

# PARSHAS VAYEILECH - SEEING DOUBLE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Seeing Double<sup>1</sup>

*This people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land...and it will forsake Me and annul My covenant...My anger will flare against it on that day and I will forsake them...and many evils and distresses will encounter it...So now, write this song for yourselves...so that this song shall be for Me a witness against the Bnei Yisrael....For I shall bring them to the Land...it will eat, be sated, and grow fat, and turn to gods of others...it will provoke Me and annul my covenant. It shall be that when many evils and distresses come upon it, then this song shall speak up as a witness.*

A summary of these psukim might go like this. Hashem shares His playbook: "Warn the Bnei Yisrael that they will start sinning after coming into the Land. I will get angry, and terrible things will happen to them. When they do, they should turn to the shirah of Haazinu for some context. Finish speech. Repeat." The last verses seem to do nothing more than offer a second round of the pattern laid out by the first!

Of course there is no repetition in the Torah. This remarkable parshah predicts the very different patterns of idolatrous behavior at two future times: during the reign of the Shoftim, and during the epoch of the evil kings of Yisrael and Yehudah. Looking carefully at the many differences between these two iterations of coming gloom and doom will expose the key elements that separate them.

We can best understand the difference by analogizing to an errant wife, or in our case, to two errant wives. We do not pick the analogy on a whim. Rather, we follow the lead of the many places that our prophets liken the relationship between Klal Yisrael and HKBH to that of a woman and her spouse.

The first unfaithful wife we will consider deeply loves her husband. He loves her, and provides well for her. He married her, despite the fact that her early influences left much to be desired. He knew that she enjoyed previous closeness with unsavory characters, including people of promiscuous leanings and violent criminals. He tried to protect the relationship with his wife by creating distance between her and the company she used to keep. Not only does he urge her to stay away from the negative influences of her past, but he cautions her to ensure that distance by making that distance a matter of her constant attention.

She did not do a very good job of focusing on keeping those people at arm's length. In time, she was drawn after them and their life style, and got involved in an isolated - but serious - affair.

Her husband found out, and was deeply hurt. He distanced himself from her, physically and emotionally. Moreover, he even suspended the support with which he had previously supplied her. She became more desperate for companionship and support, and therefore continued her illicit relationships, albeit against her better judgment and true wishes. She longed, in fact, to return to her husband. Had she acted prudently, she would have begged forgiveness after her first trespass, throwing herself on her husband's mercy, arguing that she should not be judged nor scored for a single, unplanned indiscretion that she deeply regretted. Instead, she found herself multiplying her infidelities as her husband moved away from her.

This mashal accurately conveys the state of affairs during the time of the Shoftim/ Judges. The Bnei Yisrael did not completely purge the Land of the seven evil peoples who populated it, disregarding the repeated warnings to them concerning the toxicity of their influence. That influence led them to some foolish experimentation with the deities of those peoples. Our psukim refer to this as "straying," because it was just that - a non-malicious aberration. She "strayed," but not in a deliberate manner that meant her shifting her true affections to another.

Hashem's reaction was to withdraw from them somewhat. He withheld much of the gift of prophecy from them. "The word of Hashem was scarce in those days; vision was not widespread[2]." (Radak: There were no prophets in Israel.) To substitute for the previous spiritual elevation, they sought connection elsewhere. They began to practice idolatry on their own, unrelated to the direct influence of the seven nations of the Canaan.

Things were very different during the times of spiritual decline in the First Temple period. We should analogize to a different kind of adulteress. Her husband displayed excessive, boundless love towards her. He expected, however, that her behavior would conform to his expressed needs and expectations. He treated her very well; this led to complacency on her part with the "good life" she was provided. She sought to free herself of the restrictions of her life style. She could think of no other way than to cause her husband to hate her, and therefore divorce her! She foolishly reasoned that if freed from the requirements of her husband, she could take up with another man who would provide for her in a similar manner, but without imposing boundaries and restrictions. She deliberately set out to make herself so unsuited to her husband, that he would have little choice but to rid himself of her. She purposefully acted in an abominable manner, behaving in ways she understood were morally wrong and unsuitable to her station. Initially, her husband refused to be rebuffed by her actions, and remained devoted to her, constantly pursuing her love. As her moral decay continued, she eventually reached a point at which she indeed became detestable. He banished her from his home, distancing her as much as possible. Life became miserable for her, but she was far too embarrassed to attempt to return to her spouse. She believed that she would never be able to return again.

Bnei Yisrael fared comfortably during the days of the first beis hamikdosh. Their material success was matched by the availability spiritual gifts, like the ruach hakodesh that was in ample supply even during the reigns of some of the evil kings like Achav. Having life too good, however, led them to chafe from the restrictions of the Torah. They attempted to free themselves from its obligations by pursuing avodah zarah. They foolishly decided that if they could get G-d to abandon them, they could do quite well for themselves working within the system of fixed laws governed by the subordinates appointed by Hashem. It seemed to work for other nations; they saw no reason why it would not work for them. Once they embarked on such a path, they also convinced themselves that there was no turning back. G-d would surely refuse them! She "strayed," but not in a deliberate manner that meant her shifting her true affections to another.

Two women - and two stories of tragic error in undermining a relationship, and in coping with the aftermath to disloyalty. The most important take-away impression remains the commitment of HKBH to the relationship - of abandonment that is at most transitory, always for the purpose of restoring the earlier mutual love.

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*1. Based on Haamek Davar, Devarim 31:16 2. Shmuel1 3:1*

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