

Parashah One Hundred and Ten

Numbers 14:1–45; Ezek 20:18–44; Hebrews 11:1–3

notes by Tim Hegg

The Land and Faith

In the continuing saga of the conquest, we find ourselves once again in the story of the scouts sent out to reconnoiter the Land. They have “spoken against” (the Sages understand this to be “despised”) the Land. Having agreed with God that the Land was indeed good and bountiful, they nonetheless fear the fortified cities and the giants who appear as impossible foes. What began as a march to victory is now sidelined by the fear of defeat—the battle is lost before the enemy is even engaged.

The text before us this Shabbat turns its focus from the actual report of the scouts to the reaction of the people and their leaders. What begins with weeping (a reaction of sorrow) turns quickly to grumbling. They wept for a night, and in the morning they grumbled.

Their grumbling was directed toward Moses and Aaron, a telling sign of their perspective. Previously, the people had been easily persuaded by the delay of Moses on Mt. Sinai to attribute their rescue from Egypt to foreign gods. Now, they attribute the present situation to Moses and Aaron, as though they are the ones ordaining the events in the nation’s life. Once again, the sovereign hand of the Almighty has been forgotten. Suddenly, in the face of entering the Land, the hardships of Egypt seem welcome in comparison to the required struggle to enter the Promised Land. “Would that we had died in Egypt...!”

Our own spiritual battles encounter the same struggles. When we set our hearts to honor God, and walk in His ways, we encounter new difficulties and up-hill battles. Having come to believe that God’s Torah is His will for His people in every age, we have stepped out of the “main-stream” and are seeking to recover, understand, and implement His ways of Torah as we follow our Master, Yeshua. Sometimes the grade seems too steep, and we wonder if we’ll ever find level ground. We might even be tempted to quit, and just drift back into the main stream of things. Turning around and walking downhill is admittedly far easier! For some, overcoming centuries of wrong theology and practice seems like fighting giants. They wonder if it is even possible to return to the ancient ways in our post-modern society.

In our *parashah*, we see the nation of Israel waylaid by two common errors: 1) they failed to see that possessing the Land was an act of faith, and 2) they failed to appreciate the blessings God had promised if they would obey His commands. There was no doubt that the Land was possessed by nations with formidable armies, that the cities were fortified, and that warriors of giant stature were there. Yet faith considers God bigger than the giants. Faith moves forward on the basis of who God is, not on one’s own strength and abilities. In short, faith rests in His ability to bring about what He has promised, regardless of what may seem to be insurmountable difficulties.

As faith lays hold of the God of faith, and rests in His strength, it also manifests itself in faithfulness. Faithfulness means implementing God’s ways, even when it may seem like our own plans would work better. Faithfulness means obeying God first, and leaving the consequences in His hands.

Relying upon God and preparing for the battle are not mutually exclusive activities—they are two sides of the same coin. Israel would need to fight, and would need to use all of her military strength to conquer the Land. But if she had acted in faith, and engaged in the battle, she would

have also experienced the divine help that the Almighty had promised. And so it is with us. We must rely by faith upon God's promises, and in doing so, we must likewise train ourselves in the disciplines of being faithful. As we do, we will enjoy the blessings He has promised, as individuals, as families, and as a community.

This, then, is a key element in understanding what faith is. Faith is not a blind jump in the dark, as some would have us believe. Far from it! Faith is that willingness to take a step forward into what seems an impossible situation precisely because one knows both the commandment and the promise of God. To know that HaShem has commanded this or that is not enough—we must also know Him to be the One Who keeps His promises. Based upon a genuine faith in His character, we are enabled to love Him by keeping His commandments. Apart from faith, personal righteousness is impossible. Yet when in possession of true faith (which is a gift from God Himself) we are able to accomplish His will, both for our good and His glory. Hudson Taylor said it this way: “God's work, done God's way, never lacks God's support.” If God has instructed us to accomplish a specific task, He may allow some obstacle in the way, an obstacle which appears impossible to overcome. It is at this precise juncture that He expects us to exercise faith in Him, believing that if He has instructed us to do something, He will give us the means to obey Him in the face of the impossible. In this way, when the task is accomplished, we know for certain it is because He won the victory, giving us strength to do His bidding, without which we would have failed miserably.

The people of Israel and the Land God has granted by covenant are, therefore, bound together for two primary reasons: first, because God intends for the world to see that He is, in fact, the only true God when He gives them victory over enemies far stronger than they. But secondly, Israel is bound to the Land for the simple reason that the Land continues to be the point at which she must exercise true faith in HaShem. Apart from such faith, the Land will never fully be theirs. And, to the extent that Israel despises the Land as she did in our text, to that extent she is herself unwilling to take that step into the impossible, trusting her God for the promises He has made.

