

# TUFF TRUST TUFF LOVE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

In last week's Parsha (12:2) G-d commanded the Jews to destroy all places and artifacts associated with Avodah Zara (foreign worship) in the land of Israel. The only religious worship permitted in the Promised Land is worship of G-d in the place and manner of His choosing and instruction. The Torah did not elaborate as to why foreign worship had to be irradiated; however, the Torah did state that (12:10) following G-d's commandments would result in the Jews dwelling securely in the land of Israel.

In this week's Parsha the Torah addressed what the Jews were to do with the various nations living in Israel at the time they first took possession of the land. Additionally, the Torah explained why.

(20:10-18) "...First offer peace... if they agree, they will become subject to you... if they refuse peace, wage war against them... upon victory all males must be executed... However, if the city is inhabited by "those" nations (the 7 Nations) do not offer peace. They must be destroyed... so that you (the Jewish nation) will not be influenced by their religious practices."

Let's be honest. How many of us are comfortable with these commandments? In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the concept of genocide has rightfully become more than repulsive. It now embodies the essence of intolerance and evil. It has become the single "never again" scale of absolute morality and decency in a world we can never again trust to behave with absolute morality and decency. Yet, G-d commanded the Jews to completely destroy the 7 nations occupying Eretz Yisroel at the time they first took possession of the land. How do we reconcile such a "Mitzvah" with the "moral evolution" of history?

In immediate defense of the Torah let me point out that these 'laws" were limited only to that time and that place. Never in history did the Jewish people embark on a campaign of world dominance, whether theological or territorial. We never mounted "crusades" to cleanse the world of idol worship or any other worship. It is the obligation of the other nations to oversee the moral and ethical development of their societies. Our responsibility is for Eretz Yisroel (Land of Israel) and only Eretz Yisroel, the rest of the world must deal with their responsibilities and relationship with G-d. As role models of how to have a relationship with G- d the Jews are in a position to advice and teach; however, policing that relationship never was and never will be the job of the Jewish people.

In past issues I have offered the perspective that Eretz Yisroel is like our home. Just as tolerant as we may be toward everyone in his or her own home we are equally intolerant when it comes to our own

home. Just as we would never, under the liberal guise of non-judgmental tolerance, suffer having someone live in our home practicing ethical and moral behaviors antithetical to our own, so too we should not tolerate the same in Eretz Yisroel. However, that argument, as morally correct as I believe it to be, may support the transference of entire populations out of Eretz Yisroel but it does not justify the killing of the haplessly vanquished. Or, does it?

Last week I began a discussion on the issue of trust. Essentially I was asking for us to evaluate the degree that we truly understand trust and the degree to which we are willing to trust G-d. This week presents us with a concrete challenge to that assumed trust.

Let's begin with a review of some fundamental concepts, terms and definitions.

1. All that G-d does is by definition good and beneficial to the individual and the universe, now and forever.
2. As stated in the eleventh Principle of Faith, G-d rewards and punishes. His reward and punishment is not unique to Judaism and Jews; instead, it is fundamental to the essence of His being and relevant to every person and every aspect of creation. In other words, G-d punishes and rewards Jews and non-Jews alike.
3. Our understanding of reward and punishment is consequential rather than retaliatory. G-d does not seek to revenge Himself. He seeks only to correct and rehabilitate. Given the timeless nature of G-d's existence and His systemic control of the entire universe, G-d's ability to correct and rehabilitate is not bound by time or space. What happens today may be the outcome and correction of millennium past and what G-d does today may attain its true purpose in millennium to come. Additionally, the correction and rehabilitation may also take place in the realm of the spiritual rather than physical. It may transcend the physical limits of time and space and be fully realized in the celestial setting of the World Yet To Come.
4. Because G-d is not bound by time and space, and because G-d desires to correct and rehabilitate rather than retaliate, we must therefore accept that our perspective and comprehension of all things, especially reward and punishment, are limited by time and space.
5. Therefore, trusting G-d demands that we accept our mortal limitations in all arenas and conclude the acceptance that all that He is and all that He does must be good and beneficial for the individual and the universe, now and forever.
6. Accepting our human limitations and trusting G-d demands that we extend that trust to those who have been designated as His "Teachers." Regarding all the other nations it means trusting the Jews as G-d's chosen. Regarding the Jews it means trusting the "Rabbis" who are the chosen among the chosen. (17:10-11) "You must do in accordance with what you will be taught... According to the teaching that they will teach you and according to the judgment that they will say to you... do not deviate ... right or left."

