

## LESSON 2 WAS THE LAND READY FOR THE PEOPLE?

### I. What is the aim of this lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to show that the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham regarding the Land was delayed for several hundred of years because of the territorial rights of the nations that inhabited the Land at the time. Only when the latter forfeited their moral claim to the Land could Abraham's descendants take possession of it.

### II. Why is this lesson important?

We live in an age in which competing claims to the Land of Israel are the subject of bitter dispute and a source of enmity and hatred. Although this course is not designed to address the specifics of the current dispute, exploring perspectives on the issue as it arose in the past should help provide some guidance for the present. In this lesson we will discover that although the Bible serves as the foundation for the particular Jewish claim to the Land it also recognizes the sovereign rights of the other nations living within it. Furthermore, we will see that the Bible imposes a moral and religious framework on all the nations who make territorial claims to the Land.

### III. Texts, Questions and Central Ideas of the Lesson:

#### **Text 1 – Genesis 12:6-7 – The Promise Deferred**

#### **When will Abraham inherit the Land?**

In our previous lesson we mentioned God's promise to Abraham regarding the Land of Israel. But a careful reading of the promise (text 2 of the previous lesson) will reveal that the Land was not promised to *Abraham* but to his *offspring*. Why couldn't *he* benefit personally from this great promise? After all, as we explained, it was promised to him because of his unique character, qualities and the mission that he was destined to accomplish! Why was the fulfillment of the promise deferred until after he had passed from the scene?

and moral leadership for which Abraham was singled out (see our previous lesson) will simply have to wait. The Torah is telling us that the rights of sovereign nations have to be respected despite the most noble causes and intentions. **But does this mean that the promise will be deferred indefinitely or until the Canaanites abandon the land voluntarily?**

#### **Text 2 – Genesis 15:13-16 – Deferred until When?**

In this text, God reveals to Abraham the fate of his descendants. Not only will they have to wait to inherit the land; they will have to suffer enslavement and oppression in a foreign land for a period of 400 years before the promise of the Land will be fulfilled.

Thus, we see that the promise is not going to be deferred indefinitely but for a period of 400 years. (The difficulty in this text is that verse 13 speaks of a period of exile that will last “400 years” whereas verse 16 speaks of a return to the Land “in the fourth generation”. It may be that the word “generation” refers here to a life span which, according to the Bible’s account of history, was 100 years or more.) Now, although the text does not explain why Abraham’s descendants must suffer, it does explain why they must be in a foreign land for the entire duration. The People of Israel cannot take possession of the Land so long as the “iniquity” of the nations inhabiting the Land (“Amorites” became a generic term for the nations of the Land similar to the term “Canaanites”) was “not yet complete.”

In other words, from the Torah’s perspective, the nation that inhabits a land acquires territorial rights to it. God, however, may revoke those rights if the moral behavior of the inhabitants degenerates beyond a certain point. Thus, as long as the “iniquity” of the inhabitants of the Land was “not yet complete” no other people, even God’s elect, could lay claim on it. Once the “iniquity” was complete, however, the inhabitants of the Land forfeited their rights to it and the promise to Abraham could finally be fulfilled.

Thus we see, on the one hand, the Torah’s respect for the sovereign rights of nations and, on the other hand, the Torah’s insistence that such rights are not absolute and inalienable. The right to a land must be accompanied by certain norms of behavior or else that right may be denied. The People of Israel had to wait no less than 400 years to take possession of the Land that was assigned to them by divine fiat because that is the time it took for the Land’s inhabitants to forfeit their moral claim to it.

**But what were the “iniquities” of the inhabitants? What did they do that was so bad?**

### 3A. Genesis 9:18-27

This story describes an episode in the life of Noah who, along with his family, had just emerged from the flood. The text tells us that Noah planted a vineyard and became intoxicated after partaking of some of the wine that he made from it. In his drunkenness, Noah “uncovered himself”. His son Ham, to whom the text repeatedly refers as the father of Canaan, tells his two brothers of their father’s exposure. The two, Shem and Japheth, immediately take a cloth and cover their father while looking in the other direction. Later, when Noah recovered from his drunkenness, he realizes what had happened and he proceeds to curse Canaan, the son of Ham, and to bless Shem and Yapheth.

