

Parashah One Hundred and Twenty-Seven  
Deuteronomy 2:1–3:22; Habakkuk 3:8–19; Revelation 19:11–21

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notes by Tim Hegg

*HaShem is a Warrior*

In our world of modern “values,” it is common for war and soldiers who fight wars to be couched in derogatory terms. Not that war is ever “good,” in and of itself, but in the past Americans have understood that as long as evil exists in the world, war will be a reality, and the wise will prepare themselves to defend their vital interests. By those who affirm that there are really no absolute values, the soldier is looked upon as someone who usurps the rights of others for his own gain rather than as the defender of what is good and valuable. In this worldview, it must be difficult to understand why God is portrayed in the Scriptures as a Warrior, indeed, as a fearsome warrior who always crushes His enemies. The *Haftarah* passage connected to our Torah section is styled after an epic poem describing the crushing advance of Adonai as Israel’s Mighty Warrior.

But to appreciate that God is a Warrior one must first accept the fact that there is good and evil in the world, and that righteousness has the divine sanction to fight against evil. One of the reasons the “peace movements” of the 60s and 70s (and which continue in some form to the present day) have failed is because they were founded upon the false premise that everyone is right, and thus war is simply the arrogant attempt of some to force their opinions and values upon others. While it is true (sadly) that wars have been fought for this purpose, it is blatantly untrue to propose that all wars are fought from this selfish motive. In fact, in our Torah section today, it is clearly stated that God is the One who commands Israel to engage in war against her enemies, and that He is actually the One doing the fighting and subduing the enemies. And this is considered a good thing!

What enduring principles may be based upon this revelation of God, which we can apply to our lives today? First, and perhaps foremost, is the principle that God, Who owns everything, intends for Israel to have a particular land which He promised to give her, and that this land is hers, not because she had conquered it and taken it from those who previously lived there, but because God had ordained it, and He had conquered it—He had dispossessed the peoples who lived there, and He has given it to Israel as her rightful inheritance from Him, the Owner.

Now this has deep and significant ramifications for us and for our present world. This principle, clearly laid out in our text, teaches us that the Land of Israel, the Promised Land, *HaAretz*, figures into God’s eternal plan for Israel as well as for the nations, and that the Land is therefore eternally tied to His overall plan of redemption and salvation. To abandon any significance to the Land we now call Israel is to overlook a biblical fact rooted in the Torah: God intends that His awesome might and sovereign ownership of the world be demonstrated through Israel’s possession of the Land which He promised to Abraham and his seed forever. This means, among other things, that if we have God’s perspective on things we will consider the Land of Israel as having eternal significance for the revelation of God Himself, and thus any theology which demeans the Land or considers it insignificant is a theology devoid of biblical foundations in this area.

Furthermore, realizing that the Land is something that has always belonged to HaShem, and which He conquered for Israel in order that she might possess it forever—coming to understand this means that one simply can never support a transference of the Land into the hands of a nation or people other than Israel. The current passing of the Gaza and so-called “west bank” territories into the hands of Israel’s enemies is not, first and foremost, a political travesty. It is a high-handed

move against HaShem Himself! If taking such a position makes one a “Zionist,” so be it. In reality, it is better seen as accepting the eternal record of the Scriptures.

A second enduring principle we learn from this text is one which is difficult for us to understand, and even more difficult to accept. This is the principle that God is not only the owner of real estate, but He is also the sovereign owner of all souls: “all souls are Mine” (Ezek 18:4). We question why, in the conquering of the Land, Israel needed to kill men, women, and children. What had the children done to deserve death in war? Can this ever be justified?