It is a wonderful thing to "know" what G-d wishes. That is why G-d provided for prophecy. Left up to our own devices, the manner of our moral and ethical development would have been as varied as there are people on the face of the earth. Instead, G-d spoke to individuals and eventually to the Jewish nation as a whole. In doing so He removed morality and ethics from the realm of guesswork and into the realm of divine imperative. However, prophecy requires that we trust His prophets. When a prophet abuses that trust and presents false prophecy to the nation, (18:20) "...The prophet who willfully shall speak... that which I have not commanded him... shall die." Back to being honest.

If we take the above concepts and definitions to heart we begin to appreciate the concept of trust and its potential difficulties. G-d never promised to only command those things that we agree with or feel good about. G-d made it very simple. Trust Him that He is good and that He does good things that benefit the individual and the universe for now and forever. Listen and perform His commandments as heard from Him directly or as taught by His prophets. In return He promised that our lives would be filled with blessing and that we would live securely in the land that He promised to our forefathers.

The problem is that the deal does not provide for any compromise. It appears to be an all or nothing deal. Either we accept the terms of G-d's covenant with us or else we should not expect Him to give us all that He promised. It does not mean that there is no point of compromise in the relationship. Of course there is. G-d does not only care for those who do everything He commands and could care less about those who do not listen to all His commandments. If that were true it would contradict the whole concept of correction and rehabilitation. Instead, G-d loves us for the good that we are and the good that we do and encourages in every manner possible our growth and development in attaining the full potential of our goodness. G-d relates to us in the manner and extent that we dictate. The more we listen the closer we are and the greater the comprehension of His goodness. However, the promise of constant health, financial well-being, and security are only guaranteed when we keep our part of the contract.

The Torah was very clear regarding the presence of foreign worship and its attendant artifacts. They must go. They must be destroyed entirely and the land cleansed of their presence. Understand that the practices of the ancient Canaanites were truly reprehensible. They involved human sacrifice and the consecration of the basest aspects of human nature. As the supposed caretakers of a land that was never intended to be theirs, they took the very best and perverted it into the very worse. (Bereishis 13:10) "...And he (Lot) saw the entire plain of the Yarden... before G-d destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah like the garden of G-d..." What once approximated the lushness and beauty of Gan Eden was perverted into the evil of Sodom and its eventual destruction by fire and brimstone. Let's not waste any emotion on the poor Canaanites whose culture was destroyed by the invading Israelites. There was little to admire in the ways of the Canaanites and the Seven Nations. Yet, the command to destroy them offends the nation correctly described as, "merciful, modest, and doers of good deeds."

This week's Parsha challenges our sensibilities even more. (20:10-18) "... First offer peace... if they agree, they will become subject to you... if they refuse peace, wage war against them... upon victory all males must be executed... However, if the city is inhabited by "those" nations (the 7 Nations) do not offer peace. They must be destroyed... so that you (the Jewish nation) will not be influenced by their religious practices."

G-d knew that we would have a hard time accepting the absolute nature of these commandments. G-d knew that we would attempt to rationalize not doing exactly what He told us to do. Therefore, at the end of the command G-d told us why we must do so. "They must be destroyed... so that you (the Jewish nation) will not be influenced by their religious practices." The destruction of their culture and their future ("upon victory all males must be executed") was the only means of protecting the sanctity of our home and our future. There reaches a point that G-d withdraws the option of change (Teshuvah). Sodom and Gomorrah were such an example, as was the destruction of the Seven Nations and Amalek. Their destruction served many different aspects of goodness most of which seriously challenge our readiness to trust G-d. However, if we do trust G-d and we do believe in the definitions and concepts explained above, we must conclude that His difficult commandments are the corrective measures necessary for the benefit of every individual and the entire universe, for then and forever.

We are the people chosen by G-d to receive His Torah and teach His goodness to the world. We were not chosen to teach our version of goodness to the world. We were chosen to teach the word of G-d as spoken by G-d and as taught by His prophets. Doing so demands that we trust the goodness that defines G-d and do as we are commanded. Who we are and what we are can be strong enough to withstand the challenges of exile and the influences of foreign societies and cultures. However, to become strong enough to withstand the challenges outside of our homes our homes must be citadels of uncompromised truth. Eretz Yisroel is our home. It belongs to us because G-d gave it to our forefathers from whom we have inherited it. That home must be free and clear of all foreign worship and influence. That home must be free of any person or persons who are unwilling to accept the absolutes of G-d's Torah as taught and practiced by His chosen people.

There is much work to do. The coming of Mashiach depends on it.

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