

# Holy Warriors for a Holy Land

## A D'var Torah on *Parashat Mas'ei* (Numbers 33:1 – 36:13)

By Marc Goodman

*“Eileh mas'ei v'nei-Yisrael asher yatz'u mei'erezt Mitzrayim....”*

*“These are the journeys of the Israelites who went forth from the land of Egypt....”*

### ***Parashat Mas'ei* – a Summary**

*Parashat Mas'ei* chronicles the movements of the Israelites starting from Ramses and ending 40 years later in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho. There God instructs them to destroy the cultic places and symbols and to completely dispossess the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. God further warns them that if they do not completely dispossess the Canaanites, those who remain will harass the Israelites, and that God will visit the same fate on the Israelites that God had planned for the Canaanites. God next describes the boundaries of the land they are about to “inherit” and appoints Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun as the men who should apportion the land. God then appoints (by name) the chief of each tribe (other than Levi) to whom land should be apportioned.

Having omitted the Levites from the list of tribes to which land should be apportioned, God instructs the Israelites to apportion towns and pasture land to the Levites from within their holdings. Included among the Levitical towns are to be six cities of refuge to which an unintentional killer may flee for protection (under the High Priest) from a blood avenger of the dead man's family. In describing who is eligible for protection in a city of refuge, the parashah also describes who is not eligible and states in no uncertain terms that murderers must be put to death.

The last chapter of *Parashat Mas'ei* clarifies inheritance laws for women, allowing them to own a landholding. It does, however, restrict women who have acquired landholdings by inheritance from marrying outside of their tribe, thereby ensuring that the tribes will retain their allotted portions.

### ***Parashat Mas'ei* – A Question**

*Parashat Mas'ei* raises a question that begs for an answer: Why must the Israelites destroy the cultic places and symbols of the Canaanites and dispossess the people? I would like to explore this question within the framework of “holy people” and “holy land.”

## **A Holy Land**

The land occupied by the Canaanites has been made “holy”<sup>1</sup> by God’s promises to the Patriarchs. In Genesis 12, God instructs Abram to leave his father’s home and go to the “land I will show you.” There God promises to make him a great nation, one by whom all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.<sup>2</sup> In striking the Covenant of Circumcision with Abraham, God promises the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession.<sup>3</sup> God tells Isaac not to go to Egypt during a famine, but rather to remain in the land which “I point out to you.” Similar to God’s promise to Abraham, God promises Isaac that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by his offspring.<sup>4</sup> On his journey to Haran, Jacob dreams of angels climbing up and down a ladder. God stands beside Jacob and informs him that God has given the land on which he (Jacob) lies to Jacob and his offspring. God also promises that all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by Jacob and his offspring, and that God will protect him and bring him back to this land.<sup>5</sup>

## **A Holy People**

All of the promises of the land of Canaan made by God to the Patriarchs are accompanied by a promise that all of the nations and/or families of earth shall bless themselves by the Patriarchs and their offspring. The people will bless themselves because Israel is to be the vessel through which God will establish law on earth. Israel, the offspring of the Patriarchs, will serve as a “light unto the nations.” Once established in the Holy Land, Israel will accomplish its mission by becoming a “nation of priests,” following God’s laws and faithfully observing God’s commandments. Both the people and the land have been set aside (made holy) for God’s purposes.

## **The Canaanites**

God has determined that it is time to expel the Canaanites from the Holy Land to make way for the descendents of the Patriarchs to establish themselves as a “nation of priests.” Expulsion is necessary because the Canaanites have defiled God’s Holy Land with their cultic palaces, symbols, and idolatry. God does not want the Canaanites to remain in the Holy Land where they might also contaminate God’s holy people.

## ***Parashat Mas’ei* – An Answer and Another Question**

We asked why Israel must completely dispossess the Canaanites, and we offered an answer. The Holy Land must be cleansed before the holy people

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word for “holy” is *kadosh*, which means “set aside.” God has chosen a land and a people to set aside.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 17:8.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 26:1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 28:12-15.

can establish a “nation of priests.” Its cultic places, figured objects, and molten images must be destroyed, and its current occupants must be driven from the land to prevent possible contamination of the future “nation of priests.”

But the Canaanites will not go quietly. Israel will only destroy their cultic places and symbols and dispossess them by military conquest. Why will the first act that the “nation of priests” must perform to establish itself in God’s Holy Land en route to becoming a “light unto the nations” require it to get blood on its hands? Why doesn’t God destroy the cultic places and symbols and dispossess the Canaanites? God sent plagues against the Egyptians and even against the Israelites. God separated the Sea of Reeds for the Israelites and then caused its waters to rush back together to drown the Egyptians. God opened the earth to swallow up Korach and his followers. God could certainly destroy the cultic places and symbols of the Canaanites and dispossess them from God’s Holy Land without requiring God’s “nation of priests” to engage in warfare.

### **A Light Unto the Nations**

Having agreed to the Covenant at Sinai, Israel has become God’s partner in establishing God’s Law among the nations. God’s Law is for mankind, and just as God commands mankind to lead a good and righteous life, God also commands mankind to combat evil. The “nation of priests” will be a “light unto the nations” by showing mankind not only how to lead a good and righteous life but also how to combat evil.