

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan

Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist
[87]

But He Did Not Do So...
Insights into Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:13

Updated: March 2026



Background to Our Story

The Israelites Defeat King Sihon

◆ **AI Overview**

According to the Bible, the Israelites under Moses defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, at Jahaz after he refused them passage and attacked (Numbers 21:21-32; Deuteronomy 2:26-37). Israel subsequently took possession of his territory, which stretched from the Arnon to the Jabbok rivers, and occupied his capital city, Heshbon.

Key Aspects of the Battle

- **Refused Passage:** Israel asked to pass through Sihon's territory on their way to Canaan, offering to pay for water and food and stay on the King's Highway.
- **The Conflict:** Sihon rejected this request and mobilized his army to confront Israel at Jahaz.
- **The Victory:** God delivered Sihon into Israel's hand, and they took possession of the entire Amorite kingdom, from Arnon to Jabbok.
- **Significance:** This victory, along with the subsequent defeat of Og of Bashan, provided the Israelites with their first major territory east of the Jordan River, which was later settled by the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.
- **Lasting Impact:** The victory is frequently mentioned in the Bible (e.g., Psalm 135:10-12) as a sign of God's power.

Numbers 21: 21-25

21. And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying,
22. Let me pass through your land; we will not turn into the fields, or into the vineyards; we will not drink of the waters of the well; but we will go along by the king's high way, until we are past your borders.

23. And Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his border; but Sihon gathered all his people together and went out against Israel into the wilderness; and he came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.

24. And Israel struck him with the edge of the sword, and possessed his land from Arnon to Jabbok, to the sons of Ammon; for the border of the sons of Ammon was strong.

25. And Israel took all these cities; and Israel lived in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages.

Deuteronomy 2: 24-30

24. Rise, take your journey, and pass over the brook Arnon; behold, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land; begin to possess it, and engage him in battle.

25. This day will I begin to put the dread of you and the fear of you upon the nations that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you, and shall tremble, and be in anguish because of you.

26. And I sent messengers out of the wilderness of Kedemoth to Sihon king of Heshbon with words of peace, saying,

27. Let me pass through your land; I will go along by the high way, I will neither turn to the right hand nor to the left.

28. You shall sell me food for money, that I may eat; and give me water for money, that I may drink; only I will pass through on foot;

29. Like the sons of Esau who live in Seir, and the Moabites who live in Ar, did to me; until I shall pass over the Jordan to the land which the Lord our God gives us.

30. But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him; for the Lord your God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into your hand, as is apparent this day.

? Please carefully read the above verses (Deuteronomy 2:24–30). Focus particularly on the two underlined verses. Is there anything in these verses that requires further explanation?

Deuteronomy 20:10-12

10. When you come near a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it.

11. And it shall be, if it gives you answer of peace, and opens to you, then it shall be, that all the people that are found in it shall be tributaries to you, and they shall serve you.

12. And if it will make no peace with you, but will make war against you, then you shall besiege it...

Autonomy and Heteronomy

◆ AI Overview

Autonomy (in Ethics & Philosophy) is the capacity to make an informed, uncoerced decision. Derived from the Greek *autos* ("self") and *nomos* ("law" or "rule"), it essentially refers to "self-rule." It is the moral right and ability to think and act for oneself. Immanuel Kant viewed it as a prerequisite for morality, defining it as the capacity to follow objective moral laws through reason rather than impulse.

Heteronomy is the ethical and philosophical condition where an individual's actions or moral choices are governed by external forces—such as social norms, desires, authority figures, or customs—rather than by their own rational will. It is the opposite of [autonomy](#), representing a state of, or tendency toward, being controlled by outside influences, which [Kant](#) regarded as a lack of true moral freedom.

Key Aspects and Types of Heteronomy

- Moral Heteronomy: Acting out of fear of punishment, desire for reward, or conformity to social rules rather than internal moral principles.
- Rational/Desire-Driven Heteronomy: Allowing personal desires, passions, or urges to dictate actions instead of using reason to govern behavior
- Authority-Driven Heteronomy: Obedience to external authority figures (parents, laws, leaders) without personal rational validation, common in early childhood development, typically between ages 4–7.
- Social/Traditional Heteronomy: Adhering strictly to conventions, customs, or peer pressure, often described as a form of cultural "alien rule".
- Political Heteronomy: The subjection of a community to the rule of another power, such as colonial rule or foreign occupation.
- In Kantian ethics, acting heteronomously is considered a form of "moral slavery," as the will is not self-determined, which is necessary for moral responsibility.

Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:13

הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אָמַר לוֹ שִׁילָחֵם עִם סִיחֹן, שְׁנֹאֲמַר (דְּבָרִים ב: כד) וְהִתְגַּר בּוֹ מִלְחָמָה, וְהוּא לֹא עָשָׂה כֵן, אֲלֵא (דְּבָרִים ב: כו) וְאֶשְׁלַח מַלְאָכָי וְגו', אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כִּי אָמַרְתִּי לָךְ לְהִלָּחֵם עִמּוֹ, וְאַתָּה פָּתַחְתָּ בְּשָׁלוֹם, חֲיִידָה שְׁאֲנִי מְקַיֵּם גְּזֵרְתָּהּ, כֹּל מִלְחָמָה שִׁיהוּ הוֹלְכִים לֹא יְהוּ פּוֹתְחִים אֲלֵא בְּשָׁלוֹם, שְׁנֹאֲמַר: כִּי תִקְרַב אֶל עִיר וְגו'.

The Holy One blessed be He told him [Moses] to wage war with Sihon, as it is stated: "Rise, take your journey, and pass over the brook Arnon; behold, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land; begin to possess it, and engage him in battle" (Deuteronomy 2:24). But he did not do so. Instead, "I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemot to Sihon, king of Heshbon, with words of peace" (Deuteronomy 2:26).

The Holy One blessed be He said to him [to Moses]: This is what I said to you, to wage war against him, but you started off with an offer of peace. By your life, I will fulfill your decree: Every war that they [the Children of Israel] wage, they shall start off only with an offer of peace,' as it is stated (Deuteronomy 20:10): "When you approach a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it...."



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did God command Moses to wage war against Sihon?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Bonus ? Why did Moses send a proposal of peace to Sihon, despite God's command to wage war?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? How do we know that Moses' actions did not go unnoticed by God?

? How did God confirm Moses' decision?

Bonus ? Why did God affirm Moses' decision?

? What is so bold about this midrash from the 9th century?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! Although the commandments are meant to be followed, God gives you permission, and even encourages you, to trust your moral compass! Ultimately, you alone are responsible for your moral decisions.

! If God can change His mind...



Our text presents Moses disobeying God's command to attack Sihon without warning. Acting on his own, and most likely guided by ethical considerations, Moses instead sends a request to pass through Sihon's land and even offers to pay for the water the Children of Israel would drink. God, noticing Moses' departure from His original instruction, affirms Moses's actions, thereby challenging the notion that God demands blind obedience. God's apparent "change of mind" serves as a reminder of the importance of remaining open to change when circumstances call for it.