

Material Wealth and Its Dangers

By Rav Elchanan Samet

a. TWO SEEMINGLY SIMILAR PASSAGES

Sefer Devarim is the book of preparation for entry into the Promised Land. This is evidenced both by the halakhic parashot that are situated at its core as well as by the later parashot, which deal with the covenant sealed on the plains of Mo'av and - especially - by Moshe's great monologue in the early parashot of the Sefer. Eight times during the course of parashot Va-etchanan and Ekev, Moshe describes the imminent encounter with the land. This encounter is described from different aspects, each description accompanied by mitzvot and warnings related to the theme of that description. Here we shall compare two such descriptions, one in parashat Va-etchanan (6:10-15) and the other in parashat Ekev (8:7-20).

The general framework of these two parashot is similar:

- a. Both consist of a lengthy introductory sentence followed by the primary section of the parasha.
- b. The introductory sentence in each case begins with similar wording: "And it shall be when Hashem your God brings you to the land..." (6:10), and "When Hashem your God brings you to the land..." (8:7). Likewise, the introductory sentences also conclude in a similar manner: "And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied." Between the opening and the conclusion of the introduction we find a description of all the good that awaits the nation in the land.
- c. The primary section of both parashot opens with the same warning: "Guard yourself lest you forget God," and in both we are reminded that it is God Who "took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery." The reason that may lead to forgetting God is the great goodness showered upon them in the land.
- d. Corresponding to the warning about forgetting God, both parashot contain a contrasting positive mitzva: in parashat Va-etchanan (6:13) we are told, "You shall fear Hashem your God," while in parashat Ekev (8:18) Moshe commands, "You shall remember Hashem your God."
- e. Both parashot conclude with a warning about going after other gods, and the threat of being punished with annihilation for this sin.

Thus the parallel between these two parashot exists both in their general structure and in the linguistic similarities found in corresponding places within their common structural framework.

Whenever it appears that the Torah is repeating itself, we need to look for the differences between the seemingly similar passages. It is these differences that help us discern the uniqueness of each parasha, indicating the special significance and the innovation in each.

It is not difficult to discern the basic general difference between the two parashot under discussion, a difference which in turn gives rise to all the more detailed differences: these two parashot describe two different stages in the encounter between Am Yisrael and their promised land. In parashat Va-etchanan we find a description of the initial encounter with the land, immediately following the conquest, when Israel inherit and possess all the material assets that have been created in the land by the nations that had dwelled there until the conquest. Parashat Ekev, on the other hand, describes the encounter with the good land itself, with the natural qualities that provide the basis for successful agriculture (the growth of the seven species), building and economic growth, which come in the wake of conscientious hard work on the part of Bnei Yisrael who put the good of the land to good use. Although both parashot describe material abundance and the plentiful blessings that await the nation in their land, they are different types of abundance, from different sources, and given to Israel at different stages in the process of their settlement in the land. As a result, the danger of religious corruption that this abundance may cause, as warned by the Torah, is also different in each case, as is the prescribed precautionary commandment. Let us look at these differences in more detail, dividing our discussion into a treatment of the encounter with the land on one hand and an analysis of the Torah's warnings about the results of that encounter, on the other.

b. CONQUERING THE LAND

"Hear, O Israel: You are passing over the Jordan today to go and possess nations greater and mightier than you... Know this day that it is Hashem your God Who passes before you, a consuming fire, He shall destroy them and He shall defeat them before you; you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly as God has told you." (9:1-3)

Bnei Yisrael were not brought to an empty land, covered with wild forests. They were brought to an inhabited land where nations with a material culture more highly developed than their own were living. The battle against these nations for the conquest of the land, if it lasted a long time and if it was conducted with difficult and great effort, would leave in its wake scorched earth and utter destruction of that entire material culture. But the Torah promises a great and QUICK victory for Israel over those nations. Indeed, the conquest in the days of Yehoshua is described as realizing this promise: most of the cities of the land fell into Israel's hands in their entirety, and in a speedy process of conquest. This was meant to work in Israel's favor, easing their task of conquest and settlement of the land and introducing them into a life of material abundance

immediately upon their arrival. Therefore the Torah commands, in the parasha dealing with "when you approach a city to wage war" (20:14), that "All the spoil you shall take to yourself, and you shall eat the spoil of your enemies which Hashem your God has given to you," and later on the nation is commanded not to destroy fruit-bearing trees during the siege of a city, "for you shall eat of them" (following the conquest); "you shall not cut them down" (ibid 19).

In parashat Va-etchanan, in the section under discussion, the Torah describes the great advantage in possession of the land achieved in this manner. It is not the good of the land itself that is pointed out here (for in the initial stage of the conquest this is of lesser significance), but rather the good that man has created upon it: "Great and good cities... and houses full of all types of good." In the corresponding parasha in Ekev, it is specifically the good of the land itself that is described, and also twice: "When Hashem your God brings you to the good land... and you shall bless Hashem your God for the good land which He has given you."