Nothing could be more relevant for the current situation. God has promised the Land to Israel as a permanent possession. Yet He expects Israel to be prepared to guard the Land through military expertise and strength, even as He initially commanded the nation to take the Land through military conquest. However, Israel must not ultimately trust in their military strength nor the help of other nations but rather in God's faithfulness to keep His promise. Our true strength comes from believing God and acting in accordance with this belief. “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek Adonai! Her only hope is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Is 31:1).

Nothing warrants an anti-Israel sentiment. “He who touches you, touches the apple of My eye” is as true today as it was when Zechariah proclaimed these words. Yet one thing is certain—Israel will not possess the Land until she is willing to do so by relying upon her Master. (Note v. 9: “do not rebel against Adonai”). Even as God swore that they would not enter the Land (v. 23), so it seems that His perspective is the same today. He intends to give them the Land through empowering them to both take and retain it. The difference is subtle, but profound. When Israel does finally possess the Land as God intends, then the whole world will confess one thing: Israel's God is great (not Israel is great). But the world will also know this: those who put their trust in Israel's God receive the fruit of His promises, for they are victorious in the face of impossible odds. Thus will be fulfilled, “all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord” (v. 21).

Now such faith does not come by witnessing signs and wonders. Note v. 11: “How long will they not believe in Me despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?” In fact, Israel had put God to the test 10 times (v. 22) even though He had performed many signs and wonders in their very eyes. Signs and wonders—the emotional aspect of the divine-human relationship, is not firm enough to form a sure foundation in the face of the impossible. When one lives one’s life based upon signs and wonders, one is always left with the inevitable question of whether God will perform such a miracle at any given point when He has not specifically promised that He would. Not emotion, but commitment of the will through a true knowledge of God’s Torah forms the only solid foundation for living life by faith. And the Torah leads us to Messiah (Rom 10:4), so that any faith which finds its foundations in the Torah will embrace HaShem’s Messiah as the final embodiment of all of His promises—indeed, the very locus of faith itself.

When we are moved this way or that by our impressions and feelings, we are walking on quicksand that shifts with time and circumstance. Our impressions and feelings are easily changed with the circumstances, but God’s revealed promises stand firm. It is the life of faith based upon the revealed word of God that will scale the wall and defeat the enemy.

The end of our section teaches us yet another important lesson: sometimes missed victories cannot be regained. This is not always the case, for we have come to know God as the God of “second opportunities.” Yet this is not required of Him—“Today (emphasize “today”) if you will hear His voice, do not harden your heart . . .” (Ps 97:5, cf. Heb 4:7). What the people missed in obeying God by faith, they would inevitably forfeit. The Land which would have stood as a witness of their faith in a God who does not lie, now is forever out of their reach. They will die in the wilderness, and go down in history as the generation who failed to believe God for His promises—the generation who failed to enter into the rest prepared for them by their Maker. Certainly God remained faithful to them as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (He cannot deny Himself), yet the very Land they longed for was forever to be beyond them. It would await the next generation.

It is interesting to note that the following *parashot* deal with the laws of sacrifice, separation of *challah* (dough from the bread), laws for atonement of sin, and a reiteration of the sanctity of the Shabbat. Why? The answer seems obvious: faith is evidenced and strengthened (but not initiated) by obeying God’s commands. Let us never say that we believe in God if we are, at the same time, unwilling to submit to His ways and obey His statutes. It is for this reason that rejection of the Messiah is considered the high sin, for all of the commandments of God point to Him! To reject Him, then, is as though one rejects all of the commandments in one act of rebellion. It was for rebellion against God that Israel failed to enter the land, and rebellion is simply another way of describing faithlessness. To reject HaShem’s Messiah, then, is to engage in the ultimate act of rebellion—a complete lack of faith.

This whole issue of faith is often mind-boggling. What is faith, anyway? Our Apostolic section gives us a definition: “Faith is the assurance (substance) of things hoped for, the conviction (evidence) of things not seen.” So faith has to do with things that cannot be seen, that is, cannot be grasped through sensory experience. Faith takes hold of things yet future, promised by God, things which are not presently in one’s possession. The word utilized by the author to the Hebrews, “assurance” (substance) is found to have been used in 1st Century documents to denote a “title-deed,” that document which, when in the possession of the rightful owner, assures him the possession of the deeded land even before he takes physical possession of it. “Faith is the title-deed of things hoped for. . . .” That is to say, God gives to us faith, the title-deed, so to speak, of what He intends

to do for us in the future.

The second significant word in this verse as it describes “faith” is the word translated “conviction” (evidence). In the noun form, this is the only place in the Apostolic Scriptures where the word is found (though in the verbal form it is quite common). The word describes the inner or soul-phenomenon that comes from the act of believing. Faith produces a level of knowing not based upon observation but upon what God has said. If we go back to the idea of a title-deed as one aspect of faith, then our word “conviction” is one’s own willingness to accept the title as true and trustworthy.

