

PARSHAS VAESCHANAN

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

There are difficulties with the pleas of Moshe to enter the Land of Israel, despite the vow that Hashem had made to the contrary. Firstly, the question has to be asked why now, rather than at the time of Mei Merivah, when the vow was made? Did Moshe think, as Rashi explains, that the conquest of the territories of Sichon and Og, showed that G-d had relented? This could hardly be since the Promised Land was across the Jordan, as shown in Parshat Masaei. Ibn Ezra writes that this plea of Moshe's was made prior to the appointment of Yehoshua, while the Ramban taught that it was made at the time of Hashem's vow; the question in both cases is why the delay in telling us of his plea till now rather than close to these occurrences. There is, however, perhaps the more serious question of why Moshe, who had divested himself of all material needs and desires, should so passionately want to enter the Land full of natural beauty and material plenty?

Moshe understood that the vow meant that he was not to lead the people in their conquest and tribal division of the Land, and so he asked G-d to appoint another leader. When Yehoshua was chosen he, nevertheless, assumed that he could enter the Promised Land, as an ordinary citizen without any leadership role. This assumption was strengthened by the conquest of the lands of Og and Sichon. "Hashem Elokim, You started showing Your Greatness and Your Mighty Hand": The greatness refers to the chesed that G-d did to the children of Moav, Ammon and Eisav by forbidding Israel to war or trouble them, while His Power is shown by giving Israel conquest over the 2 kings. These 2 kings were the most powerful of all the kings of the 7 nations; in the Great Hallel (Tehillim, 126), the psalmist's: "To kill mighty and powerful kings" is written only regarding them. For Moshe the conquest of these 2 kings, was seen as the beginning of the conquest over Eretz Yisrael, so he assumed that since that had occurred during his lifetime, so would the final one; VaYechal always denotes the beginning of a process. Knowing that no edict could be set aside without prayer and intercession, he now supplicated G-d to let him into the Land, albeit as an ordinary citizen.

As to the question why was Moshe so determined to enter the Land that was materialistic and earthy when he had divested himself of all the earthly desires and lusts, there are 4 reasons:

[1]. Chazal (Sotah 16) teach us that he wished to observe the mitzvot hateluyot ba'aretz. The observance of mitzvot adds to our elevation in kedushah and so Moshe sought to increase his spiritual perfection through the observance of these mitzvot. This is in accordance with, "One hour of teshuvah and good deeds in this world is preferable to the whole life in Olam Haba" (Avot, chapter 4, mishnah 11); this world is the world of avodah whereas the other world is one of reward.

[2]. Every person would like to see the completion of the tasks and the projects that he has started. The exemptions from military service consists mainly of those who has engaged a bride, planted orchards or built homes who should be given a year release to see the fruition of their labor (Devarim, 20:5). Moshe had taken this people out of Egypt, brought to Sinai to receive the Torah, carried and nursed them through their wanderings and tribulations in the desert for 40 years, and witnessed the beginnings of their settlement in the Promised Land. It is easy to realize how anxious he was to see the conclusion of his life's work when the promise made to the Patriarchs was fulfilled.

[3]. Moshe had told Israel when the Spies were sent that Eretz Yisrael was a good, fertile and beautiful land as Hashem had promised them, yet they had borne false witness against the Land. So he wanted to bear witness himself to the generation that was taking possession of it, of how true it really was, in contradiction to the words of the Spies; that is why he speaks about 'this good land'.

[4]. Moshe knew that the Bet Hamikdash would be built in Yerushalayim and wanted to prostrate himself on the spot of Yitschak's Akeidah. If Moshe would have accompanied Israel across the Jordan, they would have captured the whole country and settled it immediately and built the Mikdash. Just as he had provided Israel with the building and erection of the Miskan, so he wanted to be able to witness their sons at the sanctification of the Temple in Yerushalayim. Moshe speaks of seeing Lebanon; why is the Mikdash called levanon, This is because there the sins of Israel are turned from scarlet to white, in forgiveness.

Irrespective of Moshe's reasons for wishing to enter Eretz Yisrael, men would say that if the prayers of Moshe, the man of G-d who spoke to Him face to face, were not answered, what hope is there for salvation for ordinary men and women. Then they will conclude that there is neither value nor remedy in their prayers. To avoid that, we have to try to understand why Hashem did not grant his prayers. Chazal (Rosh Hashanah, 17), tell us that prayer helps to avert a decree before the judgment has been finalized, and, as we learn from Hezekiyahu's prayers, when Hashem cured him of his illness that was his punishment, even after. This applies provided there was no contrary Divine Vow. However, there was an oath in Moshe's case; "âLachein', surely, you will not bring this people to their Land"- âlachein' means there is an oath. Yet even an oath may be changed by teshuvah " (Pesikta and Moed Katan).

It should be clear to us that the annulment of a Divine oath can be achieved by teshuvah, only in the case of sins and crimes committed against Heaven. There is no limit to Hashem's mercy and chesed concerning sins against Him. However, regarding crimes against our fellow humans, teshuvah cannot help evade punishment; neither before judgment nor after, neither where there is a Divine oath nor where there is no oath. Moshe and Aharon had sinned against the whole community of Israel and so the decree against them could not be commuted by teshuvah.

Aharon sinned against them when he made the Golden Calf. It is true that he did not intend to bring them to idolatry, only to gain time till Moshe would return. However, things did not turn out that way

and as a result many died either from the sword or from plague. Aharon's punishment was delayed through Divine Mercy, yet just as they did not enter Eretz Yisrael, so too, he could not be allowed to.

Israel asked for the spies to be sent only so that they would report back as to the way that Israel could advance and what the Canaanite cities like. Hashem said to send the spies only so that they could see the Land that He was giving them. However, Moshe of his own accord added terrifying questions concerning the might of the cities and their inhabitants, and of the giants there. It is true that he only added this in order that Israel should be aware of the challenge before them and thus more fully be aware of the chesed that Hashem was according them by defeating such powerful enemies. However, things did not turn out like that; instead the spies brought back reports that persuaded Israel not to go into the Land. As a result that whole generation had to die in the desert without entering the Promised Land. Justice demanded that Moshe shared their fate.

It is interesting to see a different sin of Moshe's and Aharon's, albeit also one against the whole community; therefore the punishment, it would seem, could not be annulled by prayer or teshuvah. "At Merivah, when they beat the rock instead of speaking to it, Hashem took an oath that they would not go into the Land: 'Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel' (Bamidbar, 29:12). Why does speaking to the rock teach greater sanctification than smiting it; both were miracles? Now throughout the sojourn in the wilderness, Israel had seen that salvation was brought through visible miracles. However, once they crossed the Jordan the obvious miracles would cease and if they needed rain they would have to pray for it; that is the message of 'speak to the rock'. By failing to teach them that greater sanctification, Moshe was unable to cross with them and enter the Land" (Haemek D'var).

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