

A Muse: Masei 2008

“Speak unto the children of Israel and say unto them: When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land and destroy all their figured stones...And you shall drive out the inhabitants of the land and dwell therein for unto you have I given the land to possess.”
(Numbers 33: 50-53)

Many of our traditional commentators are troubled with this text not because of the disturbing message it sends but because of the language used which appears to be problematic. The commentators are concerned that stylistically there appears to be a redundancy with verses 52 and 53 where the term v'horashtem is used twice. Rashi responds by saying that they aren't repetitious but rather the second v'horashtem is a precondition for settling the land. The second verse adds a warning that if the Israelites don't dispossess the inhabitants first, they will never succeed in maintaining themselves successfully in the land. (This sounds uncannily familiar with the politics of today in Israel.)

The text cited above is also the basis for the controversy between Maimonides and Nachmanides. According to Nachmanides the emphasis isn't on dispossessing others or securing the land as much as it is fulfilling God's command and assuming our inheritance as promised by God. Maimonides however does not list the settling of Israel as one of the 613 mitzvot.

The Ramban sites the Talmudic aggada that relates the story of several sages that were on a mission to the Diaspora. On reaching a point in the Diaspora, they began thinking about Palestine with nostalgia. Their eyes filled with tears, they rent their garments and considered the biblical text: “thou shalt possess them and dwell in their land”. They turned around, abandoned their mission and went back to Palestine saying: “residence in Eretz Israel is equal in weight to all the mitzvot in the Torah”.

This last statement is very forceful, because it places a tremendous weight on the politics of living in Israel verses performing all the other mitzvot in the Torah. The question is:

does the act of living on the land replace all the other mitzvot, or is value of living on the land comparable to the comprehensive value of the other mitzvot.

None of our commentators directly addressed the ethics of dispossessing others from their land. One can only assume that two things were in play: the commandment from God as understood by our commentators overrode any other ethical considerations; and quite possibly because they were living in the Diaspora their world view and the means by which they interpreted Torah was influenced. In other words, their comments were based on a virtual reality. Circumstances today are entirely different. The State of Israel is no longer a virtual reality and responsible interpretive guidelines regarding ethical standards ought to be addressed by our rabbis.