

# Calling for Peace in the Conquest of Canaan

## Exegetical Approaches

### Overview

Commentators debate whether it is obligated, prohibited, or simply permitted to negotiate for peace with the Canaanites. Rashi takes a zero tolerance policy against the Seven Nations, claiming that it is prohibited to call for peace before embarking on the Wars of Conquest and that no overtures on the Canaanites' part will suffice to override the decree of annihilation. They present too much of a religious threat to allow them to remain as neighbors.

Other exegetes are less comfortable with such a blanket statement of destruction, and allow for varying levels of negotiations. Thus, Raavad claims that Israel is obligated to seek out peace, but only until they cross the Jordan, while Radak maintains that the obligation persists even after the Wars of Conquest have begun. Rashbam takes a middle approach, claiming that Israel may not initiate a call for peace, but that they are allowed to accept a Canaanite surrender, if they, on their own, submit themselves to Israelite rule.

### Prohibited

It is prohibited to call for peace to the Seven Nations and any overtures for peace on their part are rejected.

Sources: Perhaps Sifre Devarim, Pesikta DeRav Kahana, Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, R. Yosef Bechor Shor, perhaps Rambam Sefer HaMitzvot

Contrast between Canaanite and distant cities – Canaanite cities differ from distant cities in two aspects: when embarking on the Wars of Conquest it is prohibited to negotiate for peace, and, in addition, all women and children are to be killed.<sup>5</sup> This reading assumes that Devarim 20:16-18 ("רק מערי העמים...") stands in contrast to all of verses 10-15, and not just to the immediately preceding verses which deal with the scenario in which peace is rejected.<sup>6</sup>

HACHAREIM TACHARIM OTAM – This position is supported by the many verses throughout Torah<sup>7</sup> which speak of annihilating the Seven Nations and do not mention any alternative peace option.

Reason for decree of annihilation – According to this approach the reason for the decree of annihilation is religious in nature, as expressed in Devarim 20:18, "למען אשר לא ילמדו אתכם לעשות ככל תועבתם אשר עשו לאלהיהם."<sup>8</sup> Rashi asserts that

even if the Canaanites had rejected idolatry, thereby eliminating the religious threat, it would not suffice. Since their repentance would be motivated by fear it would not be sincere, and, thus, the Canaanite presence would still be problematic.

**LO TICHROT LAHEM BRIT... V'LO TITCHATEIN BAM** – The prohibition in Devarim 79 against making a treaty with or marrying Canaanites seems problematic for this approach as it presupposes that some Canaanites are not killed. These sources could respond in either of the following ways:

The commandment regarding annihilation and the prohibitions against alliances are not distinct commands but rather two sides of a coin. Hashem is simply explaining why there is a need to destroy everyone: in order to ensure that no treaty or marriages will be made.<sup>10</sup>

Alternatively, as Ibn Ezra

explains, the prohibitions against making alliances were needed for the period of the conquest itself, as Hashem had promised that the nations would not be destroyed at once, but rather over a long period.<sup>11</sup>

**Trickery of Gibeonites** – Both the trickery of the Gibeonites and the nation's fear<sup>12</sup> regarding the consequences of having made an alliance are totally understandable. The Gibeonites correctly understood that their only chance for survival was to convince the Israelites that they were from a distant city, since otherwise the Israelite were obligated to destroy them.<sup>13</sup> The Israelites, for their part, were upset as they had unknowingly violated Hashem's commandment.

**Desire to kill the Gibeonites** – The Israelite desire to kill the Gibeonites, were it not for their oath,<sup>14</sup> is logical since peace was not supposed to have been an option. Otherwise, even if the nation was upset at being duped, there would seem to be no reason to kill the Gibeonites as they would have allowed them to negotiate peace regardless.

**Calling to Sichon: VA'ESHLACH... DIVREI SHALOM** – These sources must explain why Moshe called for peace to Sichon, if he was from the Emorites, one of the Seven Nations:

R"Y Bekhor Shor explains that since most of Sichon's land belonged to Amon and Moav, and was not part of Canaan, Moshe could call for peace.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, it is possible that none of the land on the Eastern side of the Yarden

was considered part of the "promised land of Canaan" and thus the prohibition might not have applied, despite Sichon being an Emorite.