But from where does this conviction or assurance come? Why is one person so willing to move forward on the promises of God, while another hesitates? Why did 10 of the spies return a report which despised the Land in favor of “personal preservation,” while two (Joshua and Caleb) seem eager to trust God for what appeared impossible? Why the difference?

This, of course, is the age-old question and problem. From where does faith come? It seems to me that the Scriptures are clear about the source of *initial faith*—it is a gift from God. Abraham had no faith in God before God revealed Himself to him and called him to leave Ur to go to the Land. This initial willingness to respond to and follow God is a gift given directly from Him and cannot be manufactured or mustered by the individual sinner himself.

Paul seems to talk specifically to this question when he writes in Eph 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and *that not of yourself*.” To what does the word “that” refer? What is “not of yourself”? Since the word “grace” (χάρις) is feminine, as is the word “faith” (πίστις), and the demonstrative “that” (τοῦτο) is neuter, we cannot link it immediately to one or the other. In fact, being neuter, the demonstrative most likely refers to the whole clause, meaning that the grace of God as well as the faith to accept His grace—both are a gift from His own hand. Therefore, all boasting with regard to the possession of faith is excluded, because all, regardless of race, status, gender, or whatever—all who have faith possess it because God in His own sovereign and free choice decided to grant it.

But once our hearts have been infused with the life giving faith which God grants, the Scriptures teach that we must cause that initial faith to grow and become stronger, thus enabling us to believe God for more and more. It becomes our responsibility to nurture and strengthen the faith God has given us.

We find this scenario worked out, once again, in the father of faith, Abraham. Having been sovereignly granted faith to believe in the unseen God, Abraham is required by HaShem to grow in his faith in order to believe God for the tasks He required of him. When it came to accepting the word of HaShem that he would have a child through Sarah even when both of them were old and beyond child-bearing age, Abraham was required to “grow in faith.” Note the words of Paul as he writes about Abraham:

In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform. (Rom 4:18–20)

While HaShem had given him faith to believe initially, Abraham was now a partner with God to cause his own faith to grow. How does the believer in HaShem cause the seed of faith, divinely planted in his soul, to grow—how can he or she become “strong in faith?” Peter gives us instruction: (2Pet 1:5-7)

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.

In short, what Peter describes here is the life of Torah obedience, not as a means for gaining right-standing before HaShem (for our doing the *mitzvot* is the result of faith, not the source of it), but as a response of love to Him, as a means of increasing our faith. Each of the “circles” or “levels” of growth which Peter describes may easily be linked to aspects of Torah obedience. And the end goal? Love—love for HaShem, and love for one’s neighbor—the fulfillment of the whole Torah!

We should not overlook the perspective of Joshua, Caleb, and Moses in our Torah passage today. The people had clearly been persuaded by the evil report of the 10 spies. Apparently convinced that God’s promise to give them the Land was not true, they had given up any hope of entering the Land. Joshua and Caleb try to persuade them by reminding them that “If Adonai is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us—a land which flows with milk and honey” (v. 8). Here is the key, “if Adonai is pleased with us.” Spiritual warfare is a losing proposition unless “Adonai is pleased with us.” How fruitless to “pray the warfare pray” if we are living lives of disobedience (which is really rebellion) against God. One clear lesson we learn from the history of Israel in the Tanach is that when she is disobedient to God, He is the One who allows her enemies to triumph over her. Her defeat comes from the hand of the Almighty, not from her enemies. So Joshua and Caleb, in calling the people to take courage and to fight in order to obtain the Promised Land, couch their appeal in these words: “Only do not rebel against Adonai ...” (v. 9).

Moses, on the other hand, understands that the people have already rebelled. They have already called into question the goodness and faithfulness of God because they have failed to believe that He would complete His word to them. Note what Moses does in the face of the people’s rebellion: he calls upon God to be merciful and to forgive. Moses does not ask God to change their minds so that they would actually decide to engage the enemy. Moses recognizes that their sin has already placed them in a very vulnerable position: they have lifted their fist at God and Moses fears the worse. He simply asks God to spare their lives.

And as the basis for his request, he concerns himself with the reputation and attributes of God. If Israel were to be wiped out, they would receive what they deserve. But if such were to happen, the reputation of Adonai would be soiled, for the nations would say that He was unable to conquer the enemy and would reveal Himself to be less than the gods of the nations. What is more, He would become known as the God who does not keep His promises. Moses would have none of this. The God He knew and served was a faithful, holy God Who always did all of His holy will.

