

70 PERSPECTIVES BUT ONLY ONE TORAH

by Dr. Meir Tamari

The Land Which You Have Rejected

אַתְּ-הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר מֵאַסְתֶּם בָּהּ

The refusal of the tribes of Israel to enter Eretz Yisrael goes beyond questions of disobedience of G-d's commandments. This refusal is difficult to understand in view of their particular situation, of Middle East living down the generations until our own days and to the experiences of world history. Tribes in the desert or of the poor outskirts of civilization have throughout history invaded and conquered the prosperous and settled societies facing them. Why should our ancestors have been different? Why the powerful rejection of fertile land and rich property by a landless and nomadic people? The basic question is heightened by Israel's swift and awesome punishment by death of a whole generation and underscored that there was no t'shuva allowed for this sin of rejection. "It is this rejection which is responsible for our tribulations and exile, for our being a reproach to our neighbors and a mockery to those around us. We shall never recover our spiritual and physical stability until we return to it" (Akeidat Yitzchak).

That first generation was a great and wise one. The only one worthy of redemption through miracles and wonders in which the forces of nature

were made to behave contrary to their natures. The generation in which ordinary men women and children witnessed G-d descending on Sinai and heard Him speak to them. The generation which camped around the Mishkan-Sanctuary of G-d so that all its activities were guided by Him and were concerned only with His Service. How was it possible for such a generation to make such a traumatic error and refuse to enter the land which was so basic to its religion? How was it possible for such a generation to reject this land and thereby deny the fulfillment of Judaism's teachings and practices?

They had heard Eldad and Meldad prophesy, "Moshe is to die and Yehoshua will take us into Eretz Yisrael." Their whole existence under Moshe's leadership had been openly and visibly miraculous and spiritual. There was food from heaven, water from Miriam's well and protection by the Clouds of Glory. Moshe taught them the Torah as he received it, Aharon led their meeting with Hashem in the Mshkan and their clothing and footwear were never damaged. Under Yehoshua in Eretz Yisrael, open miracles would cease and instead G-d's power and kingship would be hidden by natural and material exteriors. Their own physical and material existence would have to be earned through normal and prosaic means. Food would have to be created by their own efforts, houses and shelter built by their hands, defense against enemies was to be through weaponry and human soldiers; even water and rain would need their

efforts at prayer. "They knew that that they could be pious and religious in the desert under Moshe's miraculous leadership. However, they doubted that their own spirituality was strong enough for the natural and material world of Eretz Yisrael and so rejected the Land and preferred to remain in the desert" (Shem MiShmuel).

This spiritual problem is one that they share with many Jews and non-Jews of all generations and flows from a failure to recognize the speciality and uniqueness of Judaism which Rav Hirsch so simply defines. "People thoughtlessly include Judaism in the category of religions generally and then discover that there is much in this 'religion' that lies quite outside the sphere of ordinary 'religion'. While there is also much of what is understood by religion, here G-d founded a Nation, a whole national life which is to form itself around Him" (S. R. Hirsch, Sh'mot 6:7) This Nation-Religion requires rituals, temples, kohanim and scholars, prayers and study but also roads, market places, water systems and urban planning, workers and traders, law courts, judges and policemen, soldiers and armies. This Nation-Religion requires a completely self-contained number of people loving in social relationship to one another. Above all, this Nation-Religion was given a designated territory which has the same unique spiritual qualities on which to make concrete and reality of its mission and ideals. By rejecting this Land that generation rejected the unique concept of Nation-Religion.

In this concept of nation-religion all

activities, thoughts, ambitions and strivings irrespective of the purpose, the religious commandments, rituals and taboos, and social laws, individual and communal relationships and interaction are all united into one singular unit. Here there is no separation between religion and nation, even no separation between holy and secular, only differing levels of holiness and sanctity. Such unity of religion and nation is unique to Judaism; others have secular societies and private individual religions or Christian, Moslem or Buddhist religions of varying nations and statehoods.

Many people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, actually fear this nation-religion unity, preferring the split personality separating religion-spirituality from the political entity of nation and statehood. Balak of Moav like the Meraglim was comfortable with the religion of the desert with its miracles, rituals and spirituality. He like the Meraglim knew that Eretz Yisrael would mean nation-religion and he feared that G-d would demand the same religious unity from him, hired Bilaam to curse Israel to prevent their entry into Eretz Yisrael even though it was not his territory or sphere of influence. (Shem Mishmuel, Balak). ★