

Parashat Ekev

Gradual Conquest & the "Beasts of the Field"

The Israelite nation waits, poised on the border of Eretz Canaan. What could possibly sabotage the success of their conquest of Canaan, or their successful colonisation of the land that God has promised them?

This is the topic to which Parashat Ekev is devoted. Both at its opening and its conclusion, the parasha cautions Bnei Yisrael that the dedicated observance of God's commands are the key to our success as a nation-state. Failure to fulfil God's commands will result in the loss of our promised land.

In addition, Parashat Ekev confronts a whole series of misconceptions and states of mind that might upset the success of Eretz Canaan's conquest and subsequent tenure in Canaan: Fear of the enemy¹, the Israelites tendency to rebel², to shirk the commands of God, the spiritual dangers of material and spiritual complacency³, a belief that Am Yisrael is righteous and God' chosen, irrespective of our ethical and religious conduct⁴ – all these beliefs are discussed and responded to within the lines of our Parasha.

This week, we shall take one such passage and analyse it:

"Should you say to yourselves, 'These nations are more numerous than we; how can we dispossess them?' Have no fear of them. Bear in mind what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians. The wondrous acts that you saw with your own eyes, the signs and miracles, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the Lord your God liberated you. This is what the Lord your God will do to all the peoples that you now fear. The Lord your God will also send hornets⁵ against them, until those who are left or in hiding perish before you. Do not be in dread of them for the Lord your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God. **The Lord your God will dislodge those peoples from before you little by little, you will not be able to put an end to them at once, else, the wild beasts will multiply.** The Lord your God will deliver them to you, throwing them into utter panic until they are wiped out. He will deliver their kings into your hand and you shall obliterate their name from under the heavens; no man

shall stand up to you; until you have wiped them out." (Devarim 17-24)

At first glance, this paragraph comes to instil confidence, to confront battle-fright and feelings of insecurity and insignificance. The Israelites are frightened to enter into battle. After all, their enemies are more numerous and fortified⁶ than themselves. Moshe urges the people to recall the miraculous defeat of the Egypt, and that God's might will ensure them absolute success. They have nothing to fear; God is on their side. The parsha (paragraph) here is filled with expressions that transmit a feeling of absolute confidence. There is no doubt that there will be a decisive and total victory: "No man shall stand up to you," "utter panic," "Have no fear," even those "in hiding" will be "wiped out."

But now, let me "home in" on verse 22.

"The Lord your God will dislodge those peoples from before you LITTLE BY LITTLE; YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PUT AN END TO THEM AT ONCE, else, the wild beasts will multiply."

The war will be "little by little." The war will be slow and protracted. Don't anticipate immediate results. This passuk gives a picture that is very different from the strident sweeping victory that is promised here.

The moods are so diverse! How does this verse match that which we see elsewhere in this chapter? What is this strange, somewhat hesitant passuk doing in the middle of these words of absolute confidence?

And if we can look more closely, what exactly does this passuk tell us? Why is the concern, the threat of the "wild beasts" so severe that it should slow the military advance of Bnei Yisrael? Are we really afraid of animals here?

THE PARALLEL PARASHA IN SHEMOT

To understand our parasha in Devarim, let us look at Sefer Shemot, which provides a direct parallel and sheds some further explanation upon our difficult passuk. In a parallel passage⁷ the Torah elaborates upon our theme:

"I shall not drive them out before you in a single year, lest the land become desolate and the **wild beasts multiply** to your hurt. I will drive them out before you **little by little** until you have increased and possess the land. I will set your borders from ... the wilderness to the Euphrates ..."

What has this parasha added that is not in Devarim? We can now begin to understand the motive of "little by little. There is a

¹ 7:17

² 9:7,23,24.

