CHUQAT: The First New Israeli Army

At some unspecified point in this week's Parasha, Chuqat, the biblical text makes a leap in time, transporting us from the second year after the Exodus from Egypt to the 40th year. The new protagonists are the young generation of Am Israel, ready to fight and conquer the Promised Land.

The previous generation was born and lived their entire lives in slavery. They didn't know how to fight or defend themselves. They were mentally tied to slavery, suffering from a fear of freedom. They missed Egypt and longed to return to a life of oppression. Despite witnessing and experiencing the most imposing miracles in history, both in Egypt and in the desert (the Ten Plagues, the parting of the sea, the revelation of God at Mount Sinai, the manna falling from the sky, etc.), they were only temporarily influenced. God was with them, but they did not see Him. Or they did not want to see Him, perhaps to avoid the many responsibilities that come with living as Jews. This defeatist generation defined themselves as locusts, unable to defend themselves against the enemy.

But this generation has now disappeared. Unfortunately, the change in the mentality of the Jewish people did not occur as a transition from slavery to freedom. It happened, as once mercilessly stated by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: "In some societies, change does not take place through a slow process of learning, but funeral after funeral."

Entebbe 1.0

The new people of Israel, the generation that did not grow up obeying Pharaoh but observing God's will, begin their relentless campaign to conquer the Promised Land in this

Parasha. The first challenge they face is highly relevant to our days. The Canaanites of the city of Arad in the Negev attack the Jews, and guess what they do? They take prisoners! What does the young Israeli army do in their first challenge? First, they pray, promising loyalty and gratitude to God if He grants them this first victory. Then they attack the terrorist kidnappers and rescue the hostages alive. The most important thing is to notice what they did not do: negotiate with the kidnappers. The Tora does not seem very much in favor of negotiating with terrorists.

The First War

They are now in what is today Jordan, on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Before crossing the river to reach Israel, they must pass through the territories of Sichon and Og, kings of the Amorites and Bashan, respectively.

Sihon was a powerful king, reputedly invincible, who had conquered the lands of the Moabites in a battle so fierce it was recorded by the poets of the time—and incidentally mentioned by the Tora—as an epic military victory, possibly intended to intimidate the enemy. Now, the commander-in-chief of the new Israeli army, Moshe Rabbenu, sends Sichon a "message of peace": The people of Israel request your permission to cross your territory "without deviating from the main path, without ruining your fields or vineyards, and without intending to drink water from your wells. We do not seek war with you. We just want to pass through your territory to cross the Jordan River and reach our destination: the land of Israel, promised to us by God (Numbers 21:22). Surprisingly—or not—Sichon rejected Israel's generous peace message and came out to attack Israel.

Why?

Reflecting on our present days, a few ideas occurred to me:

1. In the Middle East, people were not used to a nation behaving with honor and keeping their word. Because lying was part of the military strategy in those nations. Sihon must have thought the Jews were trying to deceive them. It's what he would have done. Or perhaps he did it to destroy Moab.
2. Sichon may have thought the Jews still had a slave mentality, the "locust complex." The proof for Sichon was that they had wandered in the desert for 40 years, and during that time, they had not practiced war nor attacked any nation. The Jew always stood out for his or her intelligence and study vocation. That is why they were always the ideal victims. Sichon did not know these "new" Jews also knew how to defend and fight.
3. Complementing this second idea, Israel's peace offer is not typical in the Middle East. In that region, people attack without warning; only the weak offer peace or warns before attacking. I think Sichon, in the best style of Middle Eastern war culture, did not understand the nature of the Jewish people and confused Israel's peace offer with "weakness."

Without any provocation, Sichon attacked Israel. Ironically, the first military challenge for the new Israeli army was not to attack and conquer but to defend themselves from their attackers. We are facing the first battle of the Israeli DEFENSE Forces.

Sichon miscalculated: "Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword and inherited his territory, from Arnon to Jabbok, as far as the Ammonites…" These new lands extended along the upper half of the Dead Sea, continuing along the Jordan River's shores to the current Golan Heights, now Israeli territory, where it bordered the lands of another powerful monarch: Og, king of Bashan.

Second War

Then came the second war the new Israeli army faced. Og, who did not learn from what happened to Sichon, also came out to attack Israel. “The people (of Israel) moved northward by the road to Bashan, but Og, the king of Bashan, came out with all his people to confront them in battle at Edrei. God said to Moshe: ‘Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him and all his people into your hands. You will do to him what you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon. The people of Israel defeated him, his sons, and all his people completely… and inherited his land…” (Numbers 21:33-35). This last phrase, “and inherited his land,” is also very important. If someone attacks you, you defend yourself and win; you do not have to return their territory; it is now considered your inheritance. The defeatist attitude of the old generation had been replaced by the optimistic attitude of their children. Imbued with solid EMUNA, trusting God’s providence and His help, they prevailed in the military battle against the kings of Transjordan. Thus, Israel emerged as a people prepared to settle in their land, exercise their national will, and always be ready to defend themselves against any enemy.

The New Israeli Soldiers

I can’t help but think of the brave young soldiers who, along with their leaders, fight valiantly today in Gaza with an indomitable BIBLICAL spirit. With a deep conviction that they are fighting what the Jewish Sages called MILCHAMOT HASHEM, “the wars that God’s enemies wage against His representatives, the people of Israel.”

The command line that today leads the armed forces fighting in Gaza are the commanders of the future army and also—I am convinced—the future political leaders of the State of Israel in the coming years. This new generation, which believes in themselves and their Divine mission, will replace the military

leadership that will have to say goodbye to the armed forces and give way to the new generation to take responsibility. They have already accumulated nine months of combat and nine months of unity. They are very clear that their goal is victory over the enemy. They are directing a war of the most challenging and dangerous type, not against a regular army of a country in tank combat plains but against a terrorist organization, a hidden enemy, in tunnels in dense urban areas. It is a very difficult and dangerous war for commanders and fighters.

These soldiers also have a solid Emuna, faith that the God who brought us out of Egypt, defeated Pharaoh, and was with us when we defeated Sihon, Og, and all the peoples of Canaan is still with us today, closer than ever.