

Og's Tombstone: Redemption of Prayer Beneath Sinai

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18th Century Islamic drawing of the "Giant Demon Og" attempting to kill Moses and the Jews with a mountain

I - The Encounter

The Torah itself doesn't say much about the encounter. In fact, the whole story is only three verses long:

1. Numbers 21

33 Then they turned and headed north toward the Bashan. Og, the king of Bashan, came out toward them with all his people, to wage war at Edrei.

לְגוֹיִּפְנוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ דֶרֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן וַיֵּצֵא עוֹג
מֶלֶךְ-הַבָּשָׁן לִקְרֹאתָם הוּא וְכָל-עַמּוֹ
לְמִלְחָמָה אֲדָרְעִי:

<p>34The Lord said to Moses, "Do not fear him, for I have delivered him, his people, and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sichon the king of the Amorites who dwells in Heshbon.</p>	<p>לְדוֹי אָמֹר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה אֶל־תִּירָא אֹתוֹ כִּי בְיָדִי נָתַתִּי אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ וְאֶת־ אֶרְצוֹ וְעַשִׂיתָ לוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב בְּחֶשְׁבֹן:</p>
<p>35They smote him, his sons and all his people, until there was no survivor, and they took possession of his land.</p>	<p>לְהוֹיְלוֹ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ עַד־ בְּלֹתֵי הַשְּׂאִירֵלוֹ שָׂרִיד וְיִירָשׁוּ אֶת־ אֶרְצוֹ:</p>

The Talmud, however, says that Og was a giant with tremendous strength, and it tells an incredible story about what happened during the battle:

2. Brachos 54b

<p>With regard to the rock that Og, King of Bashan, sought to throw upon Israel, there is no biblical reference, but rather a tradition was transmitted:</p> <p>Og said: How large is the camp of Israel? It is three parasangs. I will go and uproot a mountain three parasangs long and I will hurl it upon them and kill them.</p> <p>He went, uprooted a mountain three parasangs long, and brought it on his head. And The Holy One, Blessed be He, brought ants (others translate as “grasshoppers”) upon it and they bored a hole through the mountain and it fell on his neck.</p>	<p>אָבֹן שֶׁבִקֵּשׁ עוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן לְזָרוֹק עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, גָּמְרָא גְמִירֵי לָהּ.</p> <p>אָמַר מַחְגָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל כַּמָּה הוּא — תִּלְתָּא פְּרָסִי, אִיזִיל וְאִיעָקֵר טוֹרָא בַר תִּלְתָּא פְּרָסִי וְאִישְׁדִּי עַלְיָהּ, וְאִיקְטְלִינָהּ.</p> <p>אִזְל עָקֵר טוֹרָא בַר תִּלְתָּא פְּרָסִי וְאִייתִי עַל רִישִׁיהָ, וְאִייתִי קוֹדֶשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא עָלֶיהָ קִמְצִי וְנִקְבֹּוהָ, וְנִחִית בְּצוֹאֲרֵיהָ .</p>
<p>Og wanted to remove it from his head; his teeth were extended to one side of his head and to the other and he was unable to remove it.</p>	<p>הוּוּ בְּעֵי לְמַשְׁלָפָה, מְשַׁכֵּי שִׁינָיָה לְהָאֵי גִיסָא וְלְהָאֵי גִיסָא וְלֹא מְצִי לְמַשְׁלָפָה. וְהֵינּוּ דְכְּתִיב: "שְׁנֵי רְשָׁעִים שְׁבֵרֵת".</p>