³ Chapter 8 especially 8:12-14

⁴ 9:4-7; 10:12-22

⁵ The term "tzirah" has been open to wide debate. Whereas Rashi talks about a poisonous flying insect, usually translated as a "Hornet" – a large wild bee - both Rav Saadia Gaon and Ibn Ezra translate the word Tzir'ah to refer to a sickness ("Tzirah" like "Tzaraat") that will plague our enemies. Hizkuni says that it is a metaphor. Just like a hornet, God will strike them with something small and deadly. Israel will not have to fight.

On the basis of the similarity between the word TZIRA and Lo TA'AROTZ, both in Devarim 7, there are those who, above metaphor, would see the grammatical translation as Fear, and hence "God will send his fear against them."

⁶ This is reinforced again in 9:1-2. Interestingly, there Moshe uses the precise terminology that had been used in the disastrous report of the "Spies" (see Bamidbar 13:28, 31-33.) It would appear that Moshe here is verifying the facts, the evidence of the Spies, but disputing the feasibility of the war. In any situation, intelligence reports have to be interpreted and transformed into a working plan. The fierceness of the adversary is not under dispute. The feasibility of success is the issue.

⁷ There is a striking similarity between the two passages; Shemot 23:20-33 and the beginning of Ekev.

- The topic is the same – the conquest of Canaan.
- In both we have promises of blessings – abundant food, and population growth, that God will strike fear into our enemies.
- In both we find the unusual metaphor of the "Tzir'ah" driving the people out of the land.
- We also see here warnings of Avoda Zara, that it will be a "snare (mokesh)" that if served, will drive us out of the land.

concern regarding the land being "desolate." And there is a promise that once the Israelite population has increased, they will indeed occupy the land.

We should be aware that wild animals were a real and present threat in Biblical times. There are numerous stories in the Tanach that talk about lions and bears that were potential, and actual killers⁸. It appears that these animals could seriously disrupt normal living and farming.

The wild animals are not a military threat. They are a civilian threat. If lions and bears roam the countryside, the farmer will be unwilling to till the field, the merchant terrified to travel the highways. The shepherds' flocks will be ravaged. One will have to watch ones children as they play in the meadow for fear of their lives. People will live with a backdrop of terror.

Why should the land come into our control "little by little?" - Because at this moment in time, Am Yisrael could not fully populate the expansive hills and plains of Eretz Yisrael. There is a large land to be occupied by a small population. This will mean that there will be vast tracts of uninhabited or sparsely inhabited territory, leaving a vacuum, allowing for dangerous animals to proliferate. The steady but gradual advance into Eretz Canaan is to our benefit. To ensure safety within our borders, God grants us territorial conquest in accordance with our population size. As we grow, we gain more land. In this way, there is at all points in time, a safe continuum of a country, fully populated, that in time will be expanded in ratio to population growth, until the entire land has been conquered⁹.

Looking at Sefer Shemot and Devarim together, the scenario seems pretty clear. God's program is to enact the conquest incrementally, in stages. This is not a default plan, but is an integral part of the conquest strategy, it is *Lechatchila*.

BACK TO DEVARIM

Now let us view the issue of the gradual conquest in the context of our passage in Devarim. Devarim is dealing with the apprehensions of Am Yisrael as they face war, and reassuring them that God will grant them a decisive victory reminiscent of the miracles of Egypt. In the wider picture that is true. But it would seem that Moshe is also lowering expectations here and introducing a more complex conquest scenario. After all, the war campaign in Canaan is going to take some time. Moshe does not want the people to think that the military advance will be over in a matter of days, or even months. That is not the expectation; that is not the plan. The victories will be impressive – Yes! There will be miracles – Yes! God will strike fear into their hearts – Yes! But the war against Canaan is going to take decades. It will not be an absolute capitulation. Even after Joshua's death, it is not complete.

And so, in order that the nation not perceive the lengthy war campaign as a failure of God's plan - God backtracking on his promises - to ensure that the people not become discouraged

⁸ In the Joseph story, Yaakov believes that Yosef was killed by an animal (Bereshit 37:33; Samson and the lion (shoftim 14:6); King David and a lion and bear (I Samuel 17:34); the un-named navi and the lion (I Melachim 13:26,28), Elisha and the bears (II Melachim 2:24); the lions in Shomron (II Melachim 17:25-6.)