This very question, and the various answers to it, have given rise to Holy War (Jihad) on the one hand, and utter pacifism on the other. What answer can we give to those who claim that the God of Israel is a bloodthirsty warrior Who has no regard for life? We begin by accepting the whole story of Scripture and remembering that God is the very source of life—that He upholds it as having the highest of values. So important is life that He ordained capital punishment for those who unjustly take life. But there is another fact we learn in the overall picture of God’s self-revelation, namely, that He is above us, and that His ways are above us. Though such a response is often judged as less than satisfying, we must be reminded from our Torah text today that God has the sovereign right and authority (as Creator) to do with each soul as He wills, and we have no right to “slap His hand” and ask Him what He’s doing. His infinite wisdom and knowledge give Him the ability to make decisions which to us may seem wrong, but in His eternal plan and decree are righteous and good. Judged against our finite understanding and perspective, some of His works seem wicked, but we cannot judge Him by our standards, finite as they are. We must rather allow Him to be the Sovereign, and believe that in the mystery of His providence He does all things well.

It seems quite possible that in the conquest of the Land, God intended to use Israel as the means by which He would execute His righteous judgment against the idolatry existing in the Land. In the prophecy given to Abraham (Gen 15) at the covenant ceremony enacted by God Himself, it is told that in the fourth generation, the nation that would come from Abraham would return to the Land, and the implication is that their return would bring about the warranted punishment upon the wickedness of those who dwelt there:

Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete. (Gen 15:16)

Thus, while we must primarily rest upon the fact that God is sovereign, and that His judgments are true and just, we may also recognize the fact that the horrid idolatrous practices of those who had come to possess the promised Land were to be eradicated.

The principle of God’s utter sovereignty carries across in our everyday living and the experiences of life. When the events of life which are out of our control seem contrary to our belief in the goodness of God, we must hold fast to the truth that God’s ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts, and believe that whatever He brings to pass is for our good and His glory. A faith in His all-encompassing sovereignty is an essential element of walking with Him as we await our place in the world to come.

A third principle that we may glean from our text today is that all we have, we have from His hand. Note well that Israel was required to fight in order to gain the Land HaShem had promised her. Yet when she was finished fighting the battle and had won the victory, she was to understand that in reality it was God Who was fighting for her, and her victory was actually His. Israel could

never claim a rightful ownership of the Land on the basis of her own military exploits. Though she fought the battles, and surely lost soldiers in the fray, the victory belonged to HaShem. She would, then, be forever in God's debt for the gift of the Land.

How often we lose sight of this principle, that all we have and all we are is the result of God's kind and gracious mercies toward us. Surely we work hard for what we have—surely we have expended much energy and resources to obtain the homes we live in, the land we call America, the freedoms we so much enjoy, etc. But, in reality, we must remember that all that we have comes from God, not from man, and when we receive the rewards of our labor, we receive them likewise as the gracious gift of God. For, apart from His sustaining hand in our lives, we would be unable to accomplish anything at all—indeed, we would cease to exist. It is in Him that we live, and move, and have our being.

When we remember that all we have comes from Him, a number of things fall into place. First, we can loosen our grip on the things we own—we can guard ourselves against the love of “mammon.” Materialism in our times and culture is an obvious idol. Many people give their entire lives—body and soul—to the acquiring of things. And none of us is exempt from the draw of materialism and the worldly comforts and prestige it brings. The idol of materialism is subtle because there is absolutely nothing wrong with material things! In fact, God is the One who gives us those material things we need. So where does the idolatry come in? When we think we've acquired our possessions on our own strength and fail to give God the credit and glory for meeting our needs. When we think we've done it all, we grasp our material possessions as the prideful “proof” of our abilities. Moreover, in thinking that we have gained our wealth through our own strength, we fail to give God the priority in our lives that He deserves. Our pride gets the best of us.

The second thing that happens when we live with the truth before us, that God is the giver of all good things, is that we are able to look at our material possessions as a means to serving God. Our homes become a place for His work and service; our cars become vehicles for His ministry; our wealth becomes a means to expand His kingdom. In short, we are able to love Him with all of our strength. Even as each tribal region was to reflect God's presence in the Land, so may our material possessions reflect our recognition of God's ownership of everything. And this is all the more necessary in terms of community ownership of things. Even as Israel was constantly to remember that the Land belonged to God (and thus the *Shemittah* and *Yovel* were to be observed), so we must consider our own community possessions as gifted to us by HaShem for His work and service.