

## LESSON 8

# WOULD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE LAND ENSURE THEIR DISTINCTIVENESS AS A PEOPLE?

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

The aim of this lesson is to show that, despite the fact that God drove out the foreign nations and enabled them to establish sovereignty in the Land the People of Israel often adopted the beliefs and practices of other nations and had great difficulty maintaining their distinctiveness as a People.

### **II. Why is this lesson important?**

Jews, throughout history, have had to grapple with the problem of maintaining their loyalty and commitment to Judaism and their distinctiveness as a people in the face of foreign cultures and religions. For the Jews in the Diaspora this meant trying to avoid assimilating into the larger non-Jewish culture and population; for the Jews in Israel under Jewish sovereignty this meant trying to set limits to the infiltration of foreign elements within the dominant Jewish culture. Today, the Jewish community in America is forced to confront the problem of a soaring rate of intermarriage and assimilation, and the Jewish community in the State of Israel is forced to grapple with the problem of defining the precise relationship between Israel as a Jewish state and Israel as a state like all others.

Studying the way in which the People of Israel grappled with this problem in the past will help shed light on ways in which we might be able to grapple with it in the present.

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

#### **Text 1 – Exodus 34:11-17 - The warning**

#### **What is the Torah's warning in this text?**

Since the process of driving the indigenous population out of the Land will not happen overnight (see Exodus 23:29-30), the People of Israel may be tempted to make peace with those that still remain, rather than complete the conquest. Against this possibility the Torah issues a stern warning. Instead of making covenants aimed at coexistence with them they should “tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their sacred posts.”

### **Why are such extreme actions necessary?**

Apparently, the Torah knew that Jewish sovereignty in the Land could not be a fool-proof safeguard against the lure of foreign cultures and foreign gods. The Torah here is concerned lest the People of Israel be invited to join them in their worship of other gods or end up marrying their daughters, which will inevitably lead to such worship.

### **But why would the worship of other gods be more tempting than the worship of their own God?**

One of the facts of human nature, true today as it was then, is the ease with which people tend to get swept by the tide and to follow others even when they know that what they are doing is wrong, such as using drugs or causing harm to someone else. It takes courage and strength of character to go against the tide, to “just say no” and to do what you think is right. In those days, the fact that the surrounding nations worshiped other gods made the lure for the People of Israel that much greater and the idea of maintaining loyalty to their own God that much more difficult.

However, it wasn't merely the fact that these other gods were popular. In ancient civilization different gods were responsible for different things. The central god of the Canaanite civilization was Baal – the god responsible for rainfall and the fertility of the soil - because the people there were heavily dependent on rainfall for the success of their agriculture. Thus, the God who redeemed the People of Israel from Egypt and led them through the desert was likely considered merely a desert god who did not control the forces of nature that were necessary for their survival and well-being in the Land. Although the People had witnessed God's power over the forces of nature in the ten plagues and in the splitting of the sea, it must have still been extremely difficult to believe that the God of Israel controlled *all* the forces of nature, including the vastly different forces operating in the desert and in the Land.

The question that we must ask now is **to what extent did the People heed this warning once they entered the Land? Would they be able to maintain their distinctiveness as a People or would they end up being lured into the worship of other gods despite being sovereign in their own land?**

### **Text 2 – Judges 2:6-15 – An assessment of the religious life of the People in the Land**

This text draws a categorical distinction between the period of Joshua and the period of the Judges that followed. According to this text, “the people served the Lord during the lifetime of Joshua and the lifetime of the older people who lived on after Joshua.” After his death, however, another generation arose which “did what was offensive to the Lord. They worshiped the Baalim, and forsook the Lord...

they followed other gods, from among the gods of the people around them". In other words, while the generation of Joshua lived up to God's expectations and maintained their religious distinctiveness and identity as a people, the generation of the Judges abandoned God in favor of other gods, just as the Book of Exodus (text 1) had warned.