⁹ The Shemot parasha seems to indicate that further conquest is a possibility. There in Shemot 23, the parasha begins by talking about the "Emorites, Hittites, Perrizites, Cannanites, Hivites and Jebusites" all of whom inhabit the land of Canaan, but then talks about a land that stretches to the Euphrates river, well beyond the land inhabited by those nations. This is indicative of the possible option of further expansion.

and demoralised, Moshe includes this sobering line. From the start, God knows that the war in Canaan will be "little by little." That is part of the strategic plan. Moreover, it is for your own good, for the good of the country. Let us start with smaller borders as we build our country. Later, we will be able to grow from a position of strength.

THE RALBAG – REGIONAL ESCALATION.

At this point it might be interesting to include the comments of Ralbag¹⁰, an adherent of p'shat and a commentator who frequently introduces unusual approaches.

The Ralbag says that the "wild animals" is a metaphor. The term "wild animals" in our context denotes neighbouring nation states that might feel threatened by a lightening advance by the Israelite army. He suggests the following reading:

"He (Moshe) said this by way of metaphor, regarding the nations surrounding (Canaan,) outside the borders of the land that was promised to Israel. For if they see Am Yisrael engage in battle, they will come in assistance (to the Canaanite peoples) out of fear that Israel will attack them (next) as they attacked these. But, when Israel capture only a city at a time less people will be aware of it, even the nations of Canaan...and there will not be a mass war."

In other words, let the conquest of Canaan happen over time, so as not to arouse international panic that might backfire. Better that the war against Canaan move steady and slow, giving the neighbouring states no excuse to get involved in a war that is not theirs.

SEFER YEHOSHUA

Whether we follow our first option, (real animals) or the Ralbag's reading, a glance at Sefer Yehoshua will clearly verify that the conquest of Canaan did transpire "little by little" and certainly not in "a single year." The land is conquered in stages, city by city, and Chazal tell us that it took 7 years to engage in battle, and a further seven years to settle, the settlement stage involving further difficulties and warfare (see Yehoshua ch.14, and end of chapter 17 and Sefer Shofim ch.1 and 17.) It took a considerable period of time until Am Yisrael had absolute independence in their land, possibly not until the days of King Saul.

But let us take a step back now and consider what we have said thus far. In essence, rather than a quick-strike war, conquering Eretz Canaan in record time, God's plan is to take it slowly, stage by stage. Why? Either due to the concern of a wider military involvement, or to ensure that unpopulated land not become unliveable due to the proliferation of vicious animals. Is this entirely reasonable? Does God not have the means to prevent these effects? Ralbag says that God always tries to work the world with respect for the natural order, and even God tries to minimise reliance on miracles. But there are miracles in the conquest of the land! How about the splitting of the Jordan and the miraculous spectacle of the walls of Jericho!

Is there possibly something else going on here?

WILD ANIMALS – BLESSINGS AND CURSES

¹⁰ Provence 1288-1344. There is a nice set of shiurim on the Ralbag on the website of Yeshivat Maale Adumim / Birkhat Moshe at <http://www.birkatmoshe.org.il/index.asp?id=58>

Sometimes in study of Tanach, a phrase triggers a certain association that then reframes the original text in a new light. In our case, the presence or absence of vicious animals features prominently elsewhere in the Torah. Where? - In Parashat Bechokotai (Vayikra 26), where we read the Blessings and the Curses. The blessings; if we follow Gods statutes and laws, and the curses, if we reject God's Torah.

