

JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

I have often felt and even publicly stated that the relationship of Jews to the Land of Israel, just as their relationship to the Torah itself, is the litmus test of being Jewish - not necessarily strict fulfillment of observances per se but being Jewish and faithful to one's people. It is ironic in the extreme that the two noisiest factions within the Jewish world today - the leftist, liberal and completely acculturated section of Jewish society on one hand and some of the rigorously observant section of Orthodoxy on the other - are both in agreement that Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel is somehow not a good thing for Jews or the world generally.

Apparently opposition to the State of Israel makes for strange bedfellows. There are many conflicting causes to this state of affairs. But the bottom line is always the bottom line - opposition to the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state.

This week's parsha with its description of the bitter opposition by the leaders of the tribes of Israel in the desert to the planned entry of the Jewish people into the Land of Israel points out how this attitude of negativism spelled tragedy for the entire people of that generation.

Midrash and Talmud advance compelling arguments as to what these leaders thought and how they justified their error to themselves. But again, righteous self justification is not a valid reason for standing in opposition to Jewish control over the Land of Israel. Lack of faith, lack of judgment, personal conflicts of interest, fear of the unknown, misplaced theology and the inertia of exile all combined to push these previously great leaders of Israel over the brink of rebellion and despair. This week's parsha is one of the saddest in the entire Torah.

The idea of the importance of avoiding slander and not speaking evil about others is expanded in this week's parsha to include the prohibition of slandering the Land of Israel as well. Just as evil speech is forbidden even if it be true but is of no purposeful or permitted purpose, so too does this injunction against evil speech apply to the Land of Israel.

The Land of Israel is an inanimate object not capable of feeling the hurt that evil speech causes when directed against fellow human beings. Nevertheless, such speech against it is forbidden for it damages the speaker and not only the object about which he or she spoke.

In last week's parsha we read about Miriam and Aaron speaking about Moshe. If the greatest people of Israel fall victim to engaging in such speech then others feel a right to do so as well, as this week's parsha makes clear. Israeli governmental policies can be scrutinized and criticized. Leadership can

be challenged and changed. But the basic right of the Jewish people to live in the Land of Israel under Jewish sovereignty is not given to discussion and argument. I think that this is the clear message to be derived from even a cursory reading of this week's parsha.

Shabat shalom,
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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com