

# DID ABRAM WAGE A JUST WAR?

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Serious issues have been raised in the rabbinic literature about the basis and conduct of Abram's war in Genesis 14. These issues are precisely those that are raised whenever a leader is faced with the uncertainties of using force against an enemy. The biblical narrative suggests that the abstract principles of a "just war" put forth by the philosophers can never be sufficient. A leader also has to be guided by an understanding of possible future intentions, and an estimate of casualties. These factors are always open to debate, both before and after a conflict. Consequently, a moral leader can never conduct war without a sense of anguish, which was the human condition of Abram.

Genesis 14 gives the first description of warfare in the Bible, and the central figure in the conflict is the founding father of Israel. The Bible records many subsequent wars, in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Some were wars of self-defense that are universally justifiable, but others were wars of aggrandizement that are no longer tolerable. Nor was aggrandizement considered ideal in biblical times. The prophets called for an end to war: *they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more* (Mic. 4:3). By these standards, how shall we characterize Abram's war?

When Abram (later Abraham) learned that his kinsman Lot was taken captive by King Chedorlaomer and three allied kings, he mustered his forces and pursued them. Abram rescued Lot and others, and recovered plunder taken from five kings in the Valley of Siddim. On Abram's return from war, Melchizedek, the Priest-King of Salem, blessed Abram: *And Abram gave this priest a tenth of the spoils, but kept nothing for himself* (Gen. 14:23). Thus, Abram made it clear that material gain was not his motive for entering into this conflict. Ostensibly, his only objective was to rescue his kinsman Lot, although a close reading of the narrative below suggests that he may have had other concerns as well.

The development of a philosophic concept of a "just war" occurs only in post-biblical, largely medieval European literature. Yet it is hard to imagine that Abram was oblivious to the moral issues later raised by philosophers. Our respect for Abram, as well as our knowledge that his campaign was successful, suggests that he did wage a "just war." However, some concerns remain. We find them mentioned in classic Jewish midrashic works.

What are the requirements for initiating a just war? Suppose Lot were killed in the effort to rescue him? Suppose many of Abram's own men, even Abram himself, were killed in this conflict? Should he risk it? Are there no alternatives to war? Given his decision to wage war, what rules of conduct should he follow on the field of battle? Was pursuit of a fleeing enemy necessary? Abram must have given thought to these matters before he acted.

#### CRITERIA FOR A JUST WAR

Should one go to war to defend an oppressed group? For twelve years, Sodom (and four other cities in the Valley of Siddim) were oppressed by Chedorlaomer, a foreign conqueror. But this did not stir Abram to action. He also stayed out of this conflict when Chedorlaomer and his allies came to crush the efforts of the five kings to liberate themselves. Abram only became involved when he learned that Lot, his kinsman, was taken captive. Abram was duty-bound to aid his blood relation, but did this obligation necessitate a war on Lot's behalf?

War is philosophically justified only if all plausible, peaceful alternatives to resolving the conflict have been exhausted. Already Deuteronomy decrees: *When you draw near a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it* (Deut. 20:10), meaning that war is to be regarded as the last resort. The Book of Judges contains an example of this: Jephthah the Gileadite sent envoys to the King of the Ammonites to avoid conflict (Jud. 11:14). Jephthah resorted to war only after this diplomacy had failed. If Abram's war was just, why are there no indications of prior diplomatic efforts?

The biblical account of this war is also strangely silent about casualties. With no explicit mention of bloodshed it is easy to think of this war as moral. But after the battle Chedorlaomer and his allies are never heard of again. Nor are we told about casualties among Abram's forces. Can it be reasonable for a

## DID ABRAM WAGE A JUST WAR?

reader to assume that there were none?

One of the requirements of a just war is "proportionality." The enemy never forfeits his human rights. Among other things, he has the right to surrender. The enemy may also flee, and a question will arise in a "just war" as to whether hot pursuit is ethical. The suffering caused by war should be kept to a minimum. According to Maimonides: When siege is laid to a city for the purpose of capture, it may not be surrounded on all four sides but only on three, in order to give an opportunity for escape to those who would flee to save their lives.<sup>1</sup> Abram, however, *pursued them as far as Hobah . . .* (14:15).

