

Parashah One Hundred Forty-Seven

Deuteronomy 31:1–13; Isaiah 48:17–19; 2Timothy 3:12–17

notes by Tim Hegg

Trusting God

In the *parashah* before us today we hear a summary message from Moses, the servant of God. Realizing that he would not enter the Land with the people, it was time to admonish them to go forward without him and to fully trust HaShem for victory over the peoples who possessed the Promised Land.

The reason they would have success as they possessed the Land was really quite simple: God would go with them. No less than three times Moses reiterates this important fact, that God would go with the people and would, in fact, fight for them so that they would be victorious over their enemies. In v. 3 it is HaShem Who will “cross ahead of you;” in v. 6 HaShem is the One Who will “go with this people;” and in v. 8 HaShem is the One Who “goes ahead of you.” The God Who is “wholly other” and infinitely holy would dwell in the midst of Israel and would travel with them to assure their success. He would dispatch the enemy kings as He had done to Sihon and Og, and render their armies ineffective against Israel.

Had the people come to trust in Moses in a way that caused their faith in HaShem to diminish? We may note that Joshua is clearly set forward in this text as Moses’ replacement, but the emphasis given to the people is to trust in HaShem—not to put their trust in Joshua.

It is always a difficult balance to obtain—this issue of trusting God while at the same time trusting each other as we work and live together in community. On the one hand we cannot so disregard the need we have for each other, else we will fail to bear each other’s burdens and thus “fulfill the Torah of Messiah” (Gal 6:2). Nor can we so rely upon another person to the extent that when that person fails us we are thrown into such a “tail spin” that we are unable to accomplish HaShem’s purposes for our life. Israel had found in Moses a great leader and although she often complained against him, she had come to see that his leadership was good and successful. Moses would no longer be part of the community, his leadership would be gone, and another, less experienced man, Joshua, would stand in his place. It was a perfect time for Moses to remind the people that a leader, if he’s doing what he ought to be doing, directs the people to trust in HaShem and not in himself.

I’m struck with the fact that Moses reveals himself here to be a man who in every way acted upon the word of HaShem. He simply states: “...

and HaShem has said to me, ‘You (Moses) shall not cross this Jordan,’” and again “Joshua is the one who will cross ahead of you, just as HaShem has spoken.” Here is a great man, turning his leadership over to the next man, facing the fact that the very goal to which he has led the people would never be realized personally—and he does it almost as a matter-of-fact, on the basis of what God has said! Apparently for Moses, if God said it, that settled it. Oh that we might live our lives with a similar resolve to allow the words of HaShem to be the final word in the matter, and in our hearts!

Moses’ admonition to the nation is the same as to Joshua himself: “Be strong and courageous... do not fear” (cf. vv. 6, 8). This combination (חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ) and imperative form combined by ו) of “be strong and courageous” is found only in Deuteronomy and Joshua, and then primarily as it relates to Moses passing the leadership to Joshua. Interestingly we first encounter the combination (though not in imperative form) in Deut 3:28, “But charge Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him...” (וְצַו אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְחִזְקֵהוּ (וְאַמְצֵהוּ)). How does Moses “encourage and strengthen” Joshua? By commanding him to “be strong and courageous” in HaShem! Moses strengthens and encourages Joshua in the best of ways—as a great leader does, by pointing Joshua to HaShem and reminding him that true victory rests upon the faithfulness of the Almighty and His work.

We should take pause to learn an important lesson here: true friends admonish us to trust in God when times are difficult. Extending a helping hand is a given, but the word of encouragement to increase one’s faith in the Almighty ought to be welcomed by any one of us who are facing difficulties. Surely God gives us close friends who are His agents of mercy in all of life’s troubles, and friends who love the best are those who can carefully and gently lead us to increase our faith in God’s goodness.

There is another interesting turn on this phrase “be strong and courageous”: In Joshua 1:6, 7, 9 God Himself admonishes Joshua with these same words! “Be strong and courageous.” What exactly do these words mean?

The word “strong” (חֲזַק) has a primary meaning of “be strong” but interestingly, when in the hifil and followed by the preposition ב, means “to take hold of” or “to seize.” Further, in the hitpael, the reflexive form means “take courage,” i.e., to “strengthen oneself.” The obvious point of the word is that “to be strong” means not to be defeated by fear or the odds which a foe may present. To “be strong” may involve the semantic idea of “holding on to what will bring success.” In our text, “to be strong” means to lay hold of all that God has revealed Himself to be as our Father, our Protector, our Provider, and ultimately our Savior in every sense of that word.