### **But why the radical difference between the two periods in the People's loyalty to God?**

According to our text the difference stems from the fact that the generation of Joshua "had witnessed all the marvelous deeds the Lord had wrought for Israel" (although the adult members of the generation of the Exodus were supposed to have died in the desert, the survival of "older people" may have been sufficient to keep the memory of the Exodus alive. Alternatively, the "marvelous deeds" that the people are believed to have witnessed may refer to the miracles of the conquest described throughout the Book of Joshua.), whereas the subsequent generation "had not experienced [the deliverance of] the Lord or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel". In other words, the difference in the religious behavior of the generations stems from the fact that the one witnessed God's miraculous intervention and the other had not. As long as God was a visible force, manipulating nature at His will and defeating their enemies, it was easy to maintain their allegiance to Him. But once the enemy had largely been defeated and the People had begun to settle in the Land, to function as a normal People dealing with the daily routine of life and with the struggle for existence, it was relatively easy to forget all that God had done for them and to worship the same gods as all other nations. Just as people today often take good things for granted after they've grown accustomed to them, the People of Israel at the time began to take the Land and its blessing for granted after they had grown accustomed to living there.

Thus, we see that sovereignty in the Land was no guarantee that the Land will would be used for its designated purpose, to enable the People of Israel to fulfill their unique mission as God's people (see lesson 1).

The failure of the People to maximize their status as a sovereign nation in the Land as evidenced by their following "other gods, from among the gods of the people around them" was not only manifest in their adoption of other gods and cultures and the rejection of their own. In the following texts we will see two additional manifestations of the infiltration of foreign cultures into the lives of the People in the Land.

### **Text 3 – I Kings 18:16-39 – Elijah and the prophets of Baal**

### **Background**

After the split of the kingdom in 922 BCE (see lesson 6), the Northern kingdom was led in succession by Jeroboam, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, and then by Ahab in 871-852 BCE. While all these kings are described as having done “what was displeasing to the Lord”, Ahab is described as having done “what was displeasing to the Lord, more than all who preceded him” (I Kings 16:30). One of his key offenses was his marriage to a woman named Jezebel the daughter of the king of Tyre, a marriage aimed at strengthening the political ties between the two kingdoms. At her instigation, Ahab worshiped Baal and erected a temple to Baal in Samaria, the capital of the North. Feeling right at home in the kingdom of Israel, Jezebel proceeded to kill the prophets of God and introduced 450 prophets of Baal and 400 hundred prophets of Asherah (A female Canaanite fertility god) into the royal palace.

### **How would this affect the people’s loyalty to God?**

Now, it is hard to imagine that the king could institutionalize Baal worship without having an impact on the people. On the other hand, one would imagine that any attempt to introduce a new cult - an idolatrous cult no less - would meet with the resistance of the masses. That is, of course, if we assume that the worship of Baal was a new phenomenon. The following text will shed some light on this issue.

### **What is described in this text?**

The text tells the story of Elijah the prophet who was called upon by God to try to banish Baal worship from Israel. Earlier (I Kings 17:1), in an effort to call attention to the sin and futility of Baal worship, Elijah took control of the heavens and announced that rain would come only at his bidding. Now he wants to follow this up by challenging the worshipers of Baal to a contest. He gathers the people and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and asks them to provide two bulls for sacrificial purposes. They are both to be cut and laid on wood but without applying the customary fire. The names of both Baal and God will be invoked and whichever God applies the fire “that one is the God”.

### **What can we learn from this story about the religious beliefs of the People?**

In order to answer this question we must try to determine Elijah’s target audience. Now, there is no doubt that the contest is aimed at proving to King Ahab - who institutionalized the worship of Baal - the superiority of the God of Israel. But from this text it is also clear that Elijah has not only the king in mind but the People as well. To begin with, Elijah instructs Ahab to summon all Israel. Then, when they arrive at Mount Carmel, he confronts them with the following question: “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions?” an idiomatic expression which, in this context, refers to the people’s inability or unwillingness to decide between the God of Israel and Baal. He then continues: “If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” Indeed, the people do not deny that they have not made up their minds. Upon hearing Elijah’s critique of their state of belief “the people answered him not a word.”

Later, when they hear of the specifics of the challenge they respond with satisfaction “Very good!”, as if to say that this contest will force them to acknowledge the supremacy of one god over the other.