<p>And that is what is written: “You break the teeth of the wicked” (<u>Psalms 3:8</u>). And this is in accordance with the homiletic interpretation of Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish, as Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “You break the teeth of the wicked”? Do not read it as: You break [<i>shibarta</i>], but rather as: You lengthened [<i>shirbavta</i>].</p>	<p>וְכִדְרֵבֵי שְׂמֵעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ. דָּאָמַר רַבִּי שְׂמֵעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ: מַאי דִּכְתִּיב “שְׁנֵי רִשְׁעִים שִׁבְרֵת” — אֵל תִּקְרִי “שִׁבְרֵת” אֶלֶּא “שִׁרְבַבְתָּ”.</p>
<p>How tall was Moses? He was ten cubits tall. He took an axe ten cubits long, jumped up ten cubits, and struck Og in the ankle and killed him.</p>	<p>מֹשֶׁה כַּמָּה הָוָה — עָשָׂר אַמּוֹת, שָׁקִיל נִרְגָא בַר עָשָׂר אַמּוֹן, שָׁוֹר עָשָׂר אַמּוֹן, וּמַחֲיִיה בְּקַרְסוּלֵיהּ וְקָטְלֵיהּ.</p>

It’s an incredible, bizarre story. It’s so strange that many of the commentators believe that it didn’t actually happen. The 13th Century Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderes (known as the Rashba), and others believe that while the Moshe and the Jews fought Og as the Torah recounts, the Talmud’s version is merely an allegory. But what does it mean?

- **There are a lot of strange things about this story. What stands out to you?**

Here are some puzzling parts to think about:

- Why did Og try to kill the Jews by crushing them beneath a mountain?
- Why did Hashem stop Og by making the mountain get stuck on his head?
- Why did Hashem send insects to hollow it out?
- Why didn’t Hashem crush Og with mountain (like Og had wanted to do to the Jews) instead of just immobilizing him?
- Why was Moshe the one who personally fought Og?

II – Parallel Narratives

Perhaps the way to begin making sense of what happened is to find a similar story. Now granted there aren't any other stories of giants crushing Jews with mountains, but take a look at these two pictures:



Notice any similarities?

The first picture is Og preparing to crush the Jews with a mountain. The second picture shows the Jews trembling, cowering before another mountain: Mount Sinai.

In fact, the Talmud says that the Jews were almost crushed by the mountain:

3. Shabbos 88b

The Torah says, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at bottom part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר אמר
 רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא
 מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך

<p>verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a barrel, and said to them: “If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.”</p>	<p>הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם</p>
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In both stories, the Jews were almost crushed by mountains.

- **Can you find any other similarities?**

I think there are actually a few, but one that stands out is there is one person who stands between the Jews and the mountains: Moshe. Moshe is the one brings the Torah down the mountain to the Jews, and Moshe is the one jumps up to prevent Og’s mountain from crushing the Jews.

It almost seems that Og was trying to destroy the Jews by re-enacting Matan Torah, only this time with G-d’s threat fulfilled. Ostensibly, Og seems to believe that he can harness the power of the Torah and crush the Jews beneath it.

- **Why does the Gemara depict Og’s battle strategy to resemble Matan Torah?**
- **How could Og hope to succeed with such a strategy? Hashem didn’t carry out His threat at Mount Sinai, so why did Og think Hashem would allow him to do it?!**

III – Og’s Merits

What else do we know about Og?

There are several references to Og throughout the corpus of rabbinic and Biblical literature, but there’s actually something else about Og that’s implied in the verses in Bamidbar we read earlier. Take a look again at Source #1 in verse 34.

- **Can you find anything strange about Og in verse 34?** (Hint: What effect did he have on people?)

He made Moshe feel afraid.

In verse 34, Hashem is speaking directly to Moshe, exhorting him not to fear Og, and reassuring him that he would be victorious just like he was with Sichon (earlier in the chapter).

This is extremely uncharacteristic of Moshe. Moshe wasn't usually afraid of being defeated by enemies of the Jewish people. For example, earlier in the chapter (Numbers 21:21-31), the Jews fought Sichon and there is no mention of Moshe being afraid. What makes it even stranger is that the Talmud (Niddah 61a) says Sichon and Og were brothers.

