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**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**  
**Take home Dvar Torah**

5785 Parshat Chukat  
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program**

**focusing on understanding Jewish  
relevancy to our lives by studying text  
most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour  
each week, friendships are forged between  
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***Partners in Torah  
has proven to be effective at reclaiming the  
rich  
legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and  
guidance  
for many who have, until now, lacked  
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***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in  
participating so that we may grow  
together as  
a community.**

## תשפ"ה Parshat Chukat

In this week's portion's final two chapters, the Jewish nation is attacked by the world's two most powerful leaders, *Sichon*, King of the *Emori*, and *Og*, king of *Bashan*, whom the Jews handily defeated. When the Jewish people merely asked *Sichon* permission to traverse his land as a short-cut into Israel, *Sichon* gathered his troops and came out to war with them. In *Og's* case, as soon as the Jewish people entered the vicinity of *Bashan*, *Og* and his whole nation also came out fighting.



The Torah sees poetic justice in the war with *Sichon* and actually creates a poem for it (Numbers 21:27-30):

- (כז) עַל כֵּן יֹאמְרוּ הַמַּשְׁלִים בְּאוֹ הַשָּׁבוֹן תִּבְנֶה וְתִכּוֹן עִיר סִיחֹן.  
 (כח) כִּי אִישׁ יִצְאָה מִחַשְׁבוֹן לְהִבָּה מִקְרִית סִיחֹן אֶכְלָה עָר מוֹאָב בְּעַלִּי בְּמוֹת אֲרֹנָן.  
 (כט) אוֹי לָךְ מוֹאָב אֲבִדְתָּ עִם כְּמוֹשׁ נָתַן בְּכַיּוֹ פְּלִיטָם וּבְנִתָיו בְּנִשְׁבִית לְמַלְךְ אֲמָרִי סִיחֹן.  
 (ל) וַיִּנְרָם אֲבִד חַשְׁבוֹן עַד דִּיבָן וַנִּשִּׁים עַד נַפְח אֲשֶׁר עַד מִידְבָּא.

27) *Regarding this the poets would say:*

*Come to Heshbon – let it be built and established as Sichon’s city*

*28) For fire has come forth from Heshbon, a flame from the city of Sichon,  
It consumed Ar of Moav, the masters of Arnon’s heights.*

*29) Woe to you, Moav, you are lost, people of Chemosh*

*He made his sons fugitives and his daughters captives of the king of the  
Amorite, Sichon.*

*30) Their sovereignty over Heshbon was lost; it was removed from Dibon,  
and was laid waste to Nophah, which reaches up to Medebah.*

What does this poem mean? The Sages explain.

When *Sichon* wanted to conquer Moav, he felt that he could not succeed, for Moav was very mighty. To guarantee a victory, he sought the help of the evil Bilaam who cursed them. Bilaam’s curse proved effective, and Sichon conquered Moav.

*Sichon’s* victory seemed secure and immutable, but, in the end, the Jewish nation handily routed him and his entire powerful nation. There was something that Sichon did not know: Hashem had commanded the Jewish people *not* to conquer *Moav*. Hashem had given *Moav* their territory as a gift, a token of appreciation to their ancestor Lot. When Avraham traveled to Egypt because of the famine in Israel, he told Pharoah that Sarah was his sister, not his wife. He did this because he was afraid that because of Sarah’s beauty, Pharoah would kill him so that he could take her for his wife. Lot who loved money and stood to gain great wealth for providing the king with a beautiful new wife, was tempted to spill the beans. With great effort, he overcame his great urge, and did not reveal Avraham’s secret. Because Hashem rewards every good deed, He

commanded the Jewish people not to conquer the lands of Lot's two children, Amon and Moav as a reward to Lot. But now that Sichon had taken it over, the Jewish nation was permitted to conquer it. In retrospect, Sichon was just the pawn that enabled the Jewish nation to take control of the land.

Here lies the lesson for the poets (verse 27).

In this case the poet is Bilaam whom the Torah called a poet (Numbers 23:7,18).

Let Bilaam, who thought that he did Sichon the greatest favor by cursing Moav - giving Sichon the victory - see that from the onset, Sichon was destined to lose his fortified and powerful city Heshbon to the Jewish nation.

***27) Come to Heshbon – let it be built and established as the city of Sichon.***

Sichon made Cheshbon his capital city, and from it he waged all of his wars.