Thus, when the prophets of Baal are unable to elicit a response from their god despite their shouting and their performance of various rituals, Elijah tells the People to come close to him so that they can observe from up close what he is about to do. In an apparent attempt to increase the miracle he tells them to pour water over the altar – making the consumption of the bull by fire all the more difficult – not once but three times! Then he turns to God and he says: “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known that you are God of Israel... answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God”. From all this, then, there can be no doubt that Elijah is targeting *the People* above all and it is *they* who are in need of proof that God alone is God.

In other words, this story testifies to the pervasiveness of Baal worship among the masses. Now, it is possible that it became pervasive at this time strictly because of the efforts of Ahab and Jezebel. However, it is unlikely that the efforts of one king and queen could have such a far-reaching impact on the religious beliefs and life-style of an entire people. Thus, it is more likely that Baal worship was widespread long before Ahab came to power and it is for this reason that he did not encounter fierce from the People when he introduced it into the royal court.

### **What is the fundamental difference between the Baal worship of the People at this time and at the time of the Judges?**

During the period of the Judges (described in text 2) the problem was that the People rejected their own God in favor of the god worshiped by the neighboring population. Here, however, the problem was that hadn't yet decided which god to choose as their own.

But does this mean that the people *couldn't* decide between the two gods or *wouldn't* decide between them? According to the first interpretation they knew that there was to be one God; they just weren't quite sure whether it was their own god or the god of the surrounding people. According to the second, they didn't see a need to choose between the two gods. They apparently reasoned, why should they have to prefer one god over the other? Why can't they have it both ways, have their cake and eat it too? If it is possible to incorporate the god of the surrounding culture into their own faith and religion why not do so? Why not be members of the world faith community and loyal to their God, at one and the same time; a sovereign nation that is both different from and yet similar to, all other nations?

Either way we interpret it, Elijah wanted to dispel such notions and leave no room for doubt. There are not *gods* but only one *God* - the God of Israel - who alone controls *all* the forces of nature. Indeed, to put

God alongside other gods is to misconceive the very essence of God because while the other gods control particular domains or elements of nature, God controls *all* of nature and His domain is the entire world. Thus, whether they like it or not, membership in the People of Israel requires that they thoroughly reject all other gods. They simply can't have it both ways. The People were given the Land not to be just another nation, to introduce another god into the pantheon of ancient gods, but to establish a nation that is fundamentally different from all the rest, a unique civilization which will teach the world that there is only *one* God and that He reigns supreme. Thus, when only the fire from the God of Israel descended and consumed the burnt offering, the people were forced to finally acknowledge: "The Lord alone is God. The Lord alone is God!"

(It is worth noting that even with this miraculous demonstration of God's supreme powers and the utter powerlessness of Baal, the People had not been completely convinced. It was not until the time of Jehu (842-814) that Baal worship had been successfully eradicated from the Northern kingdom.)

Thus far, we have seen just how difficult it was at times for the People in the Land to maintain their distinctiveness as a people and to reject the gods of the surrounding cultures. The question that remains is, even when they weren't worshipping other gods but the God of Israel alone were they still able to maintain their distinctiveness?

While numerous examples could have been brought to answer this question, we have chosen one example with which our students are already familiar from the previous lesson.

#### **Text 4 – A. I Kings 14:22-24 and B. II Kings 17:9-11 – The Origin of Shrines**

In our previous lesson we spoke about the shrines for the worship of God which the Bible condemned either because of the presence of a religious center in Shiloh or because of the presence of the Temple in Jerusalem. We explained that the natural inclination toward local worship made the abandonment of these local shrines particularly difficult. The question is **was the idea of setting up local shrines merely a creative expression of a religious yearning, an idea that was invented in a vacuum that "caught on" among the masses?**

These texts give us an unequivocal answer. The local shrines were not an invention of the People of Israel; the erection of shrines was a form of worship that was borrowed from "the nations whom the Lord had driven into exile before them". In other words, one of the modes of the worship of *God*, common among both the people of the North and South, was borrowed from the surrounding cultures (and this fact alone may suffice to explain why such worship was prohibited).