The abundance enjoyed by the nation in the land is also different in each of these two parashot. While in parashat Ekev water is provided by the land itself, in a natural manner (through the "rivers and streams that flow and the fountains in the valleys and mountains"), in parashat Va-etchanan the water comes from wells that have been dug out by the previous inhabitants of the land. While in parashat Ekev we are told that the land brings forth seven species of agricultural produce (requiring man to invest effort in their cultivation until he is able to eat his bread in abundance), in our parasha there are "vineyards and olive trees" just waiting for Israel. It is not the SPECIES of fruit that are important here, but rather their situation: they are already planted and are ready for use and consumption.

In parashat Va-etchanan there is mention of "great and good cities, and houses full of all types of good" that the inhabitants of the land will leave behind them. This is not mentioned in the corresponding parasha in Ekev, for these are not qualities of the land itself. On the other hand, parashat Ekev mentions the iron and copper found in the ground; these need to be mined. This, obviously, has no place in the description in Va-etchanan. The root "ch-tz-v" (to mine, dig) is reserved there for the wells of water dug out of the rocks by the previous inhabitants of the land.

To conclude the comparison between the two passages which describe the material abundance of the land, let us turn our attention to one stylistic phenomenon which exists in both and which illustrates the special subject dealt with in each. In both parashot a certain word or phrase is repeated in a fixed place – at the beginning of the sentence or at its conclusion, such that the repetition echoes in the ears of the listener like a hammer. In parashat Ekev it is the word "land" (eretz) that repeats itself at the beginning of five sentences (e.g. "a land of streams ... a land of wheat...") and thus determines the subject of the parasha: "the goodness of the land." In parashat Va-etchanan it is the phrase "which you did not ..." that occurs at the conclusion of four consecutive sentences (e.g. "great cities which you did not build, houses full of all kinds of good which you did not fill..."), determining that the special subject of this parasha is the material abundance that is being given to the nation as a free gift, without any effort being required on their part.

c. LEST YOU FORGET GOD

What the Torah warns about in both parashot is "lest you forget God," and both mention the ingratitude that such forgetting would entail, for it is God who took the nation "from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery." But a close examination reveals that the reason for this forgetting is different in each parasha, and therefore it also has a different result.

In parashat Ekev we find an account of the process that may bring about the forgetfulness of ingratitude, an account that is lacking in Va-etchanan: a person who makes use of the good of the land and cultivates it diligently will become wealthy and live a life of luxury. This will not happen immediately, but rather at the conclusion of the process of settling down in the land. (Attention should be paid to the contrast between "YOU SHALL BUILD good houses and dwell in them," in parashat Ekev, and "great and good cities which YOU HAVE NOT BUILT and houses full of all kinds of good which YOU DID NOT FILL," in parashat Va-etchanan.) The wealth and economic luxury achieved through human effort bring one to a sense of pride - "and your heart will be haughty" – and the tendency to attribute all this success to oneself – "and you shall say in your heart, My power and the strength of my hand have made me all this might."

The practical result of this is first of all that one forgets God, "failing to observe His mitzvot" – neglecting the yoke of mitzvot, as we read in parashat Ha'azinu (32:15) "And Yeshurun grew fat and kicked." It is only at a later stage that this process leads to following after other gods. What is the reason for forgetting God in parashat Va-etchanan? The Torah does not specify, but the reason is clearly not pride (for what reason can there be for pride in wealth that one did not create oneself?), nor neglect of the mitzvot. In our parasha the Torah reaches the stage of idolatry much faster. If we compare the formulation of the Torah's warning against idolatry in both parashot, we find an important difference:

Va-etchanan (6:14): "You shall not go after other gods IN THE PATH OF THE NATIONS WHO ARE AROUND YOU"

Ekev (8:19): "And it will be if you forget God and go after other gods and serve them...."

The Torah's concern in Va-etchanan is that the material culture which Israel will inherit in the land of Canaan will lead to an acceptance of the religious culture with which it is bound up. Together with the "great and good cities" and "the houses full of all kinds of goodness," Bnei Yisrael might also accept Ba'al and Ashtoret, the gods of Canaan, and the pagan concepts that are part and parcel of the material culture. In every Canaanite home there were idols of gods, and many Canaanite cities boasted pagan temples. The material culture of Canaan was saturated with pagan worship.

It is now clear what concern the Torah is voicing here: the inheritance of a material culture (Canaan) by a nation with a relatively inferior material culture (Israel) may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. Feelings of inferiority and insignificance may lead the victorious nation to enter the materially richer culture of the defeated nation, adopting it wholeheartedly, including its

religious aspects. The defeated nation could then say, "They beat us, but they accepted our philosophy." Such a process has occurred more than once in human history.

Therefore the Torah demands of Israel that a distinction be made between the good cities, the houses full of all types of good, and the entire Canaanite infrastructure – all of which are given to Israel out of God's kindness – and the beliefs and philosophies of the Canaanites and their tangible expression. At the conclusion of parashat Va-etchanan (7:1-8) we find the direct continuation of our discussion:

"When Hashem your God brings you to the land to which you are coming to possess it, and He will drive out many nations before you... seven nations more numerous and mightier than you... You shall utterly destroy them... and have no mercy on them. So shall you do to them: you shall destroy their altars and break down their images, and cut down their asherim and burn their idols with fire. For you are a holy nation to Hashem your God; Hashem your God chose you to be for Him a special nation out of all the nations upon the face of the earth. God did not desire you and choose you of all the nations for your great numbers - for you are the smallest among the nations - but rather because of God's love for you..."