Now, Ham’s behavior in failing to protect his father’s dignity and in shamelessly bruited about what he had seen was certainly reprehensible. This kind of behavior flies in the face of Jewish tradition which places great emphasis on the honoring of one’s parents (it is one of the Ten Commandments) and on avoiding gossip (see Leviticus 19:16 and commentaries). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that such a curse could have been imposed for this reason alone. Rather, as most commentators point out, it is more likely that Ham was cursed because of some immoral act that he committed while seeing his father naked, the details of which the Torah did not wish to mention. Indeed, some commentaries maintain that Ham castrated his father while others claim that he committed sodomy. Furthermore, the fact that he chose to curse Ham’s son, Canaan, and not the perpetrator himself is the Torah’s way of conveying to the reader the corrupt tendencies among the Canaanites, who eventually came to occupy the land bearing their name.

### 3B. Genesis 19:4-9

This text provides some insight into the character of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities representing part of the Eastern border of the original Canaanite territory (see Genesis 10:19-20), which were destroyed because of their wickedness (see the references in our previous lesson). Two angels in the form of human beings appeared at the home of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. Upon Lot’s insistence, they entered his home, and he welcomed them with open arms and then proceeded to prepare a feast in their honor. Before the angels had a chance to lie down, however, “the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old – all the people to the last man – gathered about the house” and ordered Lot to bring his guests out “that we may be intimate (a reference to homosexual rape) with them”. When Lot shut his door and begged them to back off, offering his own daughters instead, they responded

What is remarkable in this story is not just the extent of the perversion and cruelty but also the fact that it involved every single male citizen of the city - "all the people to the last man". There was not a single voice of dissent, not a single voice of decency, among them. Thus, it appears that such abhorrent behavior was a dominant feature within Sodomite and Gomorrite culture.

### **3C. Exodus 34:11-16**

This text outlines some of the instructions regarding the relationship between the People of Israel and the inhabitants of the Land. God promises the people that he will drive out the nations of the Land but He warns the People of Israel against "making a covenant" with them "lest they be a snare in their midst" and insists that they destroy all vestiges of idolatry. Why? Because of the deleterious affects that making a covenant with the nations who "lust after their gods" will have on their own loyalty to their God. At risk is nothing less than their essential character and that which defines them as God's chosen people.

In this context it is important to note that the worship of idols is not merely the worship of entities other than the God of Israel; it is the worship of entities that *contradict the very idea and essence of God*. That is because the belief in *many* gods precludes the belief in *one* God who is the supernatural, all-powerful and supreme controller of the world. Furthermore, the fact that idols are the creations of man suggests that man is more powerful than God and can exercise control over Him. Finally, the manner in which these idols were worshiped often involved extreme immoral acts which contradict the most fundamental teachings of the religion of Israel. Thus, the Torah is unwilling to compromise with idolatry and considers it the consummate offense. The People of God and idolaters cannot coexist in any fashion and under any circumstances.

### **3D. Leviticus 18:1-24**

This chapter spells out in detail the rules of incest as well as other forbidden sexual unions. Included also is the prohibition against offering children to "Molech", the name of a deity. In other words, the Torah, in the strongest possible terms, prohibits child sacrifice. But why was it necessary to list prohibitions which should have seemed obvious to a people who encountered God at Sinai and who understood the general thrust of the Torah's laws? "For it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves". The nations that inhabited the Land adopted such abhorrent practices and the danger is that, upon entering the Land, the People of Israel will follow their lead and compromise their own ethical and religious standards.

### **3E. Deuteronomy 12:29-31**

In this text, the Torah warns the people against “being lured” by the idolatrous practices of the nations in the Land. These practices are an affront to God not merely because they reject God in favor of other gods but because “they perform for their gods every abhorrent act that the Lord detests; they even offer up their sons and daughters in fire to their gods”. In other words, since the worship of their gods involves many abhorrent acts including child sacrifice, the People of Israel must be particularly careful to stay at a safe distance.

### **3F. Deuteronomy 18:9-14**

The Torah here warns against imitating the abhorrent practices of the nations that inhabit the Land. What are some of these practices? Included are the consigning of sons and daughter to the fire – probably another allusion to child sacrifice, various types of divination, sorcery and magic as well as consulting of ghosts and inquiring of the dead. Indeed, the text tells us explicitly that it is because of these “abhorrent things that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you.”