These sources might further argue that Moshe was not negotiating a peaceful surrender at all, but simply asking leave to pass through Sichon's land.

How could the nation save Rachav?

Blameworthy action – Pesikta DeRav Kahana blames the nation for saving Rachav, claiming that their actions transgressed Hashem's commandment to destroy all of the Canaanite inhabitants.

Divine decree – Alternatively, these sources could suggest that Rachav's salvation was an exception, sanctioned by Divine decree.<sup>16</sup>

Canaanite pockets in time of Judges – These sources would explain that the nation's incomplete conquest and the presence of tribute-paying Canaanites described in Sefer Shofetim was problematic. This is supported by the fact that the people are in fact rebuked for having made alliances with the Canaanites.<sup>17</sup>

VAYA'ALEIM SH'LOMO L'MAS OVEID – Though Shelomo is not explicitly chastised, his decision to enslave remaining Canaanites rather than obliterate them might also be viewed as problematic.

Yehoshua 11:19-20 – Yehoshua 11:19-20 is problematic for this approach as it suggests that the only reason that Canaanite cities did not make peace was because Hashem hardened their hearts, implying that otherwise peace would have been an option.

**Obligated**

There is an obligation to offer peace terms before waging war against the Seven Nations, similar to the obligation before fighting an "optional war" against other enemies. This position subdivides regarding when the offer was available:

**Even in Later Stages**

Peace negotiations were allowed even after the Wars of Conquest had begun.

**Sources: Rambam, Radak, Ramban, Ralbag, Abarbanel**

**Contrast between Canaanite and distant cities – According to these sources, the directives of Devarim 20:16-18 stand in contrast only to those in the immediately preceding verses (12-14) regarding what to do to a city who has rejected peace,<sup>19</sup> but do not come to negate the obligation to offer peace also to the Seven Nations.**

**Conditions of peace – In addition to the two conditions of tribute and servitude (מס ועבדות) mentioned in the verses, all these sources agree that the Canaanites must also reject idolatry and accept the seven Noachide laws.<sup>21</sup> Ramban explains that despite the fact that this is not explicit in the verses, it can be assumed that this was necessary from the statements in Shemot 23:33 and Devarim 20:18 regarding the dangers of idolatry and the need to rid the country of it and its worshipers.**

**Reason for decree of annihilation – These sources agree that the need to obliterate the Canaanites stems from the religious threat that they present. Therefore, if that threat is eliminated via their rejection of idolatry and submissive position, there is no longer a need to destroy them.**

**Yehoshua 11:19-20 – These sources point to Yehoshua 11:19-20 as proof that the Israelites were supposed to negotiate for peace even with the Canaanites. The verses state that had it not been for Hashem hardening their hearts, some of the cities might have made peace with Israel, implying that peace was an option. This position does not explain, however, what was the point of commanding the nation to call for peace if Hashem was to ensure that the call was going to be rejected regardless. For a discussion of other cases where Hashem similarly hardens hearts and nonetheless has people go through motions that will therefore be irrelevant, see Hardened Hearts.**

**LO TICHROT LAHEM B'RIT... V'LO TITCHATEIN BAM – These two prohibitions assume that there might be Canaanites remaining in the land, supporting the idea that peaceful surrender was possible.**

**Making peace versus not making covenants – These commentators differ in how they understand how the prohibition to make a covenant relates to the call for peace:**

**Prohibited – Rambam claims that despite the possibility of making peace, there is still no permission to make a covenant.**

**Permitted if repent – Ramban, on the other hand, assumes that making a covenant is only prohibited with idolaters, as the verse says, "לא תקרת להם" 22? וְלֹא־לְהִיחֵם בְּרִית׃ If Canaanites reject idolatry, as is expected of those who accept the terms of peace, then covenants are allowed.<sup>23</sup> Radak similarly explains that the prohibition refers to making a covenant of equals. If, however, the Canaanites are subservient and accept Israelite laws (as they would if they made peace) it would not be problematic.**