- **Why was Moshe afraid?**

The Talmud asks this question:

4. Niddah 61a

<p>Now, Sichon and Og were brothers... Why was Moshe afraid of Og and not Sichon? Rabbi Yoḥanan says that Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: From Hashem's response to the Righteous One [i.e. Moshe] one can infer what he feared in his heart. He said to himself: Perhaps the merit of our forefather Abraham will stand for Og and save him. As it is stated: "And the fugitive came, and told Avraham the Hebrew [that Lot was taken captive]" (<u>Genesis 14:13–14</u>). And Rabbi Yoḥanan said that the term "fugitive" is referring to Og, who was saved from the punishment of the generation of the flood. For this reason, Moses was more afraid of Og.</p>	<p>מכדי סיחון ועוג אחי הוּו... מאי שנא מעוג דקמסתפי ומאי שנא מסיחון דלא קמסתפי א"ר יוחנן אר"ש בן יוחי מתשובתו של אותו צדיק אתה יודע מה היה בלבו אמר שמא תעמוד לו זכות של אברהם אבינו שנאמר ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברהם העברי ואמר רבי יוחנן זה עוג שפלט מדור המבול</p>
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Moshe was afraid that Og's merit of telling of Avraham that Lot had been captured when the city of Sedum was pillaged would enable Og to defeat the Jews. Indeed, the midrash (Genesis Rabbah 42:12) says that Moshe's fears were not unfounded. Og merited to live an incredibly

long life (it had been hundreds of years since Avraham died) and rule a country just because he told Avraham what had happened to Lot.

Og doesn't seem to have done anything particularly heroic or righteous; running away from a battle to tell someone that their relative was captured is certainly a nice thing to do, but it doesn't seem to merit such an incredible reward of near immortality and invincibility. But what makes it even stranger is that the midrash tells us that Og had a duplicitous ulterior motive for his good deed:

5. Genesis Rabbah 42:12

<p>Og did not have pure motivations for his actions. He said to himself: “Avraham is vengeful. I will tell him that his nephew [Lot] was captured and he will go out to battle and be killed. Then I will marry Sarah his wife.” Hashem said to him: “I swear that you will be rewarded for your steps [to warn Avraham] with a long life. And you will be punished for your evil intention to kill this righteous person [Avraham] by falling into the hands of Avraham’s children.</p>	<p>הוא לא נתפון לשם שמים אלא אמר אברהם זה קונין הוא, ועכשו אני אומר לו נשבה בן אחיך והוא יוצא למלחמה ונהרג ואני נוטל את שרי אשתו. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא חייך שכר פסיעותיך אתה נוטל שאת מאריך ימים, ועל שחשבת להרג את הצדיק חייך שאתה רואה אלה אלפים ורבי רבבות מבני בניו. ואין סופו של אותו האיש לפל אלא בידו,</p>
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- **Why was Og rewarded for his “good deed” of warning Avraham if did it for the wrong reason?**
- **If intentions don't matter, then why did Og's merit not protect him when he fought Moshe?**

VI – Og the Utilitarian

In order to understand Og's relationship with Hashem, let's take a look at how the midrash describes another time when Og escaped. The midrash says that Og actually lived during the time of the Great Flood. But instead of residing in Noah's Ark, Og found another way to survive:

6. Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 23

<p>And all living things which were upon the face of the earth decayed, as it is said, "And every living thing was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground" (Gen. 7:23), except Noah and those who were with him in the ark, as it is said, "And Noah only was left, and they that were with him in the ark" (<i>ibid.</i>), except Og, king of Bashan, who sat down on a piece of wood under the ladder of the ark. He swore to Noah and to his sons that he would be their servant forever. What did Noah do? He bored an aperture in the ark, and he put (through it) his food daily for him, and he also survived</p>	<p>ונמחו כל היקום שבארץ שנאמר וימח את כל היקום אשר על פני האדמה, חוץ מנח וכל אשר אתו בתבה שנאמר וישאר אך נח ואשר אתו בתיבה, וחוץ מעוג מלך הבשן שישב לו על עץ אחד מן הסולמות של התיבה ונשבע לנח ולבניו שיהיה להם עבד עולם מה עשה נח נקב חור אח' בתיבה והיה מושיט לו מזונו בכל יום ויום ונשאר גם הוא</p>
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- **What imagery does Og's survival method evoke?**
- **Why didn't Og live in the Ark?**

