

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Masei)

In 2016, as reported by Jeffrey Heller (Reuters March 8, 2016), the Pew research center released a poll suggesting that most Israelis, Arabs and Jews alike, appeared to have lost hope in a two-state solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict over the land of Israel.

Further, according to the poll:

“Nearly half (forty-eight percent) of Israeli Jews agreed with the statement that Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel, where they (then) make up 19 percent of the population of 8.4 million. While 54 to 71 percent of Jews who defined themselves as ultra-Orthodox, religious or “traditional” supported such a step, only 36 percent of the secular community did. President Reuven Rivlin called the findings a “wake-up call for Israeli society”.

Where does this idea, of expelling a population of people come from? And, notwithstanding that polls are easily misinterpreted, why would a poll ask such a question? Imagine one of your five children tells you they all took a vote and agreed they *want* to expel one of the children from the family; you would obviously conclude something was seriously wrong?

Yet, this exact idea seems to be what the Torah promotes in this week’s portion (overseas, part of a double-portion) of *Massei*:

“Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land; you shall destroy all their figured objects; you shall destroy all their molten images, and you shall demolish all their cult places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land to you to possess.” (Bamidbar (Numbers) 33:51-53)

It seems when we were commanded to conquer the land of Israel, part of that conquest entailed expelling its then-current inhabitants, along with destroying their religion and religious icons. If this were to apply today, it would be an extremely controversial idea, to say the least.

Rashi (ibid. v. 52) clearly suggests we are speaking of expulsion and not destruction, yet he also (ibid. v. 53) suggests that our right to remain in the land of Israel actually *depends* on our willingness to expel the inhabitants of the land; does this still apply today?

The Torah (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 20:10-18) also tells us that when we waged war we were meant to first offer cities we fought the opportunity to make peace, and the commentaries differ as to whether this applied to Canaanite cities (as the Ramban suggests) or only distant non-Canaanite cities as Rashi says (ibid. v. 10; Bamidbar 21:21).

Fascinatingly, rabbinic tradition has it (*Devarim Rabbah* 5:14; *Yerushalmi Shevi’it* 6:1) that when Joshua conquered the land, he offered the inhabitants three choices: they could run, they could make peace (which meant accepting the seven Noachide laws) or they could fight.

Indeed, the Talmud suggests that the *Girgashite* nation (which is missing from the list of nations conquered in the book of Joshua) actually chose to flee, and were not harmed. (The Talmud (ibid.) tells us they fled to Afriki, and fascinatingly, Procopius of Caesarea, in his *History of the Wars* (sixth century CE) describes the Moors of North Africa as early descendants of the Girgashites and relates that they settled there after fleeing from Joshua! He even describes a fortress they built in Numidia (in the Atlas Mountains region) with two pillars of White Stone in which one can find inscribed in Phoenician letters: “We are they that fled before Joshua, the robber, son of Nun”!

In today’s terminology and cultural environment all this would seem to be very challenging, unless we take a closer look. It really isn’t so complicated.

The Jewish people were meant to create a society that would be a model for the world to see; we were meant to be a “light unto the nations” (Isaiah 49:6). But you can’t create an ethical society in a morass of barbarity and depravity.

Moshe is speaking, in this week’s portion, to the second generation of the Jewish people; poised at long last to re-enter the land. They are coming home to the land where it all began; where G-d, through the model of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, taught the world that it could be better. And in this place we would begin our mission of sharing a world where every human being is created in G-d’s image; where we are meant to love our fellow human being, and take special care of those less fortunate: the poor and unfortunate, and the widow and the orphan. We are meant to create an ethical society where one day we will no longer hate each other for the differences amongst us, but love and respect each other despite those differences.

But when Joshua and the Jewish people came home to this special place, the land of Israel was filled with pagan idolatry and all of the licentious behavior, including child sacrifice, and brazen violence, that it entailed. Ancient Canaanite culture was all about ‘might makes right’, and power reigned supreme. And you can’t build an ethical society if your neighbor is a murderer or an adulterer.

So, the Canaanites were given a choice. They could choose to leave, and no-one would harm them. Because Judaism was never about conquering the world; it was only about showing the world how life could be; if the Canaanites wanted to continue to practice idolatry in Africa no-one would stop them. Or they could stay and accept the seven Noachide laws which means an understanding that murder, theft, idolatry and adultery would no longer be accepted.

And if they refused to leave and refused to accept this then they could fight. In order to create a society of ethics and love, immorality and hatred must first be destroyed. And that is exactly what the Torah is telling us here: you cannot build a just society if you tolerate injustice in your midst, and you cannot create a place of love unless you first do away with hatred.

And that is precisely our problem today. Every human being, Arab and Jew alike, is created in the image of G-d, and Judaism challenges us to learn to live together in peace. But if our cousins refuse to accept the goal of creating a just society based on mutual love and respect then we cannot build it with them. And if they teach their children to hate, then they don’t belong in a place that wants to create a society of love and understanding and mutual respect, and they need to go.

We will never be able to make peace with a Hamas that preaches violence, death, and hatred; not only because it isn’t practically possible, but also because it would undermine all that we are everything we

are meant to accomplish in this world. And so, the Torah enjoins us to destroy that culture of violence and hatred in order to build a world of peace and morality.

And of course, this is equally true for us as individuals. In order to live a life filled with love and tolerance, patience and joy, we need to destroy and expel from within ourselves anger and hatred, arrogance and hatred.

An appropriate message to consider as we enter the month of Av, in which we mark the tragic destruction of both Temples and our exile from the land of Israel.

Two thousand years ago, we lost everything, because we were reverting to the norms of the society we were pledged to destroy. Perhaps we are finally ready to build the role model we were always meant to be.

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem

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