**Calling to Sichon: VA'ESHLACH... DIVREI SHALOM – Ramban points to Moshe's offer not to wage war against Sichon as proof that making peace with Canaanites must be allowed.<sup>24</sup>**

**Saving Rachav – These sources could say that Rachav accepted the terms of peace, as her aid to the Israelites and recognition of God<sup>25</sup> might imply.**

**VAYA'ALEIM SH'LOMO L'MAS OVEID – Shelomo's actions are also viewed as being in accord with Torah law. He allowed remaining Canaanites to stay in the land as long as they were "לְמַסַּע עֲבָד׃" 62?׃**

**Canaanite pockets in time of Judges – According to this approach, it is not clear why the people should have been chastised in Sefer Shofetim for taxing the Canaanites rather than destroying them, if this was allowed.**

**Ramban suggests these Canaanites had not accepted all of the terms of peace, paying tribute but not laboring for the State.<sup>27</sup>**

**The Rambam might answer that the tribes were only chastised for making a covenant, not for leaving the Canaanites alive.**

**Trickery of the Gibeonites – It is not clear why, according to this approach, the Gibeonites needed to resort to trickery rather than simply accept the Israelites' call to peace. They offer several possible explanations:**

**Misunderstood offer – Rambam posits that they had originally rejected Yehoshua's call and did not realize that the offer was still open.**

**Already rejected the offer – Ramban and Ralbag, however, raise the possibility that the Gibeonites' assumption was in fact correct, and once they had rejected the original call for peace, Yehoshua would no longer have been open to surrender.**

**Distrusted offer – Radak claims that, after seeing the destruction of Yericho and Ai, the Gibeonites simply did not trust the Israelite offer and thought that**

the call for peace was a deceitful tactic aimed at putting them off their guard so the Israelites could more easily defeat them.<sup>28</sup>

Did not want terms of offer – Ramban also raises the possibility that the Gibeonites were hoping to make a covenant of equals, without having to acquiesce to the Israelite terms of peace (tribute and servitude).

Desire to kill the Gibeonites – If the Israelites were allowed to keep the Canaanites alive, it is not clear why they wanted to kill the Gibeonites after their deception was discovered.

Rambam, Radak and Ramban answer that the princes so desired not because of the commandment of "תִּהְיֶה אֲנִי וְעַמִּי כְּכָל הָעַמִּים" but since the Gibeonites tricked them into making a covenant that was not allowed.

In contrast, according to Ramban and Ralbag's possibility that the Gibeonites had already rejected Yehoshua's offer, and it was no longer open, the desire to kill the Gibeonites stemmed from the original command to obliterate those who do not make peace.

What would have happened had everyone accepted peace? According to this position it is unclear what would have happened if all the nations had agreed to surrender. Where would the Israelites have lived? Could the land have sustained everyone living together? How would having such a large enslaved population have affected the nation?

Moral motivation – It is likely that this position is motivated, at least in part, by the discomfort with a blanket decree to annihilate all Canaanites.

**Only in Early Stages**

Peace negotiations were allowed only until entry into the land, or perhaps until the first battle against the Canaanites began.

Sources: Yerushalmi Sheviit, Raavad, Tosafot

Contrast between Canaanite and distant cities – According to this approach, the verses in Devarim contrast the two types of cities only with regards to whether or not to leave alive women and children when peace is rejected. However, there is an obligation to call for peace to all.<sup>31</sup>

Terms of Peace – According to Tosafot the terms of peace require a rejection

of idolatry in addition to the conditions discussed in the Torah explicitly.

Why differentiate between before and after entry? If making peace is prohibited in order to prevent the Canaanites from negatively influencing the beliefs and deeds of Israel, it is not clear why there should be a distinction between pre/post entry.

Yehoshua 11:19-21 – This position, too, is supported by these verses which suggest that had Hashem not hardened their hearts, the Canaanites would have made peace.

