

Should Israel Expel the Arabs?

In this week's Torah portion, *Mass'ei*, in chapter 33 of the Book of Numbers, we read:

You shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you...

You shall clear out the Land and settle in it, for I have given you the Land to occupy it. If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the Land, then those whom you allow to remain will be as spikes in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will harass you in the land in which you settle. [Numbers 33:52 - 33:55]

These are not the words of a modern Israeli settler. They are the words of the Torah. Rashi explains, in case it is not clear: You shall empty the land of its inhabitants, and then you shall settle in it. Only then will you be able to survive there. But if you do not do this, you will not be able to survive there.

First, the facts. Jews have never done this. Not in biblical times, not in 1948 when the State of Israel was founded, and not in the past decades of strife and turmoil in the Middle East. And I venture the prediction that Jews will never do it.

My purpose here is not to debate revisionists. After all, the facts are clear: two million Arabs live in Israel today as Israeli citizens. They are about 20% of the population, about the same proportion as when Israel was founded. These Arabs enjoy more rights, representation, education, freedom and tangible benefits than any other Arabs in the Arab world. This includes the freedom to thunder against their country, profess sympathy for its enemies, and actively work to destroy it, as many do.

Rather, my purpose is to try to answer the following question. Why did we *not* follow that commandment, given it is so clear? Throw them *all* out! God may well say, "What part of 'Throw them *all* out!' don't you understand?" After all, that is what everybody else did. (And still does. I am living proof of it. I am a Jew born and raised in an Arab country, and I

was shown the door, along with just about every Jew in every Arab country, 850,000 of them, not counting their descendants. Ethnic cleansing.)

First, the Bible is clear that we did not follow the commandment. In the Book of Judges, it says:

-And the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem; but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem unto this day. [Judges 1:21]

-And Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shean and her towns, nor Taanach and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Dor and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Ibleam and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Megiddo and her towns; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land. [Judges 1:27]

-And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; but the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them. [Judges 1:29]

-And Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, nor the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites lived among them... [Judges 1:30]

-And Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, nor the inhabitants of Sidon, nor of Ahlab, nor of Achzib, nor of Helbah, nor of Aphik, nor of Rehob; but the sons of Asher lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out. [Judges 1:31-2]

-And Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh, nor the inhabitants of Beth-Anath; but he lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land... [Judges 1:33]

and finally:

-And the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. [Judges 3:5]

Why?

Maybe they could *not* drive them out? That was certainly the case in the early days, when Israel was weak. The Book of Judges tells us that Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron [Judges 1:19]. And that the tribe of Dan was confined to the mountain because the Amorites prevented them from settling in the valley [Judges 1:34].

But later, when Israel grew strong, in the days of David and Solomon, they could have carried out the expulsions, but didn't.

Maybe they were grateful to some of the natives for helping them? Yes, that happened. For example, Rahav helped Joshua conquer Jericho. She told Joshua's emissaries:

I know that the Lord has given you the land. Now therefore, I pray you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness, that you will also show kindness to my father's house, and give me a true sign; and that you will keep alive my father, and my mother, and my brothers, and my sisters, and all that they have, and save our lives from death.

And the men answered her: ... "We pledge our lives for your lives ... When the Lord has given us the land ... we will deal kindly and truly with you." [Joshua 2:9-14]

Maybe some of the natives surrendered or converted, and the Israelites couldn't bring themselves to harm them. Yes also. This was the case of the Gibeonites, later called *nethinim* and accepted as Jews. The Bible also tells us of Uriah the Hittite. He was Bathsheba's hapless first husband, who lost his wife and life to King David. He was a very observant Jew from ethnic Hittite stock, whose ancestors evidently converted. We also know that King Saul spared the king of the Amalekites, Agag, to the dismay of the prophet Samuel. [1 Samuel 15]

Maybe the Israelites liked the natives, or were seduced by their women, their colorful surroundings, their idolatrous practices that appealed to the senses [as in "fertility rites"]. Yes also. The Book of Judges tells us:

