**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

Rabbi Evan Hoffman – Congregation Anshe Sholom

[evanhoffman@gmail.com](mailto:evanhoffman@gmail.com)

Parshat Shelach – פרשת שלח

June 17, 2017 – כ"ג סיון תשע"ז

This essay is sponsored by Joanne Wiesner-Steiner in memory of her mother, Marion Rosalie Wiesner מרים רייזל בת צבי הירש.

**The Land Devours its Inhabitants**

Ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to investigate the Land of Canaan spread calumnies upon their return to the Israelite wilderness encampment.  They said, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers.  All the people that we saw in it are men of great size (Numbers 13:32).”

Some scholars understood “devours its settlers” to mean that the spies depicted Canaan as being insufficiently fertile and susceptible to famines.  While it is true that Canaan three times experienced famine during the Patriarchal period (Genesis 12:10, 26:1, 46:2), and that, unlike the case in Egypt of the annual Nile flood, the Land of Canaan was dependent upon unreliable rainfall (Deuteronomy 11:11), it seems incorrect to interpret the spies’ remark as denying the land’s fecundity.  Only moments earlier, the spies displayed to the Israelites the oversized produce of a land that they admitted “flows with milk and honey” (13:27).  In the second recension of the narrative, the spies openly acknowledged that “It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving to us (Deuteronomy 1:25).”  Moreover, when the Israelites accept the calumnious report and despair of achieving a settled existence in the Promised Land, they bemoan how “the Lord is taking us to that land to fall by the sword (Numbers 14:3).”  The people foresaw their demise as happening through armed conflict, not because of the paucity of the land’s agricultural output.

In rabbinic literature, the spies are blamed for misreading -- possibly intentionally – what happened during their forty-day stint in the land.  Wherever they traveled in Canaan, the local chieftains suddenly died.  God arranged these deaths so that the local inhabitants would be busy eulogizing and burying their leaders and would be too preoccupied to notice the presence of foreign spies.  The spies failed to see the kindness thereby wrought for them by God.  Instead, they assumed that Canaan was an undesirable land with a dreadfully high mortality rate -- a land that “devours its settlers” (Sotah 35a).  Pseudo-Jonathan, probably influenced by the above homiletic embellishment, rendered the verse “a land that slays its inhabitants with diseases.”

Ibn Ezra interpreted the spies’ words to mean that the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan suffered from the country’s poor air quality.  In the Admonition, God warns the Israelites what will happen to them if they fail to heed His voice.  “You shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall consume you (Leviticus 26:28).”  Ibn Ezra, consistent in his commentary, explains that exiled peoples often do not adapt well to the climate in their places of dispersion and, as a result, suffer high mortality rates.  His comments bring to mind the many *halutzim*, Zionist pioneers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose zeal for rebuilding the Jewish homeland cost them their lives because they were constitutionally ill-suited for the swamps of the Middle East.  Though nowhere does Scripture offer a general condemnation of the air quality in Eretz Yisrael, it does note that God sent a swarm of hornets to force out the indigenous inhabitants on the eve of Israelite entry (see Joshua 24:12, Exodus23:28, and Deuteronomy 7:20).  The spies may have misread a temporary miraculous phenomenon, intended to facilitate Israelite conquest, as being representative of regular climatic conditions in Canaan.

Ramban understood the spies’ accusation that the land devours its inhabitants in light of their subsequent remark that all the people in the land were gargantuan.  He noted that in arid and infertile countries people typically are scrawny, short, weak, and suffer from kwashiorkor.  In contrast, the atmosphere and produce in Canaan are overly rich.  Hence, only large people can thrive there, while those of average build are doomed.  In this view, the spies made their remarks in an attempt to dissuade the average-sized Israelites from any hope that they could survive in a land suited exclusively for antediluvian giants.