Moses therefore goes on to rehearse (as the grounds for his request) the very attributes of God revealed on Mt. Sinai. “Adonai is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the

children to the third and the fourth generations” (v. 18, cf. Ex 34:6). “Slow to anger” utilizes an idiom in the Hebrew which is literally “long of nose.” It means He is not quick tempered, but His wrath is measured and just, and therefore is perfectly balanced by His patience and mercy. “Abundant in lovingkindness” is connected with “slow to anger.” “Lovingkindness” (חֶסֶד, *chesed*) is often matched with אֱמֶת, *emet* “truth” as a two-word expression (a hendiadys), and implies “loyalty or faithfulness to the covenant.” It is because God remains faithful to His covenant promises that He does not immediately snuff out Israel. His lovingkindness is “abundant” (רַב, *rav*), thus able to remain faithful in spite of the great transgressions of His people. However, His attributes of compassion and forgiveness—His commitment to be faithful to His covenant promises, should not be taken for granted. His faithfulness does not negate His justice. Thus, “but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.” Moses, in rehearsing God’s attributes, is reminded that the faithful God is also a just God. He does not overlook or sweep aside the transgressions of His people. Yet even in His justice there remains mercy (cf. Hab 3:1, “. . . in wrath remember mercy.”). This fact is discovered when one looks more closely at the word “visit” (פָּקַד, *pachad*). While this verb can have the connotation of “visit with judgment” (e.g., Is 24:2; 29:6), it may have the more basic meaning of “to seek, seek out, visit,” that is, “to be concerned about,” “to be troubled over someone,” or even to “care for, look after” (e.g., Is 23:17; Jer 23:2; Zech 11:16; Ps 8:4[5]). This phrase (“visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children”) has most often been understood to mean “punish the children for the sins of the fathers,” but we know this is contrary to God’s justice (Ezek 18:20ff). If, however, the word “visit” is understood in the sense of “care for,” “be concerned about,” then the meaning is entirely different: God comes to the aid of the children of wayward parents, recognizing that they have “two strikes against” them of which they had no part. He comes, then, calling them to turn from the way of their sinful parents, and offers them teshuvah (repentance, to return) as the doorway to the covenant blessings which flow from His faithfulness.

Thus Moses, in the face of the people’s rebellion, turns his heart to seek forgiveness on their behalf, and does so on the basis of his own faith in God’s revealed attributes. His example is a good one for us all to follow.

So what are some clear applications we may derive from our portions? Most obvious is that we, like Israel of old, are called to walk by faith, not by sight. As a Torah Community, we find ourselves seeking to “enter the Land” in the sense of “return to what we’ve lost” through almost 2000 years of ecclesiastical traditions. It often feels like a battle, and it is easy to think that the foe is very mighty and more than we could ever hope to overcome. We have enough trouble getting along with each other! The prospects of effectively passing this message to the next generation, not to speak of enlightening the world with the message of Torah, seems overwhelming at times.

What is more, in our struggle to understand God’s ways and put them into practice in our lives and community, we may find ourselves the object of others’ false reports and misjudgments, even hatred. Then a new enemy rears its head: the enemy of bitterness. I suppose Moses could have been bitter at the people. After all, they were blaming him and Aaron for all of their troubles! Perhaps some even cooked up conspiracy theories against the leaders. But bitterness is the sharpest of the enemy’s weapons. Its insidious tentacles wrap the soul and starve it of any joy and spiritual health. Worse than that, bitterness gives way to the enemy (Eph 4:26-27). The only defense against bitterness is the ability to forgive, to offer up to HaShem whatever has caused offense, and trust that His way is perfect—that He is the One who must be the ultimate and final Judge. Putting into His hands those things that would otherwise drive us to bitterness is the first step in forgiveness. And

the second is realizing how much each of us ourselves have been forgiven by Him. Our Master taught: "... he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). The converse is true (as the woman who was washing His feet demonstrated): "he who is forgiven much, loves much." Only when we have experienced the forgiveness of God in regard to our own sins are we ready and able to forgive others who have sinned against us.

We have a task before us. Many small communities are emerging, world-wide, who are anxious to recover the way of Torah as they follow in the footsteps of Yeshua. They are looking to communities like ours to help them—to teach and provide guidance as they strive to peel back the layers of tradition in which they have been trapped. And we have the ability to help. We have been through years of community life in which we have learned valuable lessons, and we have studied the Torah together. In our dialogs and discussions, we have seen the light of God's truth shining through, showing the beauty and value of the ancient ways. And we have come to realize how much we still need to learn, how building community is a spiritual discipline that takes patience, perseverance, and genuine humility before the Lord and each other.

Thus a mission lies before us. Will we put our hand to the task, seeking God's help and strength to do His work, His way? Or will we look at the difficulties that surely lie ahead and shrink back from engaging in this mission of truth? It may well be that the next generation will see victories we could hardly imagine. Are we willing to persevere with joy as we rely upon God's hand to win the victory, preparing the next generation to receive the blessings of the Almighty? By God's grace, we will.