth and height; therefore Moshe prepared in three different ways.

Fully prepared, Moshe's spirit-based power felled Og from the place where he stood. And we, who have traveled this far, see the place of the miracle in a different, richer light.

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Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 21:35
  2. Berachos 54A
  3. Amos 7:2
  4. Yeshayah 41:14
  5. Bamidbar 21:34
  6. Nidah 61A
  7. Yehoshua 14:15. Shemos Rabbah 28:1 applies  
this verse to Avraham 8. Shabbos 88A
  9. Tehillim 3:8
  10. Sukkah 5A
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