

CAN A GIFT BE RETURNED?

By Rabbi David Algaze

“But if you do not drive the inhabitants of the Land before you, those of them whom you leave shall be pins in your eyes and a surrounding barrier of thorns in your sides, and they will harass you upon the Land in which you dwell. And it shall be that what I had meant to do them, I shall do to you.” (Bamidbar 33:55-56)

With these ominous and moving words the Torah presents its case for the Land of Israel. In G-d’s Master Plan for the universe, He designed that Israel shall live in this Land and from there it will impart its teachings to the whole world. “For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the Word of the L-rd from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:3)

This plan started at the onset of our history. The first commandment to Abraham was to go the land of Israel. The Land was promised to him and to his descendants and throughout our history, the inheritance of the land by the people of Israel was the dominant theme of our mission. After Abraham is told of the future exile to Egypt, Hashem promises him that “the fourth generation shall return here.” (Genesis 15:16). The Midrash Rabbah connects the story of the Akeda (the commandment to bind Isaac to the altar) with the preceding passage to indicate that the Akeda was a form of a warning to Abraham for having made a pact with strangers over the Land of Israel.

Isaac and Jacob receive the same instructions concerning the land upon acceding to the leadership of the nation. Jacob’s poignant request “do not bury me here in Egypt” highlights the everlasting yearning of the Jewish people to live in its land. Throughout the Torah, Hashem continuously impresses upon Israel the obligation to live in the Land but nowhere with more passion and verve than in this parasha with its sweeping description of the borders of Eretz Israel and the obligation to inherit the land by force. “And you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you” (v.52) indicates most clearly that our residence in the land is exclusive, that our mission is to create a Jewish society in the land and that strangers who do not adhere to the Torah may become noxious influences upon the spirit of Israel. Rashi emphasizes that the verse connects the driving of the strangers from the land with our settling upon it. This is not a promise but a warning. If you drive the inhabitants from the land, you will be able to settle it and remain secure; but if you do not drive them out, you will not be able to survive there.

R. Zalman Sorotzkin (1881-1966) in his Oznam Latorah comments that if Israel will fight against its enemies in order to inherit the land, then the promises of G-d that we will “not be afraid of the fear of night...a thousand shall fall at your side and ten thousand at right hand...”(Psalm 91) will be fulfilled. But if we fail to drive them out, the enemy will then feel stronger and become “pins in your eyes.” In another profound insight, Rabbi Sorotzkin adds that if you drive the enemy out of the Land he may harbor hatred for you from the outside. But if you allow them to live among you they will bear enmity against you while inside. Naturally, enemies inside the Land are much harsher than enemies outside. How true these comments are today!

The Ramban (Nachmanides) derives from the word “you shall settle” that is a positive biblical commandment to inherit the land incumbent upon every Jew in every generation even by force of arms.

This precious gift of the Land to Israel has been given to us exclusively. Yet, we are not to inherit except through pain and sacrifice. (Brachot 5a). These sacrifices and tribulations are intrinsic to the process of settlement, control and development. Nachmanides adds, For G-d gave the land to them and they shall not reject it. And if they should choose another land to settle they will be transgressing the will of G-d.” (s.v. Bamidbar 33:53) Ramban adds most clearly in his commentary on Maimonides Sefer Hamitzvot (mitzvah 4) that we are not allowed to leave any part of the land under some other people’s sovereignty and that we are prevented from establishing covenants with them that will permit them to settle in the land as sovereign bodies. Just in case someone should question whether this mitzvah applied only to Biblical times, Ramban adds, “This mitzvah (of conquest) is applicable to all generations.”

In our generation, we have succumbed to the cloud of confusion regarding our connection to the Land. Our enemies and many well meaning friends have forgotten or distorted our historical connections to the land of Israel. Some are ignorant of our history and the preeminence of the Land in our lives. Many of our brethren today fear that the holding on to the land of Israel within its biblical boundaries is beyond our reach. Rabbinical bodies and leaders have lost their way and instead of clarity we have come to the darkness of uncertainty. The words of the Torah are like lamps in the dark illuminating our path and giving us the proper direction to take. The gift of the Land should not be rejected like a gift that one returns. The false premise that giving away land will be good for us is a cruel chimera. Only the truth of the Torah shall bring us joy. Let us cherish this precious gift and by yearning to obtain it and live within its borders we shall regain the Land and the beauty of Jerusalem shall shine brightly for the people of Israel and hence for the entire world.