The simple answer to why Og couldn't live in the Ark is because the midrash says he was a giant, so he couldn't fit inside. But if you think about it, that answer is rather difficult: Hashem commanded Noah to build the Ark with specific dimensions, and if Hashem wanted Og in the Ark, then He could have told Noah to build a bigger one. Moreover, even with the given dimensions, it would take a miracle for all the animals to fit inside. Indeed, the midrash says that the Ark admitted those that were righteous and rebuffed those that were not. It would seem then, that Og was not allowed into the Ark. He wasn't righteous enough to go into the Ark.

So he found another way to survive. He found a legal loophole by holding on to the outside of the Ark. He survived by latching onto the periphery of God's munificence and mercy without pledging himself to God's will. Og gamed the system and survived.

He did it again with Avraham. The fugitive told Avraham of his nephew's capture and merited to continue to survive and thrive for centuries as a king (and not the slave like he promised Noah).

- **How could Og “game the system?”**

Og was a utilitarianist. Unlike the nations of the world who denied Hashem’s existence and omnipotence, Og believed in an All-Powerful God. He believed that Hashem controlled the resources in the world. But Og didn’t want to serve God, he merely wanted to get the resources God controlled. **He followed God’s commandments, but not God’s values or desires.** And while he was not righteous like Noach, Avraham, and Moshe were and thus denied entrance to the Ark, Og still followed God’s rules and was rewarded accordingly.

Thus, Og sought to use the same power to crush the Jews. He sought to use the Torah for his own benefit. To Og, the Torah was God’s will. It was a rulebook for how to get stuff from God. It was a power that could be harnessed for Og’s desires. Looking back at his life, a life full of surviving by harnessing the Torah to further his personal interests, Og was confident that he could crush the Jews with the force of Sinai and its Torah.

VII – Life at the Foot of Sinai

But he couldn’t. The mountain stuck to his head and immobilized him. Sinai paralyzed him.

- **Why did Og’s strategy fail him when he tried to reenact Matan Torah?**

The Torah is more than a rulebook. It’s God’s value system. And the closer one gets to God, the less independence one can have if their desires run contrary to God’s. Og didn’t want to retreat, but he couldn’t go forward if he wanted to maintain his independent agenda. Thus, he was paralyzed.

But if that’s the case, then we must ask ourselves a self-incriminating question?

- **Were the Jews any different than Og?**

Let’s go back to Source #3. The Jews accepted the Torah because they were forced to. God threatened to crush them beneath Sinai. They may have accepted God’s rules, but what is more self-serving than to survive!?

VIII – The Redemption of Prayer

To understand the difference between Og and the Jews, let's return to how the mountain came to be stuck on Og's head – the ants. What do insects symbolize in the Talmud's homily?

The Maharsha (17th Century Polish Rabbi) explains that the insects symbolize how the Jews were able to triumph over Og:

7. Maharsha's Commentary to Brachos 54b

This is a reference to the merit of Yaakov as it says (Isaiah 41:14) "Do not fear worm of Jacob." When [the prophet] compares the descendants of Yaakov to worm whose only strength is in its mouth, it refers to prayer.	דהיינו זכותו של יעקב כו' שנאמר בו אל תיראי תולעת יעקב וגו' וע"פ מ"ש כתולעת זו שאין לה גבורה אלא בפיה דהיינו בתפלתן
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- **Why is the power of prayer able to triumph over Og?**

Let's think about what prayer actually is. Imagine you're sitting in shul (something we hope we'll be able to do soon) praying and a child walks up to asking what you're doing. Probably the simplest answer is that you're talking to God. But then the child asks you another question: Why?

- **What is the purpose of prayer?**

8. Brachos 32a

A person should always first praise God and then pray [Shmoneh Esrei (Silent Prayer Service) to request things from Hashem]	לעולם יסדר אדם שבחו של הקב"ה ואח"כ יתפלל
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It seems that the very definition of prayer is asking Hashem for what we want. Once again, we seem to be doing the exact same thing Og did!

