



Water Won't Drown Us and Fire Won't Burn Us

What type of Jew should live in Israel, and what type of Jew should live in the Diaspora?

The Great Speech

A story is told of a newly appointed Rabbi who gave a very nice speech on his first Shabbos. The next Shabbos, he gave the same speech, but the congregation dismissed it as a fluke. When he began the same speech again on the third Shabbos, the congregants realized they have a problem on their hands. A delegation went to the Rabbi who ordained him. They complained, "Our new Rabbi says the same speech each week!"

The Chief Rabbi asked them, "Nu, can someone tell me the speech?" Try as they might, none of them could repeat the speech! The Rabbi smiled and said, "Go tell the Rabbi that he can say the speech one more time!"

Moshe's Argument

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the greatest rabbi of all, Moshe, repeating his speech four times. We read the story of the Tribes of Reuven and Gad, who had an abundance of livestock. This story occurred after the Jews conquered the land of Sichon and Og and they saw that the land was ideal for raising animals. They turned to Moshe with a simple request: "If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not take us across the Jordan." They

wanted to stay on the East side of the Jordan River and not enter into the land.

Moshe responded very sharply: “Your brethren will go to war while you stay here?” You want to stay here and inherit this land while the other tribes will go and fight alone? Moshe doesn’t stop there, however, and launches into a long speech. “Why should you discourage the Jews from entering the land?” If you stay here, it may weaken the resolve of the rest of the Jews and cause them to rethink going into the land. Moshe immediately reminds them of the story with the spies that happened 39 years earlier, which caused the Jews to remain in the desert an extra 40 years — here they come and do the same thing by not wanting to enter the land!

The tribes of Reuven and Gad reply that they are not trying to run away from the fight. Just the opposite. They offered to leave their children behind and lead the Jews to war. When Moshe heard this, he immediately agreed to give them the land they had requested, but not before he repeated the details of the conditions four times. This is the gist of the story which is told in great detail in the Torah.

It seems a bit perplexing that Moshe suddenly agreed to their request, allowing them to remain outside the land. True, they were willing to lead the charge to conquer the land, but they themselves did not settle in the land and the whole point of leaving Egypt was to enter into Israel. They willingly give that up and Moshe agrees to it! At first Moshe was vehemently opposed to it, and then he suddenly agrees. What changed?

The Real Deal

We all know that it is difficult to be a Jew in exile. That is why any Jew whose sole purpose in life is materialism needs to live specifically in Israel. There, he will be amongst other Jews, kosher food will be readily available, Shabbos is the national day of rest, he will not need

to fight with his boss to have the holidays off, all the restaurants are kosher, etc. But to live outside of Israel and remain strong in his Judaism, a person needs to be of strong character and iron will and be very stubborn.

You could say that when they first approached Moshe, he saw before him businessmen only interested in their business and not in Israel. That is why at first, he felt that they were not fit to live outside Israel, as they were liable to assimilate and lose the essence of their beliefs. However, when they told Moshe that they would lead the fight, they showed Moshe a new side of their personalities, a side he hadn't seen before: one of self-sacrifice.

Here were Jews who volunteered to go first into the line of fire, when Moshe hadn't asked it of them, and it wasn't expected of them. Moshe saw that they were ideal for living outside of the land. Jews who were ready to go with self-sacrifice would be able to withstand all the obstacles a Jew faces in exile. Therefore Moshe gave his permission for them to remain outside of Israel.

Additionally, we all know that Moshe himself did not enter the land. Why did he not at least ask that his bones be taken and buried in Israel, as was done with Yaakov and Yosef? When Moshe heard the self-sacrifice the sons of Reuven and Gad had for another Jew, he cast his lot with them, preferring to remain with these Mesiras Nefesh Jews.

“And where is Moshe buried? In Gad's portion.” Moshe chose to be buried in the portion of the Jews who showed self-sacrifice. Gad were the first to show this self-sacrifice, with Reuven their subordinates, so Moshe chose to be buried in Gad's portion.

Fire vs. Water

In the seventies, when Jews began leaving the Soviet Union and

Chassidim from that region were finally able to see the Rebbe in person, they brought a song with them that translates as “In water we will not drown and in fire we will not burn”. The Rebbe really liked this song, which showed the power of the self-sacrifice of the Jews in Russia. He often asked that it be sung, and it was always sung with great joy and enthusiasm.

There are two types of self-sacrifice outside of Israel: The first is fire: all those who were killed in the history of the Jewish nation are “in fire we will not burn.” It doesn’t matter how many problems you make for us, we stay true to G-d and His Torah.

But there is the second type; that of water. The Tanya says, “Water sprouts all types of pleasures.” Water symbolizes the free world, exile in the land of plenty — the good life.

Here, in the free world, there is a different kind of test. Nobody is burning people or persecuting them. On the contrary, here it is possible to completely submerge oneself in the waves of pleasurable waters of the physical world; to not stand out as different. Here we find the great test with which the Alter Rebbe begins the Shulchan Aruch: “Do not be ashamed before the scoffers.” It requires great strength to demonstrate one’s Judaism in public, to be proud of being Jewish.

This test of “water” is no less difficult than the test of “fire”, and someone who is weak and doesn’t possess the strength to withstand such a test needs to live in Israel amongst other Jews. But someone who can live outside of Israel and successfully overcome these tests — he is a self-sacrificing Jew.

Perhaps this is why the Rebbes of Chabad chose to be buried outside of Israel, in order to be together with these same self-sacrificing Jews, until the arrival of Moshiach.