As we mentioned above there are many other examples of this phenomenon. The idea of the worship of God through borrowed means may be the key to understanding the Bible's objection to the two golden calves set up by Jeroboam in the Temples in Dan and Bethel (see our previous lesson). In the ancient Near East representations of divinities standing erect upon animal-shaped (such as a winged ox, bull or sphinx) pedestals were common. This is probably also the meaning of Micah's sculptured image described in Judges 17-18 (and mentioned in our previous lesson) which, interestingly, was later transferred to Dan in the north, the future site of the two golden calves. Furthermore, one of the central events that would have a critical impact on the course of Jewish history was the People's request for a king that they formulated in the following manner: "appoint a king for us, *to govern us like all the other nations* (my italics)". Although God ultimately granted them this request He does not hide His displeasure. He regards the idea of appointing a king of flesh and blood, as was customary among the other nations, as a fundamental rejection of His divine kingship (see I Samuel 8:1-22).

Thus, we see that even when the worship of God was foremost on the People's minds and hearts, the way in which the People in the Land chose to establish themselves as a People and to worship God in their Land was deeply influenced by the other nations who lived in and around the Land. It seems then that the idea of creating "a great nation" of the People in their Land - with a distinctive culture and religion that would serve as an inspiration to the rest of mankind - was a wonderful and lofty vision that was rarely matched by the reality on the ground. Despite the best efforts of the religious leaders and God's advance warning, the People of Israel in the Land of Israel couldn't resist the temptation to be like the other nations of the world. By following, rather than leading them, they missed the opportunity to truly become a "great nation" and they eventually lost their moral claim to the Land as had the nations that had come before them. This helped set the stage for their exile from the Land which will be discussed in the following lesson.

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

##### **Step 1**

It is recommended to begin with a discussion that will help introduce the subject of the lesson. Students may be asked to respond orally or in writing to the following question: What challenges does the surrounding culture pose to you as a Jew? Do you think it is harder or easier to be a Jew than it was for our parents and grandparents? Is it harder or easier to be a Jew in Israel than it is elsewhere?

This discussion should help the students understand the issues that will be discussed in the lesson.

## Step 2

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Study and analyze text 1 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. Then ask: Do these warnings make sense to you? Do you think you would have been able to live up to these warnings if you were living in the Land at the time?

## Step 3

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Study and analyze text 2 guided by the questions in bold print. After studying the text it might be of interest to ask the students to think of opportunities or blessings that they have which they have taken for granted?

**Note:** This text may be omitted if necessary due to time constraints.

## Step 4

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Study and analyze text 3 guided by the questions in bold print. Then ask: Are many of us today *unable* to make important decisions about the extent of our Jewish commitment today or are we simply *unwilling* to do so? To what extent are our decisions about our commitment to Judaism influenced by non-Jewish values and culture?

## Step 5

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Study and analyze text 4 guided by the questions in bold print. Then ask: To what extent should we be engaged in, and influenced by, other faiths? For example, should we celebrate Christmas or New Year's Day? Should we socialize with or date non-Jews? To what extent should we act and look different from others in conducting our lives as Jews? Do you think high-school students in Israel today are better able to maintain their Jewish identity than high-school students living abroad?

## Step 6

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Summary and questions for thought. The following are a few examples: Should we place any limits on the extent of our involvement in non-Jewish culture? What are some of the Jewish features of the State of Israel? Do you think Israel should be more or less Jewish than it is?

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

1. Read Judges 1:1-2:5. What was the sin of the people according to this text? In what way is this sin different from the sin described in text 2?
2. Read II Kings 21:1-18. What does the text tell us about the reign of Manasseh (698-643 BCE) in the Southern kingdom? Compare his sins to those of Ahab described in I Kings 16:29-22:40. Who do you think was worse?

### **VI. Literature for Further Reading**

Kaufmann, Y. (1960). "The Religion of the People" in *The Religion of Israel*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 122-149

Smith, M. (1971). "Religious Parties among the Israelites before 587" in *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 15-56