## CHEDORLAOMER AND HIS ALLIES ATTACK

The objective of Chedorlaomer's campaign was to subdue the five rebellious cities in the valley. On the way, however, Chedorlaomer terrorized innocent settlements. Plunder seems not to have been his reason for doing so, since there was sufficient to be had in the cities in the valley. Chedorlaomer may have wanted to secure his flank and route of return. However, there was no reason to think that these outlying settlements were allied with the cities in the valley. Certainly, the cities in the valley did not come to defense of the

outlying settlements when they were attacked. More likely, this destruction in the surrounding country was simply a tactic in psychological warfare. News of Chedorlaomer's ruthlessness must have reached the cities in the valley and spread fear. The armed forces in the cities were probably demoralized even before they attempted battle.

While this destruction was going on, Abram seems to have been unresponsive. His location near Hebron was high above the battlefield, and apparently not in the line of Chedorlaomer's campaign. Nevertheless, Abram was not entirely passive. His ability to muster his forces quickly when he heard that Lot had been captured suggests that Abram had already put his men on a high state of alert. His forces were ready.

However, the Zohar expresses some concerns (Bereshith 1,112b):

R. Isaac put the question: 'Have we not been taught that a man should not court danger, in reliance on a miracle? And was not Abraham [sic] putting himself into extreme danger in pursuing the four kings and engaging in battle against them?' R. Judah replied: 'Abraham did not set out with the intention of joining battle, nor did he count upon a miracle. What impelled him to leave his house was the distress of Lot, whom he resolved to ransom, taking money with him for this purpose . . .'

The Zohar goes on to attribute the slaughter in battle to the Holy One, not to Abram. Evidently, the possibility that Abram might have killed others in order to free Lot was disturbing:

But as soon as he set out he saw the *Shekinah* illumining the way before him, and hosts of angels encompassing him. Then it was that he began to pursue them, whilst the Holy One slew them. Hence the verse: *and the wicked are put to silence in darkness* (I Sam. 2:9).

However, we have no knowledge as to what Chedorlaomer would have demanded. Abram might have faced an exorbitant expense, or worse, a continuing threat to his economic welfare. Perhaps Abram would be next on Chedorlaomer's list. Abram may have been partly motivated to rescue Lot by force because he also feared for his own future. If so, Abram's war might now be classified as "pre-emptive." However, philosophers have always had difficulty with wars waged to avert supposed greater evils. Thus, the morality of

## DID ABRAM WAGE A JUST WAR?

Abram's war depends on how reliably he estimated Chedorlaomer's future intentions. Given the nature of his campaign, would Chedorlaomer return again – this time to subjugate Abram?

### ABRAM'S TACTIC

Abram probably pursued Chedorlaomer along a different but parallel route north. Unburdened by plunder and captives Abram was able to move at a faster pace than Chedorlaomer, and he caught up with him near Dan. Then at night Abram divided his forces, possibly to reduce chances of early detection, but also to come at Chedorlaomer from different directions and thereby give the appearance of a massive army. His surprise attack was successful. He "defeated" them. Nevertheless, he relentlessly pursued them for miles beyond Dan – as far as Hobah, north of Damascus (14:15). Why pursue them all the way to Hobah?

One scenario is that this pursuit was necessary because Lot had not yet been rescued. The biblical text is not clear on this point, but this interpretation seems unlikely. Armed forces taken by surprise at night will flee for their lives in panic and are unlikely to take captives with them who will only hinder their retreat. Had Chedorlaomer realized that Abram was attacking him (this is doubtful at night), he would have used Lot as a hostage to allow his forces to escape, but this did not happen.

A more likely scenario (but one that may be hard for some readers to accept) is that Abram had the capacity to conduct an unrelenting war. Abram pursued them to Hobah to ensure that Chedorlaomer's forces would never, ever, return again. To achieve his objectives Abram could be pitiless and brutal.