Among the list of blessings are agricultural abundance, peace and security, a population boom, a living relationship with God. But amongst all the blessings is the statement:

"And I will remove wild beasts from the Land." (Vayikra 26:6)

And in counterbalance, when we fail to fulfil the requirements of Torah:

"I will loose wild beasts against you, and they shall bereave you of your children and wipe out your cattle. They shall decimate you, and your roads shall be deserted" (Vayikra 26:22)

Or putting it another way, the issue of "wild beasts" is integrally linked to the polar opposites of Blessing and Curse, and the covenantal world that they transcribe. Furthermore, the theme of "wild beasts" in the context of blessings and curses is highly relevant to us in Chapter 7 of Devarim as well. After all Parashat Ekev is also a passage of blessings and curses:

"And IF YOU (EKEV) OBEY these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that he made on oath with your fathers. He will favour you and bless you and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the produce of your soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock ... you shall be blessed above all other people ... the Lord will ward off from you all sickness ..." (7:12-15)

"AND IF YOU DO FORGET the Lord your God and follow other Gods to serve them ... I warn you this day that you shall certainly perish like the nations that the Lord will cause to perish before you ... because (EKEV) YOU DID NOT OBEY the Lord your God" (8:19-20)

In a way, we have now associated wild animals into a new covenantal matrix. And now, I believe, Rashi's concise comments to the parasha fall neatly into place.

RASHI – COVENANTAL CAUTION.

"Lest the wild animals will multiply against you:
But is it not correct that when (Israel) do God's will, they will be unafraid of the (wild) animals, as in Job 5:23 ...? – (but) God knew that they would sin."

In other words, in the middle of the passage that assures Israel of phenomenal victory and success in battle, assured Divine assistance, **there is a single hesitant line that cautions like a warning light**, as if to say that the entire enterprise of conquest and settlement in Canaan is not assured, it is not granted without strings attached. Here we have a caveat that weighs heavily over Bnei Yisrael's entry to Canaan. The issue at the heart of the matter is the question of whether the people will indeed remain faithful to God.

On this covenantal backdrop, it is not particularly surprising then that at the beginning and end of Moses' assurance speech here in ch.7, there is a warning about the dangers of

assimilation in Canaan and the attractiveness of Idolatry – see verses 16 and 25-26. God assures His people of His unreserved backup in the battle for Canaan, but should the people falter in their commitment to Torah, to God, then they will fear – not only their enemies, but even the wild animals.

In this reading, Rashi turns this line around; from a blessing into a curse, from reassurance to caution, from part of the plan of conquest to its downfall. Rashi reads this as a sobering line amidst the upbeat tone.

Maybe Rashi takes his cue precisely from Parashat Bechokotai. After all, is it not the wild animals that represent the barometer of blessing vs. curse, of Torah observance as opposed to its abandonment? The very mention of wild animals raises to the surface the blessings and curses, so much in the foreground of Parashat Ekev, and along with it, the entire conditional nature of our tenure in Eretz Canaan.

CONTEMPORARY THOUGHTS

In our day, questions of "gradual conquest" are reality, not ancient history or academic Biblical Studies. I thank God that we have the privilege of living in this fateful generation in which we can live in our land, shaping our national destiny upon our God-given soil. And yet, along with the privilege comes a great responsibility. The questions regarding whether we succeed in controlling Eretz Yisrael "little by little," whether Jewish sovereignty over Eretz Yisrael happens here and now, or whether it is part of a long historical process are real political debates in modern Israel.

We have presented two models. The first tells us that God assures us that all the hiccups are part of the plan. There is a strategy. It promises total and absolute control of our Promised Land. However the road to the absolute dream, while fully assured, will be long and sometimes slow. But that these processes, the twists and turns, the ups and downs, are necessary to ensure the success of the final product.

But another alternative is possible. That the twists and turns are not simply stages on an upward climb, but rather a test, a step back, a sign that there are problems and flaws, that we are not adhering to God's plan, as God instills fear within our ranks as a signal that we are not being faithful to His way.

One can read Sefer Devarim as exclusively addressed to the problems and reality of yesteryear, but to my mind, if these are the words of the Living God, it must be read with an eye to the present.

Shabbat Shalom!