Haim Jacob Kramer (late 19th century), a religious Zionist leader and author of Doresh L’Zion, offered a novel interpretation of Numbers 13:32.  Scripture uses the language of the digestive process to describe the relationship of the Promised Land to its inhabitants.  After forbidding the abominable sexual and cultic practices of the Canaanites, Scripture warns the Israelites, “So let not the land spew you out for defiling it as it spewed out the nation that came before you (Leviticus 18:28).”  A land that spews out its inhabitants is a land whose topography enables foreigners to invade easily and displace the population.  Contrariwise, a land whose topographical features inhibit conquest by foreigners, and allow the indigenous population securely to entrench itself, is called a “land that consumes its settlers.”  From this standpoint, the spies had no way to deny the bountiful nature of the land and its desirability.  All they could do was exaggerate the size and strength of the enemy and assert that the landscape made conquest virtually impossible.

Numbers 13:32 is best understood in light of a passage in the Later Prophets.  Ezekiel, living in the Babylonian captivity, prophesied about a glorious future in which the reputation of the Holy Land would be rehabilitated.  The nations of the world were wont to say to Eretz Yisrael, “You are a land that devours men; you have been a bereaver of your nations (Ezekiel 36:13).”  God promised the land that the cycle of bereavement will end and that she will no longer have to suffer the jibes and taunts of the heathens (36:14-15).  In this context, the notion of “land devouring men” is clearly a reference to the historical pattern of warfare and population displacement.  Numbers 13:32 could be read similarly to mean that the spies tried to dampen the fervor of the Israelites concerning the upcoming conquest of the land by noting that nations come and go in that land and they never achieve permanence or stability.

Students of Jewish history are well aware that no religio-national civilization has heretofore controlled Eretz Yisrael for longer than a few centuries.  The Israelites defeated the Canaanites.  The Assyrians exiled the Northern Israelites.  The Babylonians exiled the Southern Judahites.  The Persians conquered the Babylonians.  The Macedonians swept away the Persians.  The Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires traded control of the land back and forth multiple times.  The Hasmoneans ousted the Hellenists.  The Romans wrested control from the Hasmoneans.  The Muslims defeated the Byzantines.  The Crusaders fought the Muslims.  The Mamluks slaughtered the Crusaders.  The Ottomans conquered the Mamluks.  The British ousted the Ottomans.  And, finally, the Zionists restored Jewish sovereignty.

In Zionist schools, students are often required to memorize the historical roster of occupiers of Eretz Yisrael.  This serves the ideological purpose of demonstrating that no other group can reasonably set forth a claim to the land.  Jews were there in antiquity; Jews are there now; and no other people or country or empire ever had a sustained presence in the intervening period.  But what this list also demonstrates is that (in the pre-messianic era) the spies were correct in describing the country as a “land that devours its settlers.”

Did our ancestors in the Biblical period believe it was the land’s theological significance that resulted in the frequent change in overlord and turnover of population, or did they ascribe these developments to some other factor?  The secular perspective might lead one to conclude that those phenomena were inevitable, given the country’s geographical location.  Eretz Yisrael is at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe.  It lies between the two great cradles of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia.  As late as the early 20th century, and in recognition of its strategic value, the European colonial powers still desired control of Palestine.

While the Bible is a religious document, and prefers to offer theological explanations for historical events, the text does offer hints that ancient Israel was aware of its unique and inherently dangerous position on the map.  Josiah was one of the most righteous kings of the Davidic line.  Yet he was killed at Megiddo while attempting to stop the Egyptian military expedition against Assyria (II Kings 23:29).  Geopolitics, and the Land of Israel’s uneasy place within those politics, appears to be the determining factor.  Chapter 11 of the Book of Daniel describes the back and forth clashes between the King of the North and the King of the South.  It is a thinly veiled account of the third-century BCE wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires.  Eretz Yisrael was unlucky enough at that time to be the territory separating those bitter rivals.

Sadly, the restoration of Jewish sovereignty has only increased the intensity of armed conflict in Eretz Yisrael.  The world’s attention is focused unduly on that conflict.   Many countries root for the demise of our people.  As Jews, we must, however, trust in God’s promise to Ezekiel that the Holy Land will no longer be a devourer of men or a bereaver of nations.  Am Yisrael Chai.  The Third Commonwealth shall not fall.