### THE ROLE OF MELCHIZEDEK

As a victorious leader one might expect Abram to return in triumph like Saul after his campaign against the Amalekites (I Sam. 15:12). Instead, Abram was greeted only with bread and wine from the Priest-King Melchizedek, who rightly understood Abram's state of mind. Melchizedek offered food and drink to battle-weary soldiers but, more important, Melchizedek blessed Abram. Abram responded appropriately to this gesture of comfort and concern by giving him a tenth of everything (14:20). Psychologically, we may assume

Abram suffered from what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or, perhaps more familiarly, shell shock.<sup>2</sup> No sensitive person can go into battle and witness the slaughter of other human beings without being burdened with a sense of horror. Abram needed the comfort of a priest, and also: *After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, He said, 'Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you'* (Gen.15:1).

The medieval church divided the Bible into chapters and placed this verse about fear at the beginning of Chapter 15. But some rabbis regard this verse as an extension and completion of Chapter 14, the narrative about Abram's war. Why should Abram be afraid now, at the end of the war, after he had decisively defeated Chedorlaomer?

In the post-biblical commentaries of the Midrash Rabbah (dated from 400 to 650 C.E.) we find in Genesis Rabbah 44:4 the following interpretation: "Rabbi Levi said: Abraham [sic] was filled with misgiving, thinking to himself: 'Maybe there was a righteous or God-fearing man among those troops that I killed.'"

A sense of guilt in thinking that perhaps (or probably) he had killed someone who was, or could have been, a decent person is a psychological price that combatants pay for participation in war.

Rabbi Levi made another comment: "Abraham was fearful, saying, 'Perhaps the sons of the kings that I killed will collect troops and come and wage war against me.'"

As Nehama Leibowitz put it: "Victory is not the end of war. It contains within itself the germs of the next war."<sup>3</sup> It takes careful judgment to determine just how far one should go to insure that an enemy is sufficiently punished so that he will not wish to do battle again.

## CONCLUSIONS

If abstract philosophical requisites for a just war are held up as the standard, then it is possible to fault Abram. Perhaps most persuasive is an argument that Abram resorted to war without giving diplomacy a chance. Abram might have offered to pay a ransom for the return of Lot and his family. Captives in the ancient world were usually a form of loot, and a reasonable reward for Lot's safe return was possibly all that Chedorlaomer wanted.

How far does one go in conflict? It is easy to talk about proportionality

## DID ABRAM WAGE A JUST WAR?

after a conflict is over. In hindsight, once victory is achieved, it always seems wrong to have taken ruthless measures against an enemy. What is overlooked is that, in the heat of battle, victory is not always assured. It almost seems as if Psalm 18 was written with Abram in mind: *I pursued my enemies and overtook them; I did not turn back till I destroyed them. I struck them down, And they could rise no more; They lay fallen at my feet* (vv. 38-39).

An analysis of this biblical narrative reveals some of the limitations in trying to judge a war based on abstract philosophic principles alone. In the end, one has to consider all the circumstances, and there will be differences in opinion. Abram may have sensed that he had an opportunity to rid the area of a force that could (and likely would) be a continuing threat to his freedom. Only at this time would Abram have the advantage of both accessibility and surprise. If he failed to take this opportunity, his life and destiny might be substantially and irrevocably altered. He might never be a free man again. Who will second-guess him?

There is nobody around now to regret the loss of Chedorlaomer and his forces, but in taking military action against him, Abram himself would be burdened for the rest of his life with the thought that possibly he had misjudged Chedorlaomer's intentions, and that bloodshed could have been avoided. Nor would Abram know for sure that his relentless pursuit was necessary to prevent the aggressor, or his heirs, from ever returning.

In every war there are instances of "errors" and "atrocities." Was the bombing, in the Second World War of Dresden, and of Hiroshima and Nagasaki necessary? In the conflict over the Falkland Islands was the British government justified in sinking the Argentine warship *Belgrano*, even though it was apparently retreating from the battle zone? Once victory has been achieved, it is only human to think that possibly some or even all bloodshed could have been avoided. Abram may have had his own doubts on this matter even after reassurance. This, then, is the anguish that a morally sensitive leader must live with when a decision is made to go to war.

## NOTES

1. *The Code of Maimonides Translation of Mishneh Torah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954) Book 14, The Book of Judges, Chapter 6:7.
2. D. Grossman, and B.K. Siddle, "Psychological Effects of Combat," *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999)

[www.killology.com/print/print\\_psychological.htm](http://www.killology.com/print/print_psychological.htm)

3. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1974) pp. 136-141.