

PARASHAH ONE HUNDRED & NINETEEN

Numbers 26:52-27:23; Joshua 17:1-6; John 10:7-18

notes by Tim Hegg

Inheriting the Land - Generational Covenant Community

Our Torah section for this Shabbat begins with HaShem declaring to Moshe, “To these shall the Land be divided as an inheritance....” What exactly is an “inheritance”? It is something that is legally bequeathed to relatives or friends by the legal owner. To inherit something means that our relative or friend passes down to us something they rightfully owned. If this is the case, how could the Land be called our “inheritance” when it was occupied by people of other nations? How could it be passed down to us if the people who possessed it were not part of our family and made no legal arrangement for us to own it after their demise?

The answer to this question is very important for understanding our identity—our family. The Land is our inheritance because our Father owns it and we are His firstborn. Note carefully Exodus 4:22 and the summary statement which HaShem gives to Moshe—a summary of all that he is to tell Pharaoh: “You shall say to Pharaoh, ‘So said HaShem, My firstborn son is Israel.’” If HaShem is the Owner of all things (קִנְיָה הַכֹּל, cf. Gen 14:19, 22 where שָׂמַיִם וָאָרֶץ should be translated “Owner of heaven and earth“, not “Maker of heaven and earth”), then He has the right to give to His firstborn whatever He desires, and it becomes his as a matter of inheritance.

And how is it that Israel becomes HaShem’s “firstborn”? Why not some other nation, larger and more prestigious? Note well the words of Deut 4:37, “Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power.” Why has HaShem chosen us to be His firstborn? The only answer is to be found in the mystery of His love—of His covenant promises which He made to Abraham and renewed to Isaac and Israel. All we can say is that out of the sovereign and eternal love of the Almighty, He chose us to be His people and to bear His message to the world. It is His choosing us that gives us our own identity and our mission in life.

Inheritance is important to HaShem, and once again our passage underscores this. The Land is apportioned to each of the 12 tribes (the tribe of Levi has no inheritance in the Land). Yet in fulfillment of HaShem’s word, none of those who initially despised the Land were allowed to enter it. Only their children, born in the wilderness, were allowed to possess the inheritance of HaShem. Caleb and Joshua are the two exceptions (Num 26:65) because it was in their heart to possess the Land, but the evil report of the rest prevented it.

Here we find another important aspect of generational inheritance—the misdeeds of one generation will inevitably affect the next. Note that in the listings of the tribes and their inheritance in the Land, the sins of Nadab and Abihu are noted, as well as the rebellion of Korah (27:3). While the obedience of any generation may overturn the rebellion of a former generation, we should never forget that the sins of the fathers always have an effect upon their children and their children’s children.

But why is inheritance in the Land so important to HaShem? Why does the Torah go out of its way to make sure each tribe receives its due portion in the Land? The answer is simple and obvious: the faithfulness of HaShem to His promises demands that Israel possesses the Land. Adonai’s name is profaned when Israel is not in the Land (Ezek 36:19-20) because the nations seem to have a valid argument when they say “their God is not able to keep His promises—He said He’d give them this Land, but look—they’re not even living there any more!” When Israel, therefore, is not planted in the Land which HaShem promised Abraham and his seed (cf. Gen 15), the faithfulness as well as the power of HaShem is brought into question. Rather than being “sanctified” in the eyes of the nations, He is despised and belittled.

This fact is all the more emphasized by the story of the daughters of Zelophechad. Some have suggested that the name, צִלְפָּחַד, is made up of two words: צל, “shadow” (=refuge, on the analogy of coming under the “shadow” of a protector) and פחד, “danger” or “trembling.” Perhaps, then, the name means “refuge from danger.” At any rate, the daughters of Zelophechad stood to lose their claim to the Land because there was no male offspring to lay legal claim to it. Yet they knew that God had given the Land to them—it mattered nothing at all whether they were male or female in this regard—they too constituted God’s “firstborn” and so they knew the Land belonged to them. Finding a legal way to claim it was their only dilemma. After approaching Moses we hear HaShem speak these astounding words: “The daughters of Zelophechad speak properly.” Oh to have HaShem say that about each of us—that we speak His will, that our words and thoughts conform to His way of looking at things! Yes, the Land was as much their inheritance as it was for the males of the family, and from this came the Divine *halachah* that families were to inherit the Land, and this included those who had no direct male descendants. God was to show Himself faithful to all His people without respect to their gender.

This concept or axiom, like anything, could obviously be taken too far. We must never deny the differing roles that HaShem has ordained for each of us, whether male or female. But we must always affirm that all in our community are equally “heirs of grace” (cf. 1Pet 3:7) and that each of us, whether male or female, have a God given role to fulfill, the neglect of which will be a grave detriment to the community as a whole. The reality of our basic equality before HaShem is based upon creation—that male and female are both created in the image of God. Or to put it another way, the image of God in mankind is recognized in the ability of two who are diverse (male and female) to be one (Gen 2:24).

In the final passage of our Torah section we see Moses passing the authority of leadership to Joshua, son of Nun. Joshua is chosen by HaShem, not Moses (27:18) and the ceremony of transferring authority becomes the norm for that later rabbinic ordination, for Moses “leans his hands upon” Joshua (27:18), from which is derived the “laying on of hands” characteristic of rabbinic ordination. The Hebrew verb for “lean” is נָמַךְ, from which we get the noun form נְמִיכָה, “*s’micha*.” The symbolism is important, for the word “hand” (יָד) also conveys the idea of “power” or “authority” in the Hebrew. Thus Moses was passing the authority of leadership to Joshua—the authority of his office as a primary leader of the nation of Israel. But in this symbolic act a very important principle was laid down: Joshua would always be under the authority of Moses, for the authority received is delegated, and cannot rise above the one bestowing it. This same pattern obtained in the later rabbinic ordination: a disciple was never ultimately to disagree with his mentor from whom he received ordination, though of course he could expand upon and even enhance his master’s message. Though Joshua would be a leader in his own right, never could he transgress the words of Moses from whom He had received his authority. The Law Giver Himself had given to Moses the words of Torah, and Joshua, in accepting the *s’michah* of Moses, submitted to the authority passed on to him, i.e., the authority of God’s revealed Torah.

The text says that Moses placed upon Joshua some of his “majesty” (הוֹד, v. 20), by which is meant the recognized authority which HaShem had conferred upon Moses. Never could the people say that Joshua had somehow usurped the position of leadership. The evident appointment of God, like His appointment of Moses, was to have been received by all the people.

What exactly was the role of Joshua as leader? 27:21 is interesting indeed: “Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before Adonai. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, both he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation.” Joshua was to be a mediator between the High Priest (who wore the Ephod in which were the Urim and the Tummim) and the people, listening to the decisions which HaShem confirmed via the Urim, and then conveying these to the people. His strategic role was to hear the message accurately and convey it to the people without changing it.

This continues to be illustrative of the proper role for leaders in all generations. It is their duty to convey to the people what HaShem has said, and to do so without changing the message. After all, HaShem is the One who actually leads the people, not Joshua.

Here is a very important point for us: our Leader is Yeshua—He is the revelation of HaShem to us. He is the Shepherd, and we are His sheep. We listen for His voice and follow Him. Any and all leaders (within the family, community, congregation, or wherever) must therefore have as their ultimate mission to lead those under their care to Yeshua. This is especially true of congregational leaders: we must always strive to help the congregation hear and obey the One, true Shepherd.