The second word **יָמַח**, means essentially the same thing: “to be strong” or “courageous.” It is used of trees which withstand the winds, and of repairs to a house which “strengthen” it. In the end we should most likely understand these two words, used together as they are in our *parashah*, as a hendiadys, two words joined together to present one idea. And what is this one idea? That a true faith in God produces a strength or courage which can stand in the face of what would otherwise be viewed as inevitable disaster. What are the factors that allow such a strength? How can one muster such courage in the face of overwhelming calamity? How could Joshua face the fact that he would lead the men of Israel against fortified cities well equipped with military power, and still be confident and strong? Was he to disregard the facts? The obvious disadvantage Israel had? The reputation of their enemies as fierce beyond description?

No. Joshua was to face the facts squarely, but he was to put his faith in the God that he knew, the God Who would go with the people and lead them to victory. As long as Israel would obey Hashem, as long as they would trust Him fully and not turn to their own understanding, as long as they lived by faith, God would bless them, even as our *haftarah* passage emphasizes. Faithfully doing His bidding is the surest way to secure His blessings. And the greatest blessing of all is that God promises to “go with you.” The words of Yeshua in Matt 28:20 are a clear reiteration of this divine promise: “And look! I am with you always, even to the end of the age!”

Still, how does one gain additional strength and courage in the face of life’s issues—issues which have the real capacity to bring sorrow, trouble, and what appear to be overwhelming odds? As I noted, Moses is characterized in our text as knowing God’s word and acting upon it. God had said it, and for Moses that settled it. We may note also how our *parashah* ends with this interesting notice: “So Moses wrote this Torah and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of HaShem, and to all the elders of Israel.” Here is the key: the very revelation of God Himself, as well as the infallible record of His covenant with Israel, is written for the people and given to the leaders who are responsible to teach them from its sacred words. So important is this covenant record that, as customary in the Ancient Near East, the leaders of the nation were commanded to read the Torah to the people at the end of the *sh’mitta* cycle. Sukkot, which is the final feast in the cycle of *mo’edim*, forms the fitting occasion for the reading of the Torah, for here the people are gathered together, symbolic of the future, millennial reign of Messiah, when He, the ultimate prophet and priest, will teach the Torah to the people: “for the Torah will go forth from Zion and the word of HaShem for Jerusalem.”

Note clearly who was to be called to listen to the Torah: (v. 12) “Assemble the people, the men and the women and the children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear HaShem your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this Torah.” Now even the Sages have difficulty with this! For here, in plain language, the *ger*, the foreigner within Israel, is, like all of the native born, admonished to hear, learn, and carefully observe the words of Torah! Ibn Ezra commented that this was not to say that the *ger*, i.e., the non-Jewish person who had attached himself to Israel (note the Hebrew וְגֵר אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֵיָךְ, “and the stranger who is in your gates”), should actually keep Torah, but that as he listened to the Torah he would convert (become a proselyte) and then would be required to keep Torah! Rambam and Ramban discuss whether or not it is a command for the non-Jew to attend the reading of the Torah at the *sh’mita* year (called *hakel* after the first word of v. 12, הִקְהַל, “to gather”). They decide it is not a requirement because this would add an eighth law to the seven so-called Noachide laws, but rather that it is a law that the Jew should encourage the non-Jew to listen to Torah! The obvious and plain meaning of the text, however, is that the Torah is for all—that is God’s intention. All who are His, who are members of His covenant people by faith, should listen to the reading of the word of God so that they might learn it *so that they might be careful to do it*.

Note as well that the children (יְלָדָי, which usually refers to small children, those who are still toddlers or younger!) were to be part of the group, the congregation, as they listened to the reading of the Torah. This emphasizes that the Torah, God’s divine word, was to be the substance of learning from the very beginning for each covenant member. It also shows that it was and is the responsibility of the community to train the children in the ways of Torah from their earliest years.

This tells us that we dare not wait until our children are “older” to engage in the study of Torah with them. Granted, we must put it at their level, carefully putting God’s immutable truths into bite-size pieces, but we must trust that HaShem will plant it in their hearts and bring forth eternal fruit. God has promised to use His words to change the heart: “The Torah of Adonai is without defect, restoring the soul” (Ps 19:7[8]).

Taking strength and courage in the face of life’s battles, then, is ultimately tied to knowing God—knowing that He is with us, knowing Who He is (His divine character) and knowing what He has promised to do. All of this is available only to those who know His word and by faith are willing to act upon it.