- **Why is prayer not another example of "gaming the system" to get what we want? Isn't it transactional?!**

9. Rav Soloveitchik (Worship of the Heart pg. 10)

Prayer [is] basically [a] dialogue between finitude and infinite...God is the listener and man is the speaker. Many contemporary conceptions of prayer service diminish it considerably due to a one-sided preoccupation with its hymnal and thanksgiving elements. Judaism vigorously disagreed with this elimination of petition. On the contrary Judaism not only retained the so-called selfish prayer in its liturgical texts but considered such prayer the central theme of the service. It suffices to glance through the Bible to become unmistakably aware of the fact that petition is the main form of human prayer.

The middle part of the weekday *Amidah*, the silent prayer, is completely devoted to thoughtful petition and consists of thirteen blessings, while the other two parts expressing adoration and gratitude...serve as a prologue and epilogue; the central petitions to Him are *avodah she-ba-lev* in action: the service of God and the addressing to Him of our appeal for help.

The reason for the centrality that Judaism has given the element of petition in the service lies in our philosophy of prayer. *Avodah she-ba-lev* for all its tendency to express religious experience as a whole, and particularly its emotional aspect does also tend to single out a particular state of mind. **For when we view the noetic content of prayer, we must admit that one emotion is central as far as prayer is concerned – namely the feeling of unqualified dependence.**

- **Can you find a difference between the utilitarianism of Og and the dependence expressed in Rav Soloveitchik's description of prayer?**

10. Rav Yitzchok Hutner (Pachad Yitzchak: Rosh Hashanah 5:5)

<p>The nature of prayer is that it is asking for humanity's needs. Thus, even though in other areas, the ability and means of a person is a benefit and one's needs and 'lackings' are considered a liability, by prayer [it is the exact opposite] – <u>the ability to stand before the King [Hashem] is made possible specifically because a person lacks.</u> If hypothetically, a person wasn't missing anything, <u>the self-actualization of standing before the King</u> would be "locked" from him.</p>	<p>הרי תכונה של תפילה הוא בקשת [ו]מילוי צרכיו של אדם. נמצא דאף על גב דבכל הענינים יכלתו של אדם נמנית על צד שלימותו, ואילו צרכיו של אדם נמנים על צד חסרונו, מ"מ <u>בענין התפילה יכולת העמידה לפני המלך ניזונת דוקא מחסרונו.</u> ולו יצויר אדם שאינו חסר כלום, הרי שלימות זו של עמידה לפני המלך נעולה היא לפניו.</p>
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- **What kind of "self-actualization" is manifested by "standing before the King of Kings?"**

11. Pirkei Avos 2:4

<p>[Rabbi Yehuda] used to say: Make His [God's] will your will, so that He will make your will His will. Set aside your will in the face of His will, so that he may set aside the will of others for the sake of your will.</p>	<p>הוא הִיָּה אומֵר, עֲשֵׂה רְצוֹנוֹ כְּרְצוֹנִי, כְּדִי שְׂיַעֲשֶׂה רְצוֹנִי כְּרְצוֹנוֹ. בְּטֹל רְצוֹנִי מִפְּנֵי רְצוֹנוֹ, כְּדִי שְׂיַבְטֹל רְצוֹן אֲחֵרִים מִפְּנֵי רְצוֹנִי</p>
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According to Rav Hutner and Rav Soloveitchik, it is true that prayer is medium through which humanity acquires resources. But it is far more than that. **It is an opportunity to form a relationship with the King of the World.**

By transforming prayer from a mere guidebook for getting things from God into an opportunity using it as an opportunity to get close to the divine, we redeem prayer. **Through this newfound relationship we approach Sinai to embrace not only God's rules, but His values.** His will becomes our will. And thus, our will becomes His will; **because our needs and desires are in sync with Hashem's, we are not only asking for what we want, but we are asking for what God wants.** Since the desire of a Jew is to fulfill the will of Hashem, to bring His grand vision for the world into fruition, then everything we ask for and need is really what Hashem "needs."

