

PROMISED LAND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

However, the men that went up with him said, "We are not able to fight the people; they are stronger than us!" They brought an evil report of the land which they had spied to the Children of Israel ... (Bamidbar 13:31-32)

The Torah tells us that when God promised Eretz Yisroel to Avraham Avinu, he asked God, "How can I know that I will inherit it?" (Bereishis 15:8). "Well, Avraham Avinu," a person might ask, "didn't God just promise you the land? What else do you need to know? Which words did you not understand?"

However, the Talmud quickly points out, that Avraham's questioning of God's promise had little to do with him, but everything to do with his descendants (Megillah 31b). He was worried that maybe his future progeny would sin to such an extent that God would have to reverse His promise at some time in the future, and unpromise the land to his descendants. Therefore, Avraham Avinu wanted some kind of assurance from God that, in spite of the sins that the future Jewish people might commit, that they would never lose the land as an inheritance.

Nevertheless, Avraham is held accountable for a lack of trust in God, which raises an important question: If God makes a promise for good, can it ever be repealed? If yes, then Avraham was justified to ask as he did, and if not, then it is understandable that he was taken to task for having doubted God at His word. The answer to this question obviously has an important message for our generation, in terms of how secure we can afford to feel today living on the land. It is in Yirmiyahu:

One moment I may speak concerning a nation or a kingdom, to destroy, demolish or annihilate [it], but if that nation repents of its evil deed of which I had spoken ... Or one moment I may speak concerning a nation or a kingdom, to build and establish [it], but if they do what is wrong in My eyes, not heeding My voice, then I relent of the good that I had said to bestow upon it. (Yirmiyahu 18:7-11)

According to this, it seems as if sin can wipe away the good that God has promised a nation, justifying Avraham Avinu's query. The implication for us would be that, even though God has been incredibly gracious to the Jewish people over the last 60 years, not only giving us the land back, but allowing us to develop it, the fact that so many Jews living on the land don't live by Torah, or by Torah well enough, means that God might take back His gift, God forbid.

However, says the Leshem: perish the thought!

It seems to me that anything promised for good cannot be changed — even as a result of sin, as it is

explained in the Midrash Tanchuma (Vayaira 13); see there. And, regarding that which is said in Yirmiyahu (18:10), that good can be changed because of sin, that is only when the promise of good is the reason for the sin, that is, when people rely upon the promise of good in order to do fulfill the desires of their hearts. Thus, because they trust in the good, for them that trust becomes the very reason to sin! When this is the case then the promise of good can be reversed, since the promise of good was made the reason for the sin itself.

Thus it says in the Talmud: "One who says, 'I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone for me,' Yom Kippur will not atone for him" (Yoma 85b), because Yom Kippur becomes the very reason to sin, and it is similar to what we have said. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 116)

In other words, should the Jewish people living in Eretz Yisroel sin, God forbid, relying on the promise made to Avraham Avinu for security, then they will not be protected from being thrown off the land. What a chutzpah!

Use the promise of inheritance as the basis to defile the land? Not in God's world ...

However, how many Jews living in Eretz Yisroel today even know about this concept, let alone rely upon it? Today, secular Jews are not religious because either they don't know better, or because they have a strong yetzer hara. But, no one sins today, thinking, "I don't have to worry about my evil ways because God promised to give us the land as an inheritance!" Thus, the Talmud says, that God told Avraham, "Take a look around at the world. Look at the way people are living. Not exactly what I had in mind, is it? And yet, I put up with it all, giving them life and sustenance on a daily basis, and you ask Me how you can be sure that your descendants will truly inherit the land, even if they are unworthy?"

The question was true then, and it is certainly true today as well. Take a look at the world around us. The Jewish people might be off course, but the rest of the world is worse. And yet, God supports them, even allows them to prosper, and we doubt the extent of the mercy that God has for His own people, and the longevity of a promise made thousands of years ago? As the Leshem explains, shema yigrom chet — perhaps a sin will cause — God to relent on His previous promise of good is not a trait of the ighteous, and flies in the face of trust in God.

