

CHAPTER 7, VERSES 7-8

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

(7:7, 8)

"Yehoshua said, 'Alas, Hashem why did you bring this nation across the Jordan to deliver us into the Emorite hands to destroy us? If only we had desired to stay on the other side of the Jordan.

"Please Hashem, what can I say after Israel turned its neck around in the face of its enemies?"

Yehoshua's heart-rending plea reflected a serious concern, almost to the point of despair. This minor defeat at Ay seems to have assumed outrageous proportions and projected total destruction for the Jewish people. Why didn't Yehoshua merely address the people and inform them of their error? Although they suffered defeat together with the loss of a great figure, they were certainly capable of getting back on their feet and continuing their conquest. Yet it seems that this was not the case, and in fact a serious danger lay before them.

In order to appreciate the prevalent feeling of the people, it is important to revisit the report of the original ten spies in the days of Moshe Rabbeinu. After capturing a birds eye view of the land, they were petrified and concluded that it was virtually impossible to conquer the occupants of the land. They related that from a natural standpoint, the Jewish people stood no chance against those towering giants. Now, when considering the relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem, this response seems to be far off track. At that time, the Jewish people existed totally on miracles. They were surrounded by Hashem every step of their way and had recently witnessed the complete upheaval of the powerful Egyptian empire. Wasn't it obvious by now that Hashem could and would do anything for them? Why this petrified feeling?

The answer is that this relationship depended upon their perfect conduct. It was certainly a supreme privilege to enjoy a close relationship with Hashem, but it came with specific conditions. In essence, Hashem's closeness was based upon their closeness to Him. What would happen if, Heaven forbid, the Jewish people made a severe spiritual plunge? With conduct that was far from perfect, they certainly couldn't expect continuous royal treatment. This potential danger was the serious worry of the spies. Although they were men of great stature, they personally viewed the strength of these towering giants. When considering this phenomenon through physical faculties, they concluded that the risk was too great to chance. Although the spies were severely punished for even entertaining this idea, the Jewish people heard the message and realized that they had no chance to naturally exist in the land of the giants.

This feeling now became an important factor in the Jewish people's psyche. Until now they undoubtedly had full trust in Hashem and relied totally upon His miraculous blessing. At this point however serious levels of concern began to surface. The defeat at Ay suggested a change in policy. For some unclear reason they did not receive Hashem's miraculous treatment. This threw the Jewish people into reality and forced them to consider a natural existence in the land. This horrifying thought was capable of bringing anyone into despair. Yehoshua feared that after this experience, it would be close to impossible to return the Jewish people to their original level of trust and faith. Now all they saw before themselves was guaranteed destruction, and they certainly could not entertain lofty ideals such as miracles. In addition, even if they could consider their old lifestyle, what would prevent them from erring again placing themselves in this impossible position all over again?

This was Yehoshua's rationale when expressing his plea to Hashem. Yehoshua knew that Hashem's miracles demanded a high level of trust and faith. However, at this time he couldn't see any way of bringing the Jewish people back to that level. Once they left the world of perfect faith, they entered the realm of natural phenomena and couldn't be easily removed from it. They were presently subject to their human frailties and, in their petrified state, couldn't be expected to get past them. But Yehoshua realized that the Jewish people were constantly warned against this and certainly could not claim innocence. This being so, they had no choice but to face their bitter end at the hands of the mighty Emorites. Although they were forewarned, the Jewish people were now doomed to fall into the enemy's hands with no recourse available to them.

This then is the meaning of Yehoshua's words mentioned earlier. Based on Hashem's master plan, the result of the Jewish people's severe plunge was to fall into Emorite hands. As explained, Yehoshua believed that all of this was the result of the Jewish people's lack of perfect faith and their overconfidence in their own merits. Yehoshua confessed the Jewish people's error of retreating in the face of danger rather than proceeding with total faith in Hashem. Now that this happened, Yehoshua feared that the Jewish people would never get beyond this and would therefore be constantly subject to a natural state of affairs. Knowing the people's nature this meant guaranteed defeat and called for Yehoshua to do all in his power to prevent this.

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