And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons, and served their gods. [Judges 3:6]

The Book of Kings adds,

King Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughters of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, the Amorites, the Edomites, the Zidonians, and the Hittites. [1 Kings 11:1]

Maybe the Israelites were concerned about international opinion? Well, certainly not in those days, when expulsions and massacres were expected of conquerors. Cynics will say that that is a concern *today*. I tell you: International opinion is not what prevents Israel from expelling Arabs. First, the biblical narrative shows we were never inclined to do so in the first place. Second, the memory of us Jews being expelled left and right in our long history inclines us even less towards doing the same to others.

Maybe the Israelites were confused about what they were supposed to do to the natives. The quotes I gave you say God commanded the Israelites to expel the natives. But other quotes say to kill them outright.

Deuteronomy says:

-You must doom them to destruction: Grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them... for they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods. [Deuteronomy 7:1-4]

-You shall not keep alive anything that breathes... You shall utterly destroy them ... lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods. [Deuteronomy 20:16-18]

So which is it? Expel or kill? It cannot be both. If you expel, you do not kill; and if you kill, you do not expel.

Maybe God was testing us, to see if we had a mind of our own or would just “follow orders”, no matter what these orders were?

Time to conclude. In every real-world situation, Jewish values will come into conflict. We have to make choices.

-On the one hand we are told, *Ve-ahavta le-re'acha kamocha* – “Love your neighbor as yourself” [Lev. 19:18], but on the other hand we are also told: Kill your neighbor, if that’s the only way to stop him from killing you or your loved ones. [Berakhot 58a; Yoma 85b; Sanhedrin 72a]

-We were told to expel or kill the natives, but the Torah also tells us, “Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt”, a phrase repeated some 36 times in the Tanach. So clearly the Torah anticipates non-Jews living among Jews in Israel, and tells us to treat them well. And the Hebrew word for “stranger”, *ger*, clearly means “non-Jew” in that context, and not “convert”, because it adds “for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt”, and we were certainly not “converts” in the Land of Egypt.

We just don’t have it in us to carry out certain commandments exactly as written, or follow certain practices, even if they are allowed. That is where rabbinic interpretation comes in. For example:

-Slavery and polygamy are allowed, but we don’t practice them anymore, and it’s not just because the law of the land does not allow us. Of the

thousand rabbis in the Talmud, not one is recorded as having more than one wife at a time, even though they could have.

-No “rebellious son” has ever been put to death, even though the Torah mandates it. [Deuteronomy, 22:18-21; Sanhedrin 71a]

-No Jewish court has handed out the death penalty in over 2,000 years. When Israel became a state, one of its first laws was to abolish the death penalty. The most you will get in Israel for any crime is 20 years in jail.

-The ordeal of the bitter water for the wife suspected of adultery, the *sotah*, was effectively banned in the Talmud. [Sotah 9:9]

-The Talmud also worked out loopholes to avoid the cancellation of debts in the seventh year and allow credit to flow.

Did God intend this evolution? Perhaps. God could not very well put our evolution in writing. If God had mandated His real goals right away, He may not have gotten anybody to follow any part of the Torah, because everybody was so far from it. So He did the next best thing: He told us to follow the teachings of the rabbis, and it is the rabbis of the Talmud and their successors who have been managing this evolution, one generation at a time. The Talmud says:

In the generation of Rabban Gamliel, follow the teachings of Rabban Gamliel; in the generation of Rabbi Yosei, follow the teachings of Rabbi Yosei. [Eruvin 41a]

As Israel struggles to retain its Jewish character and do the right thing while upholding *all* Jewish values, let us give the last word to what our Sages taught us in the Talmud:

Rabbi Nahman ben Yitzhaq said: It is better to violate a commandment with good intentions than to perform a commandment with evil intentions. [Nazir 23b]

Shabbat shalom.