LO TICHROT LAHEM B'RIT... V'LO TITCHATEIN BAM – Since there is the possibility of making peace before entry/the conquest began, there could be surviving Canaanites who might be a harmful influence, as these prohibitions suggest. Thus, even though peace is allowed, covenants are not.

Calling to Sichon: VA'ESHLACH... DIVREI SHALOM – As war with Sichon took place before crossing the Jordan, Moshe was obligated to negotiate for peace before fighting.

Saving of Rachav – According to Tosafot, surrender was allowed until the wars of conquest began, so there was no problem with saving Rachav. The other commentators might suggest that she was uniquely exempted by Hashem for having aided the Israelites.

Trickery of Gibeonites – The Gibeonites had to resort to trickery since they had already lost the opportunity to make peace.

Desire to kill the Gibeonites – The people thought that the Gibeonites needed to be killed because the command of "תִּהְרַגְמָם" applied to them.

Canaanite pockets in time of Judges – These sources could explain that the nation is chastised for allowing Canaanites to remain in their midst because surrender was no longer an option at this point and they should have been killed.

VAYA'ALEIM SH'LOMO L'MAS OVEID – These sources might similarly suggest that, despite his not being chastised, Shelomo was in the wrong when he allowed remaining Canaanites to be part of his labor force rather than destroying them. And, in fact, at the end of his life, among the foreign women whom he marries and who lead him astray are also Hittites.

Moral motivation – This position might also be motivated by a desire to

minimize the extent of the decree of annihilation.

## Accepted

Although the Israelites are not commanded to seek out peace, if, before hostilities commence, the Canaanites take the initiative to submit themselves to Israel, their surrender is accepted.

Sources: Rashbam, Chizkuni

Contrast between Canaanite and distant cities – Canaanites cities are contrasted with distant cities with regards to both the possibility of calling for peace, and the need to kill women and children when at war.

Reason for decree of annihilation – Chizkuni posits that there is a military-political, rather than religious, motivation for the directive. If Canaanite inhabitants are left alive, they will dispute the inheritances that had belonged to their relatives and claim them as their own.<sup>32</sup>

Why is peace accepted but not offered? If the Canaanites come to surrender of their own volition there is less reason to think that they will later dispute the taken territories.

Terms of peace – These sources do not elaborate, but might suggest that the conditions are identical to those outlined for distant cities: tribute and servitude.<sup>33</sup>

Yehoshua 11:19-21 – These verses assume that there was a possibility that the Canaanites might have made peace. These sources would likely explain that the verses are speaking of the fact that the Canaanites had the prerogative to initiate surrender.

Saving Rachav – It was permissible to save Rachav since she switched to the Israelite side on her own accord before the war began.

Calling to Sichon: VA'ESHLACH... DIVREI SHALOM – These sources might posit that Sichon's land was not considered Canaanite as it was on the Eastern side of the Jordan, and thus the laws of "distant cities" applied and Moshe was allowed to seek out peace before fighting him.

Trickery of Gibeonites – This position might suggest, as above, that the Gibeonites did not know that if they simply asked for peace, it would have been accepted.

**Desire to kill the Gibeonites – Both Rashbam and Chizkuni point out that there was no problem with accepting the Gibeonites. If so, however, it is not clear why the nation desired to harm them.**

**They could suggest that it was only the laymen who so desired, and they simply erred in thinking that the alliance was problematic.**

**Alternatively, it is possible that although peace was an option, the covenant made was problematic since it was one of equals and did not originally include the necessary terms of submission and taxation.<sup>34</sup>**

**Canaanite pockets in time of Judges – The Israelites are chastised since, in the absence of voluntary surrender, they were supposed to have killed off the Canaanites in their territories.**

**VAYA'ALEIM SH'LOMO L'MAS OVEID – Since the verse states that the Canaanites whom Shelomo taxed were those whom the nation was unable to destroy, it is hard to suggest that they were people who had initiated surrender. As such, these sources might suggest that Shelomo really should have killed them rather than levy a labor tax on them.**

**Position's motivation – This position might assume that the simple reading of the verses prohibits a call for peace to the Canaanites, but simultaneously desire that there be some way that Canaanites can surrender without being annihilated.**