

WE ARE ALL TRAVELERS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One of the overriding themes that is reflected in this week's parsha is the impermanence of all human ownership, reflected in its accompanying agreements and contracts. The Torah specifically states that property in the Land of Israel cannot be sold in perpetuity. The laws of shemitta and yovel preclude permanent sales of land, and as far as houses in walled cities are concerned the seller has a year long right of redemption and repurchase.

The Torah emphasizes the reason for this overriding value which restricts permanent sale, that "all of the earth belongs to Me." As long as people are convinced that somehow their property really belongs to them and that that they somehow are more than temporary dwellers, then they will have a false view of life and society.

The only permanence in human affairs is its impermanence, just as the only certainty in human life is its uncertainty. God told us that we are only strangers and sojourners within His realm. To think otherwise is hubris of the worst sort.

By limiting our control of property and curtailing our proprietary rights, the Torah emphasizes to us the view that a person should have regarding one's life and possessions. We are no more than tenants, trustees if you will, but never the real permanent owners of what we temporarily possess and enjoy.

That is really the import of the famous first comment of Rashi to the Torah - that the Lord owns all property and territory in this world and He distributes and redistributes it amongst nations and peoples as He so desires.

Judaism is a this-world oriented faith. Nevertheless, one of its basic tenets is its belief in the immortality of the soul and its place in the World to Come - the eternal world of the spirit. There is a Chasidic legend about a wealthy man who was traveling and found overnight lodging in the hovel of an impoverished Jew. The bed was hard, the blanket was flimsy, the house was cold and the breakfast consisted of meager gruel and water. The wealthy visitor complained to his poor host: "Is this the way you live always?" The poor Jew replied: "And are these your usual accommodations?" In response the rich man replied: "Certainly not. I have a sixteen-room home with heat and food aplenty where I truly reside. But I am now traveling and on the road as a such I must accept whatever accommodations come my way."

The poor Jew then said: "I also have a mansion for my permanent home. It is being built for me in the

World to Come. In this world I am but a traveler so I also must accept whatever accommodations come my way." We are all only travelers on this journey of life. A traveler always has a sense of impermanence, of living out of a suitcase, of being merely a tenant or guest in the great hotel/inn that we call this world of ours.

Mount Sinai and the Torah that emanated from there emphasized this truism of life to us. Would that we would see ourselves this way and thereby spare ourselves needless frustration and aggravation.

Strengthen Our Faith

The book of Vayikra opened on a very high and positive note. Moshe is the recipient of Divine revelation and serves as the High priest of the Mishkan during its first week of its dedication. His brother Aharon is appointed as the permanent High Priest and the children and the descendants of Aharon remain the special family of kohanim throughout the ages of Jewish history.

After the revelation at Sinai and the acceptance of the Torah by Israel, and the dedication of the Mishkan, the Jewish people are apparently at the zenith of their national and spiritual life. Yet this rosy future is not quite what will really occur. At the conclusion of the book of Vayikra, which we read in this week's parsha, a much more somber picture is portrayed.

Anyone cognizant of the story of the Jewish people over the centuries is well aware that all of the dire predictions that appear in this week's parsha are not hyperbole. A professor of Jewish studies once wryly commented to me that Jewish history was "all books and blood." That pretty much sums up the book of Vayikra as well.

Two of Aharon's sons are destroyed, many laws and strictures are brought down as the Torah of Sinai is fleshed out by God through Moshe, and the awful events that will befall the Jewish people - destruction, exile and agony, are all painfully described in this week's parsha. Thus the book of Vayikra becomes the true book of the Jewish story, in all of its glory and somber narrative.

What are we to make of all of this? That question has hovered over all of Jewish life in every location, generation and circumstance. Because of the inscrutable nature of God's direction of Jewish affairs, the question has never had an even halfheartedly satisfactory answer. The books, the laws, and the commandments remain in the main to be mysterious as does the blood of Jewish history.

Because of this, Jewish history, aside from being composed of books and blood, is mainly composed of faith and belief. That is what the rabbis may have meant when they stated that the prophet annunciated the basic underpinning of all of the Torah - "the righteous person lives on faith." And faith is truly a difficult commodity to achieve and maintain.

The past century of Jewish life has challenged traditional Jewish faith greatly and dealt it mighty

blows. For many Jews it no longer is a viable commodity in their arsenal of life's values. Yet it is obvious that it is the one and only value that can help us weather the uncertainties, contradictions, cruelties and dangers that make up current Jewish life.

The Torah itself charts no easy way to acquire faith - in fact, it has very little to say regarding the subject of faith itself. However, at the conclusion of the public reading of the book of Vayikra (as at the conclusion of all of the other books of the Torah as well) we rise and strengthen ourselves in our belief and faith. May it so be.

Shabat shalom,

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