This was how the Jews were able to defeat Og through the merit of prayer. Og merely saw the Torah as tool to acquire the resources and blessings he wanted even if those desires went against God’s desires. And though the Jews were also “forced” to accept the Torah to ensure their survival, they were not forced to accept the value system. They willingly said “*naaseh venishma*” “we will do and we will hear.” We saw the Torah not merely as the key to obtain what they lacked, but as a way to form a relationship with Hashem, sharing a common set of values and dream to spread the light of Torah throughout the world.

IX – Conclusion

In the boxes below are two descriptions of prayer.

- **Do either of them resemble Og’s perspective?**
- **Do either (or both) of them resemble Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Hutner’s perspective?**

<p>"True prayer is neither a mere mental exercise nor a vocal performance. It is far deeper than that - <u>it is spiritual transaction with the Creator</u> of Heaven and Earth." - Charles Spurgeon (19th Century Baptist Minister)</p>	<p><u>We pray because our soul is lonely...</u>Eagerly it awaits the times set aside for prayer — those precious daily moments when the person it inhabits <u>ceases to commune with the world and communes with his or her Creator.</u> – Rabbi Yaakov Tauber (20th Century Chabad Scholar)</p>
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- **What does prayer mean to you? Has it changed over the past few months?**

Food for Thought

Although we have explained some of the strange elements in the Gemara's (Brachos 54b) account of Og's confrontation with Moshe and the Jews, there are still several points which demand further clarification. While we unfortunately can't cover each element in detail, here are some points to think about:

- Why did Hashem decide to enlarge Og's teeth to lodge the mountain on his head?

(There is another character we read about 49 days ago in the Haggadah who had a very different tooth related consequence. Perhaps the two characters express different reactions to something they both had to confront...)

- Why does the Gemara describe how Moshe's height, the height he jumped, and the length of the axe he used to kill Og were all equal?

(See Succah 5a for a description of how Moshe received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Perhaps the symbolism is connected to the gap between Adam and God's fingers in Michaelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*...)

- The Talmud (Niddah 61a) says that Og was the son of an angel who descended into the world during the generations before the Flood to prove that angels could observe the mitzvos better than humanity. Is this part of Og's background connected to his approach to the Torah and/or the giving of the Torah on Sinai?

(See Shabbos 88b for an account of Moshe arguing with angels about humanity's right to the Torah...)

- According to the excerpts of the Talmud and midrash we read above, Og lived during the time of the Flood and survived. Is there a connection between the Flood and the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, an event Og sought to recreate and engineer for his own purposes?

(See Zevachim 116a that the Nations of the World thought that commotion of Sinai was the herald of another Flood. See Seforno Genesis 8:22 who describes how the geological impact of the Flood signaled a change in the relationship between humanity and the resources/divine blessings they needed to survive. See Pesachim 118b how this new relationship between humanity, nature, and God culminated with the giving of the Torah...)

- With the mountain stuck atop Og's head, it resembled a crown. Perhaps this is connected to the mishnah in Pirkei Avos (4:5):

רבי צדוק אומר, אל תעשים עטרה להתגדל בהם, ולא קרדום לחפר בהם. וקד הקנה הלל אומר, ודאשפתמש בתגא, חלף. הא למדת, כל הנקנה מדברי תורה, נוטל חייו מן העולם

Rabbi Zadok said: do not make [the Torah] a crown for self-exaltation, nor a spade with which to dig. So too Hillel used to say, "And he that puts the crown to his own use shall perish." Thus you have learned, anyone who derives worldly benefit from the words of the Torah, removes his life from the world.

Further Reading:

For those interested in learning more about the Gemara's account of Og's confrontation with the Jews, here are some additional sources:

- Ben Yehoyada's (19th Century Iraqi Rabbi) commentary on Tractate Brachos 54b

- Rav Tzadok Hakohen's (19th Century Polish Chassidic Rabbi) *Resisei Laila*
44