

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

MISHPATIM

Near the end of the parasha, G-d tells Moshe that Am Yisrael will slowly, but not immediately, take possession of the all the Land when they get there:

Because the Land will become a barren wilderness and the wild animals will become too many for you (23:29).

Moshe communicated the same message to Am Yisrael before he died, warning them that on entry to the Land they would not conquer outright, but slowly infiltrate and take possession. He gave the same reason: "less the wild animals will become too many for you" (D'varim 7:22).

It appears strange that invading wild animals should be a threat to Am Yisrael in fighting mode, a people who would knock out the likes of Amalek, Sichon, Og, and the cities of Yericho and Ai. What had they to fear from wild animals if they could defeat an impressive list of Canaanite city states?

As an approach, the late Rabbi Dessler tells of being in a train that came to a stop near a carcass on a desolate landscape in pre-war Eastern Europe. Two hungry wolves emerged, fighting to grim death to

get the dead animal. Eventually, the weaker one succumbed. Bleeding copiously, the stronger wolf made his way, and he too fell dead. So in the end no-one got the carcass. Rabbi Dessler uses this story to show how destructive misdirected and unrestrained personal conflicting ambitions can be. Tolkien in The Hobbit illustrates this idea beautifully in relating the highly destructive wars and the depths of degradation between self-serving 'entitled' beings in conflict over valuable treasures which had all of a sudden become free for the taking.

Similarly here. Nowhere does the Torah state or imply that Am Yisrael has been a nation of saints. On the contrary. Our sacred sources show that our people have our share of the human nature faults of impatience, jealously, selfish ambitions, delusions of grandeur, sense of entitlement, and bitter rivalries. The Torah requires disciplining those traits, but it sadly tells of woefully falling short on too many occasions.

As may be in settling the Land. Would the previous inhabitants suddenly vanish, they'd be plenty of goodies to go around. Too many, in fact. Like wolves on the fold, the newly arrived people would descend on the "houses filled with good things that you didn't build and farms that you never planted and tended" (D'varim 6:11). Inevitably, some would find them-

selves with more and some would find themselves with what they perceive as less and unfair. Quarrelling and fighting to grim death over all the 'extras' that they could quite well live without. Sense of entitlement and selfish ambitions in the driving seat. Like the carcass that no wolf ended up getting, or so damaged as to be uninhabitable, what was once quality real estate would become barren and fit only for the most savage of wildlife, who would become many by flourishing there. So many in fact, that no-one would be a hurry to stretch out their hand and take it back. Lands and structures becoming unfit for all but the most hostile of beasts and birds of prey, as would be the just deserts of the nations that oppress Israel when G-d finally catches up with them: "Its palaces will sprout weeds, thorns and thistles, becoming the home of the jackals and the ostriches..." (Yesha-yahu 34:13). The hostile and stark wildlife succeeding what was once pride and civilization.

For the economists among us, the Tragedy of the Commons.

Like the grand lottery win with hordes of relatives, 'friends' and hangers-on emerging to make their presence felt, eying a share or two of the wealth. And the mismanagement of the fortune that had become the winner's to enjoy. Ending too frequently with the winner being the

worse rather than the better for the win.

So G-d, the Torah tells, will only very slowly drive out the inhabitants. The rate will synchronize with "you become many and inherit the land" (23:30) - as the Israelite population would grow, proportionally more land and dwellings would open up and become available. But not more than they could comfortably handle without fighting over it given their human nature. G-d is in effect telling us that He does not wish to test in order to bring out the worst in people.

Perhaps this idea could also give an insight as to why the manna fell in daily portions rather than one large one for the week. Enough food to sustain, but at no point enough to quarrel over. 