Which brings us to the Spies, who complained:

They returned from spying the land at the end of 40 days. They appeared before Moshe and Aharon, and the entire congregation of the Children of Israel, in the desert of Paran (Kadesh) with word [of their journey]. [They] showed the entire community the fruit of the land, and related the following, "We came to the land to which you sent us, and it certainly flows with milk and honey; this is the fruit from it. However, the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are large and fortified... We are not able to fight the people; they are stronger than us!" (Bamidbar 13:25-28, 31)

Which might have been understandable, had the Talmud not commented: They said this with

respect to Heaven. (Sotah 35a) That is, they said that the Canaanites were even stronger than God! However, how could the generation that witnessed the destruction of the mightiest nation on earth, the splitting of the sea, and the giving of the Torah, even think such a thing. How? Because it says the following:

In the Holy Zohar it also says in many places that "the sins of men cause imperfections above"; it speaks of the opposite as well. This is the meaning of the verse, "Give strength to God!" (Tehillim 68:35). And in the Zohar, at the beginning of Parashas Bo, it says, "It happened one day that they came... to present themselves before God" (Iyov 1:6): When they want to prosecute the actions of Israel they lay their charges against God, because when Israel acts improperly they weaken the strength of God; when they act correctly they give strength and power to God. With respect to this it is written, "Give strength to God!" Give strength how? Give strength through proper conduct. (Nefesh HaChaim, Ch. 3)

Thus, the Spies were not saying that the people of Canaan were stronger than God, since they understood perfectly that God creates, sustains, and maintains everything, including the Canaanites. Any strength that the Canaanites had, the Spies knew, originated from God. The Spies were far more spiritually sophisticated than the Talmud, or at least the superficial reading of the Talmud, might have us believe.

In other words, they argued, God has set up the world in such a way that He acts as if His strength depends upon our deeds. They said that the strength that God exhibits in history, in general, is going to be a reflection of the strength of belief that we exhibit in our lives. God can always do whatever He wants to whomever He wants to do it, whenever He chooses to. However, He doesn't, usually, to give us more responsibility in determining the direction of history.

The upshot of this? The Jewish people can lose battles, even ones they are meant to fight, as occurred during the conquering of Eretz Yisroel. Because of the sins of Achan, we lost the Battle of Ai, and 36 Jewish soldiers were killed. In the 60 short years of the modern State of Israel's existence, we have lost far more soldiers than that, and before this, in the Holocaust, an unspeakable amount, R"L.

What a terrible Chillul Hashem — a profanation of God's Name — which is what the Spies had been trying to avoid by delaying the campaign to take Eretz Canaan. That is why they confidently rejected the call to make aliyah at the time, right in plain view of the Divine Presence; they had thought they were doing a mitzvah at the time, not a sin. Given the spiritual level they had thought they had been on at the time, they believed it wise not to rely upon a miracle and attack the Canaanites, since losing the war was possible, and a Chillul Hashem, likely.

Makes sense, no? It did to them, which is why they were literally shocked when God not only rejected the idea, but sentenced them to a horrible death in the desert. Apparently, as sophisticated as they had been in their understanding of how God runs His world, and the role the Jewish people

can plan in His master plan, there was one thing they had overlooked, one detail of Divine Providence they had missed.

Which was?

God promised us the land.

"But what about the fact that we're not spiritually fitting yet?" God promised us the land.

"Won't we weaken the hand of God, and leave ourselves vulnerable?" God promised us the land.

"But, that we'll necessitate a miracle!"

Fine, but God promised us the land.

"And if the miracle doesn't happen, we'll get slaughtered!"

True, but God promised us the land.

"Won't that be a great Chillul Hashem?"

Probably, but God promised us the land.

And, as long as you're in the process of fulfilling that promise, you don't consider other issues, no matter how true and important they might be at other times. You're there, on the land, developing it, prospering, enjoying it. Don't wonder about which sins will anger God enough to throw you off the land. Don't talk about how you can't take the land from the enemy, or keep it from those who desire it.

Whatever happens (such as the destruction of Gush Katif), happens, and it does so for a specific reason that may be known only to God. However, to worry about what can go wrong in the meantime, when what you plan to do represents a fulfillment of a promise He has made to the Jewish people long ago, is to show a weakness in your trust in God. And, for that, greater people than us have been taken to task for such breaches in trust in God, and therefore, we would do well to learn from their mistakes: when God promises good, believe in it, don't use it as the basis to sin, and you can rely upon it, forever.

Text

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