Rashi comments:

רש"י על במדבר פרק כא פסוק כג

ויצא לקראת ישראל - אילו היתה חשבון מלאה יתושין אין כל בריה יכולה לכבשה ואם היה סיחון בכפר חלש אין כל אדם יכול לכבשו וכ"ש אלו היה בחשבון. אמר הקב"ה מה אני מטריח על בני כל זאת לצור על כל עיר ועיר נתן בלב כל אנשי המלחמה לצאת מן העיירות ונתקבצו כולם למקום אחד ושם נפלו ומשם הלכו: ישראל אל הערים ואין עומד לנגדם כי אין שם איש אלא נשים וטף

*If the city of Cheshbon was occupied by flies, it would still have been impossible to breach it, it was so fortified. And if Sichon dwelled in a weak*

village, he would have been impossible to conquer, he was so powerful. So, for sure Sichon in Cheshbon would have been doubly impossible. Hashem said, why should I bother the Jewish people to siege each of the cities? Instead, Hashem put it in their minds to come out of their cities to one place and fight Israel there. The Bnai Yisrael vanquished them and then they proceeded to conquer the cities where there was no one to oppose them.

**28) For Fire has come forth from Heshbon, a flame from the city of Sichon, It consumed Ar of Moab, the masters of Arnon's heights.** One would have thought that he would occupy it forever. However, **Their sovereignty over Heshbon was lost, (it was removed from Dibon, and was laid waste to Nophah, which reaches up to Medebah)** because of Bnai Yisrael.

Moav also learned a lesson here.

Placing all their trust in their god *Chemosh*, they thought that they were invincible. But all that their “god” did for them was leave their sons fugitives and daughters captives to Sichon. [*Woe to you, Moab, you are lost, people of Chemosh. He made his sons fugitives and his daughters captives of the king of the Amorite, Sichon*]. This is the simple understanding of the poem.

The Sages provide a deeper lesson in this poem.

The Torah was given with four levels of understanding. The first letter of each level forms an acronym called פרד"ס. The פ stands for פשט – *Pshat* - which means the simple meaning in context. The ר stands for רמז - *Remez*- which means hints, such as gematria – numerical equivalencies - which hint to a deeper textual meanings. The ד stands for דרוש – *Drush* - which means lessons that can be exegetically derived from the text. In

the *drush* mode, words may be taken out of context and analyzed on their own to teach a lesson that does not necessarily flow from the verse. The **סוד** stands for **סוד** -*Sod*- which means a secret or mystical approach to understanding.

The Sages taught a lesson, a *drush*, from this poem in the Torah. In Tractate Baba Batra 78b, our Rabbis tell us.

א"ר שמואל בר נחמן א"ר יוחנן מאי דכתיב על כן יאמרו המושלים וגו' המושלים אלו  
המושלים ביצרים בואו חשבון בואו ונחשב חשבוננו של עולם הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה  
ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה תבנה ותכונן אם אתה עושה כן תבנה בעולם הזה ותכונן  
לעולם הבא

*Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan (quoting this poem) **Therefore the rulers should say**, these are those who rule over their evil inclination. **Come to Heshbon** come and let's make the calculations of eternity – the loss of a mitzvah compared to the reward for it, and the reward for a sin, compared to the loss it brings. If you do this, **you will be built strong** in this world and **you will be well established** in the world to come.*

This *drasha* is derived by using different meanings for some of the verse's words. In the simple contextual translation, the מושלים were **poets**, whereas in this interpretation they are **rulers**. Both are correct interpretations of the word. In the simple contextual translation, **Heshbon** was the name of the city that formerly belonged to Moav and was captured by Sichon, whereas, in this *drasha*, it is translated as a **calculation**, also a correct meaning of the word. (In both cases, the underlying Hebrew root carries multiple meanings.)

The question we need to answer is where is this *drasha* coming from? Does it have anything to do with the story in the text?

Our Sages explain that these two ideas are very deeply connected.

When Sichon conquered Moav and Ammon, he had no idea that he was simply a pawn for the Jewish people and that his success was really his undoing. Similarly, when the evil inclination convinces a person to avail himself of something that he should not, and he feels like he has received a bonus, something extra, in reality he is only setting himself up for a punishment, as he will have to pay for the sin that he has committed.

Therefore, our Sages advise us to make a simple calculation and to think carefully before you act. Should a mitzvah present itself, and you feel too lazy to do it thinking that you will go easy on yourself, make the simple calculation of how much you will lose if you let the mitzvah slip away versus how much reward you will gain if you perform it. Yes, not doing it may feel good now, but *later*, when you see how much reward you lost by squandering the opportunity, it will be very painful. Is the moment of rest from the mitzvah really worth all the reward that you are forfeiting?

Similarly, is the fleeting pleasure experienced by indulging in a forbidden pleasure for the thrill of the moment worth transgressing Hashem's law and setting yourself up for punishment? True, it's delicious now, but how will you feel about it later when the punishment arrives?

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Hakohen Kagan (d. 1933), adds an additional element to the calculation.

A mitzvah's reward is *eternal*, while the benefit in this world is fleeting. Can the immediate sensation of the pleasure of this world begin to compare to an eternity of the most sublime reward in the World to Come?

