

PARSHAS MASEI - TOLERANCE AND ITS LIMITS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Tolerance and Its Limits¹

Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and say to them: When you cross the Yarden to the land of Cana'an, you shall drive out all the inhabitants...and all their molten images you shall destroy...You shall possess the Land and you shall settle in it. If you do not drive out the inhabitants...those of them whom you leave shall be as if fenced-in in your eyes and a surrounding barrier of thorns in your side.

Almost reflexively, we think of the Book of Shoftim, and how it prominently chronicles the unfortunate fulfillment of this prediction. Bnei Yisrael failed to finish the job of completely routing the inhabitants of the Land. The vestiges of those idolatrous nations became a constant source of trouble for them, leading inexorably to the loss of the Land.

Such a reading instantly resonates with us. It is also incorrect. The danger in allowing the coexistence of the remnants of the evil Seven Nations was not in what they would do to us, but in an ill-founded tolerance on our part that has no place in a Torah nation.

"You shall possess the Land and you shall settle in it." What difference is there between possessing and settling? The Torah tells us that our settlement will be tentative and precarious, unless we first make it suitable for settlement. In other words, the possession that the Torah speaks of is spiritually readying the Land for a Torah nation to properly live within. The Torah commands us to utterly banish idolatry and all its appurtenances as a precondition to settling the Land. This is so important, that it cannot be delayed. We cannot move in until we perform the required housecleaning.

This is so important, that Hashem conveys the message to us three times. In the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe's arguments succeed in having Hashem agree not to destroy the People. Moreover, Hashem quickly moves to reestablish the promise that they will enter the Land^[2]. Precisely at that point - with the memory avodah zarah and its effects fresh in their minds - G-d tells the Bnei Yisrael that they must destroy everything idolatrous when they come into the Land. In our pesukim, with the Bnei Yisrael after a 38 year delay finally ready to take possession of Israel, Hashem reiterates His directive. The third occasion is the most dramatic. "The kohanim with the Aron stood still in the middle of the Yarden until Yehoshua had finished telling the people all that Hashem had commanded him to tell the people^[3]." What was the content of that speech? According to the gemara^[4] Yehoshua once again repeated the instruction of ridding the Land of its idols and idolatry.

He had picked an emotion-laden moment. Bnei Yisrael were conscious of having nearly drowned, were it not for Hashem's miraculous intervention. They were thankful to be alive, and now able to look ahead, towards a happy future in the Land. At this crucial juncture, Yehoshua chose to transmit was once again the commandment to destroy avodah zarah.

We understand that avodah zarah runs counter to everything the Torah stands for, and is the platform from which every debased and dissolute activity becomes possible. We still need to understand why it would be so terrible to wait a bit before eradicating its icons and acolytes. Our pesukim provide the explanation. *"Those of them whom you leave shall be as if fenced-in in your eyes and a surrounding barrier of thorns in your side."* If you do not immediately work at ridding the Land of the idolaters, they will be "fenced in" and live within "a surrounding barrier." They will live out of your immediate sight, as if behind fences and barriers that obscure from your vision the abominations that they practice. If you would see how they conduct their lives, you would never tolerate them. When you cannot see what they are doing, you will lose your resolve to be rid of them. When they live in self-contained enclaves, outside of your immediate gaze, you will tolerate them. In so doing, you will tolerate the idolatry that you know they practice. The service of other deities is entirely incompatible with your mission in life, and your mission in the Land. If you cannot discharge your obligation to those missions, you will compromise your special relationship with Hashem, and thereby endanger the providential protection that He wishes to provide you. We can be tolerant of many things, but not an ideology that stands at complete cross-purposes to Hashem's expressed Will.

This, more than anything else, is the danger. Going soft on avodah zarah is tantamount to a renunciation of our pledge to G-d. Abrogating our commitment to Him means that we lose some of His assistance. Without that assistance, we have no ability to withstand the onslaught that inexorably follows, as those idolaters find ways to become our enemies and oppressors.

Shoftim indeed is the story of the downward spiral whose engine was the idolaters we failed to banish from the Land. But they were only the obvious, manifest source of our problems. Our real problem was our own lack of resolve, our tolerating that which should not be tolerated.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 33:51-55
 2. Shemos 34:11
 3. Yehoshua 4:10
 4. Sotah 34A
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