Thus, these examples provide some insight into the nature of the “iniquities” of the inhabitants of the Land which resulted in the loss of their territorial rights in the Land of Israel, and help explain why the time for the fulfillment of the divine promise to Abraham had finally arrived.

### **What does this imply about the rights of the *People of Israel* to the Land?**

In other words, what if the People of Israel commit similar “iniquities”? Will they also forfeit their moral claim to the Land and be banished from it? That is the subject of the following texts.

### **Texts 4A-B – The Conditions of Inheritance**

#### **4A. Leviticus 18:24-28**

This is the continuation to text 3D. In this section the People of Israel are warned against following the abhorrent sexual practices of the nations of the Land. It is these practices that led to the land’s defilement and to the expulsion of the nations from it. Lest the People of Israel think that their future in the Land is guaranteed the Torah warns that they will suffer the same fate if they continue to follow these abhorrent practices: “So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you.”

#### **4B. Deuteronomy 11:13-17**

This text, known from the Liturgy as the second paragraph of the “*Shema*”, has a similar message. The Land of Israel can be bountiful and good, a source of well-being and a blessing. On the other hand, the Land can yield little and be a cause of disaster and an awful curse. What will determine whether it will

be the one or the other? "If... you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day", i.e. if the people adhere to the large corpus of laws included in the Torah, then they will enjoy its blessings. However, if they "are lured away to serve other gods and bow down to them" then "the Lords' anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain... and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you."

In other words, God does not maintain a double standard. Just as the nations that inhabited the Land lost their moral right to it because of abhorrent behavior, the same applies to the People of Israel. The Land of Israel is the legitimate inheritance of the descendants of Abraham but, according to the Torah, they can exercise their claim to that inheritance only as long as they follow in his footsteps.

Now that we have explained the importance of the Land and we have explained why the promise of the Land could not be fulfilled for several hundred years after it was first made, we are ready to move forward in biblical history to the dramatic moment in which the promise can finally become a reality.

#### **IV. Suggested Lesson Plan**

##### **Step 1**

It may be helpful to begin this lesson with a general discussion about territorial rights. When can a nation claim to have a legitimate claim to a land? Are there circumstances in which that claim may be forfeited? What happens when there are two nations with a competing claim to the same land?

While these questions may lead to a discussion of the contemporary Arab-Israeli conflict it does not necessarily have to. The teacher can choose to focus on territorial claims in the French or American Revolutions or in the republics of the former Soviet Union, or any other examples that may be of interest to you and the students. By encouraging the students to briefly (!) address the difficult issue of defining the legitimacy of any nation's territorial claims, the students should be both better prepared and more keenly interested in the subject of this lesson.

### Step 2

Study and analyze texts 1-2 guided by the questions that appear in bold print.

### Step 3

Since there are several texts which are all aimed at demonstrating one central point (the cruelty and immorality of the nations which inhabited the land), it is best to divide the class into study groups ("chavruta") and to assign different texts from among 3A-F to different groups. Groups can be assigned to study either 1 or 2 texts depending on the size of the group and the class dynamics. The class should reconvene to discuss the findings of each group.

### Step 4

It may be helpful at this stage to have a class discussion about the various types of abhorrence that were attributed to the nations that inhabited the Land of Israel. The discussion may revolve around any, or all, of the following questions: Which "abhorrence" did you find the most objectionable? Which the least? What other things would you include in a list of abhorrence things of which nations, then and now, might be guilty?

### Step 5

Study and analyze texts 4A-B.

### Step 6

Summarize the central ideas of the lesson. It is then recommended to raise a few questions for thought: How do you feel about the fact that, from the Torah's perspective, morality plays a critical role in defining territorial rights? What are the pros and cons of applying this principle today? How might this principle apply to the Israeli-Arab conflict?

### **V. Questions for Further Study**

1. What should be done with the inhabitants of the Land after the conquest of the People of Israel? Compare Exodus 34:11-16 (text C above) and Deuteronomy 20:10-18.
2. See Joshua Chapters 6-11 and 15-17. To what extent were these rulings followed in the actual conquest?

### **VI. For Further Reading**

Sarna, N. *Understanding Genesis*, New York: Schocken Books, 1970. pp. 123-125

Schweid, E. "Land of Israel" in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987, pp. 535-541