To help us appreciate the notion of “eternity,” our Sages give us the following metaphor. Imagine a sand dune covering the earth as far as you can see. There are trillions and trillions of grains of sand in that dune. If, every thousand years, a bird came by and took away one grain of sand, it would take a seeming eternity for the bird to clear away all the sand in the dune. The reality however is, that as long as that would take, it would, in terms of eternity, only be but a moment.

How could we let the moment of pleasure we experience *here* override the eternity of pleasure we will receive in the World to Come? Just a little thought should be enough to help us make the right decisions in our life to keep Hashem’s Torah to the letter.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in his book *Path of the Just* adds an extra element to the Talmud’s teaching. He explains that a person should dedicate time every day to review and analyze his actions to determine where he went off and where he can improve himself. This is the only sure path to self-perfection.

ספר מסילת ישרים פרק ג - בבאור חלקי הזהירות

כללו של דבר יהיה האדם מעיין על מעשיו כולם, ומפקח על כל דרכיו שלא להניח לעצמו הרגל רע ומדה רעה, כל שכן עבירה ופשע. והנני רואה צורך לאדם שיהיה מדקדק ושוקל דרכיו דבר יום ביומו כסוחרים הגדולים אשר יפלסו תמיד כל עסקיהם למען לא יתקלקלו, ויקבע עתים ושעות לזה שלא יהיה משקלו עראי, אלא בקביעות גדול, כי רב התולדה הוא. וחכמים זכרונם לברכה הורונו בפירוש צורך החשבון הזה, והוא מה שאמרו ז"ל (בבא בתרא עח) על כן יאמרו המושלים בואו חשבון על כן יאמרו המושלים ביצרם, בואו ונחשב חשבוננו של עולם, הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה ושכר עברה כנגד הפסדה וכו

*A person should look into all of his actions and supervise all of his ways very carefully, not letting himself keep a wrong habit or poor*

*character quality, and for sure not to do a sin. I see a need for a person to daily inspect and weigh his ways. Like successful merchants who are constantly evaluating their business to make sure that it doesn't falter, he sets a special time for this so that his evaluation is not a fleeting thing, but, rather, a very serious matter. Because this will have great benefits. And the Sages have taught this to us in the statement in the Talmud (Baba Batra 78b). "Therefore, the rulers should say," these are those who rule over their evil inclination. "Come to Heshbon," come and let's make the calculations of eternity – the loss of a mitzvah compared to the reward for it, and the reward for a sin, compared to the loss it brings.*

In explaining the metaphor of the Sages in the story of Sichon and Moav, Rabbi Yonasan Eibeshitz has a different lesson, a variation on a theme.

Moav was strong and fortified such that Sichon should have been unable to conquer it. So, how did he do it? It was through the city Heshbon. The king of Moav didn't consider the small city of Heshbon near the border of his land very important and he didn't fortify it properly. First Sichon captured Heshbon, this "unimportant" city, and then he used it as a platform to launch his attacks on the rest of Moav, eventually taking over the entire land.

This is one of the tactics that the evil inclination uses to conquer us and push us to do things that we are not supposed to do. He picks a matter that we do not consider too important and hence do not protect ourselves from, and then, after we have transgressed that, he leverages it to take us to the next level and do other more grievous sins.

This is the lesson we should learn from Sichon: how to protect ourselves from the tactics of the evil inclination. We need to make a calculation *before* we act and not be fooled to let the little things go by.

We need to realize more fundamentally that there are no little things. Everything that Hashem commands us to do is important, and its reward is eternal.

When thinking about it rationally, we wonder how an intelligent person could forgo the great reward that Hashem has in store for us for the fleeting pleasure of the moment. Yet this is the “nature of the beast,” the human being. This is where Rabbi Luzzato’s suggestion comes in. The trick is to think about how to respond to the challenge before the moment of challenge and decide the path of action that we are going to take when next confronted with a test.

If taken to heart, this small calculation can make a tremendous change in our lives.

Our Sages teach us that our purpose in this world is to stand up to the challenges of the evil inclination and reap reward in the World to Come for making the correct choices. The choice is always between doing what Hashem wants us to do versus what **we** want to do. If we defer our personal wishes in favor of Hashem’s, we will be incalculably rewarded in the world to come.

As we look at our world today, we see much confusion and a myriad of options to follow each step of the way. Every person thinks that he has it all figured out and that he has figured out the right path to follow. As Jews we have to be so thankful that we have the Torah, Hashem’s handbook for man on this planet, to guide us. The Torah contains the perfect balance of spirituality and pleasure for a human being. We have

clear instructions on what is good for us and what is not. We are able to steer clear of the pitfalls and stumbling blocks that threaten to trip a person up in his path in life. It behooves us to follow the advice of Rabbi Chaim Luzzato to set aside time to think about this for ourselves. The results will be extremely impactful.