Thus, it is true that the nations that you are about to possess do have an advantage - they are greater and mightier than you. But you are a holy nation to God, and He has chosen you from among all the nations. On the strength of that superiority you are destined to be victorious over all these nations, and therefore take care that you do not lose your advantage over them - your sanctity.

What is the precaution that the Torah suggests against the possibility of deterioration in each of the parashot? In parashat Ekev the answer starts to be hinted at even before the possibility of the deterioration is explicitly discussed (8:10): "And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied, AND YOU SHALL BLESS HASHEM YOUR GOD for the good land which He has given you." In the corresponding place in parashat Va-etchanan, we are told simply, "And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied," with no mention of blessing God for this goodness. The reason for this difference lies in the fact that God's blessing in having given us the good land, which is the source of all the wealth and ease which we have attained, is indeed a measure of guarantee against pride and forgetting God's mercies, but it has no power to protect the nation against the influence of pagan culture.

An additional precaution provided by the Torah in parashat Ekev against man's pride and forgetting God is the mention of God's mercies towards Israel during their desert wanderings (8:15-16): "...Who leads you in the great and terrible desert, with poisonous snakes, scorpions and drought with no water, Who brought out water for you from the rock of flint, Who fed you manna in the desert..." The Ramban (8:18) interprets this as teaching,

"If you think 'My power and the strength of my hand made all of this might for me,' remember God Who took you out of Egypt - there you had no power nor strength in your hands at all. And remember also that in the desert, where you had no means to survive, God performed all that you needed. Thus, this might, which you have achieved by your own strength - it is God Who gives you the strength with which to do it."

This precaution, too, lacks the power to protect against the influences of pagan culture against which the Torah warns in parashat Va-etchanan. In our parasha there is no suitable precaution other than complete cleaving to God (6:13): "YOU SHALL FEAR Hashem your God, and you shall serve HIM, and you shall swear IN HIS NAME." From this verse we learn the prohibition of fearing other gods, the prohibition of serving them and that of swearing in their names.

A practical precaution against the influences of pagan Canculture is found in the continuation of the parasha, and it is repeated several times in Sefer Devarim: the destruction of the pagan nations, the shattering of their altars and the burning of their idols. These acts are a precondition to ensure that Israel will in no way remain "stuck" to the spoils.

d. A SOCIETY OF LUXURY

From our study here we may draw conclusions that apply to our days as well, and the society of luxury in which we live. Economic abundance, wealth and ease for the individual and society as a whole present two hidden dangers. One danger applies to the individual who has earned his wealth through his own efforts - a positive phenomenon in its own right - and that is the danger of pride and a feeling of human power, which distances the memory of God's mercies towards him. There is nothing wrong with the joy of creating and doing, and pride in the success and achievements that come in the wake of diligent and careful labor. But only a hair's breadth separates this joy and pride from a forbidden and negative type of pride. This hair's breadth is a person's constant memory of the true source of all his achievements: God's mercy towards him.

And thus the Ran, in his tenth derasha, interprets the verses in parashat Va-etchanan (8:17-18), "And you shall say in your heart, My power and the strength of my hand have made me all this might. And you shall remember Hashem your God, for it is He Who gives you strength to perform might." If a certain power or talent exists within you, remember Who gave it to you. As the verse teaches, "For it is He Who gives you STRENGTH to perform might." It does not say, "Remember that it is Hashem your God Who gives you the might" - for this would deny the power that a person indeed has, as the means for gathering wealth. In other words, when a person remembers and recognizes the source of his strength and talents and Who it is that has shown him so much mercy so far, he may truly declare with joy, "My power and the strength of my hands (which are a gift from God) have made me this might!"

The other danger, which characterizes our generation, is that the society of abundance in which we live connects with many different cultures, making them into a single global culture.

There is tremendous benefit in this: without any need for war and for "eating the spoil of our enemies" we are able to enjoy every cultural achievement from every part of the world; it arrives at our doorstep - or straight into our homes - without any effort on our part. The question posed to us is to what extent we are capable of drawing a distinction between material culture which improves our "quality of life," and the spiritual values of the creators of that culture.

The ability to draw this distinction in our generation, and the knowledge of where exactly the line is to be drawn, is one of the most complex and difficult tasks that we face. This is because western culture is not a pagan culture as was the Canaanite culture in its time. Some of the spiritual values of western culture fit in with the Torah and are indeed nourished by it. Nevertheless, other values stand in clear contrast to our Torah. We may run away from this task by closing ourselves off from any manifestation of this culture. But someone who seeks to address it, to extract its good while rejecting its negative elements, must pay attention to the Torah's warning in our parasha.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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