

## Mishpatim: Murder Hornets and The Long Walk Home

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The past year shook the world. Humanity faced a pandemic, the likes of which only occurs every hundred years. Locked in battle with an invisible but deadly virus, we also discovered that, bees can also be deadly. Regular bees sometimes cause irrational fear because they buzz and are airborne. But their sting rarely inflicts more than temporary discomfort or passing irritation. This past year, the Northwest region of the USA was introduced to "murder hornets" which are highly venomous, aggressive, and capable of wreaking significant damage both to the "ecological balance" as well as, in rare cases, to human beings.

Parshat Mishpatim actually describes murder hornets – swarming wasps which G-d dispatched to defeat the residents of Israel and pave the way for Jewish settlement. This promise of supernatural victory, spearheaded by deadly hornets, suggests a very quick and easy conquest of the land and a rapid and trouble-free settlement of Israel. Dashing these expectations, the very next verse cautions us that, the process will be slow and staged. Conquest and settlement will not occur quickly but slowly and gradually; the overall process of inhabiting the promised land of Israel lasted over a fourteen-year period. In His very first detailed description of Jewish entry into the land of Israel, G-d reminded us not to expect a quick or immediate process.

The Torah lists two reasons that the schedule will be delayed: Firstly, the frontier cannot be quickly tamed; if the entire land were immediately delivered to the Jewish people, the frontier would overwhelm the city and the jungle would overrun human habitat. A more gradual pace allowed the Jews to slowly build their cities and villages and to stabilize their society.

However, it wasn't just the threats of the frontier which dictated a more gradual pace of settlement. For internal reasons as well, the young and fledgling nation wasn't yet prepared to settle the vast land. Ensuing verses describe the extensive borders of Israel – a swath of land which could not possibly be inhabited by a young nation of former slaves; a more paced and gradual timeline would allow natural growth and would allow the nation to slowly ease into their homeland.

The promise of murder hornets vanquishing their enemies may have aroused undue expectations about a rapid conquest of the entire land of Israel. The Torah quickly ramps down these expectations by stressing that, for both internal and external reasons, a more staged pace of settling Israel is beneficial and preferable.

Jewish History is all about patterns- what happened before is bound to happen again. We study past redemptions to uncover the general outline of our own redemption. Thousands of years later, we, once again, find ourselves living the "historical pattern" described in Mishpatim. G-d has returned His people to His land; we haven't exactly witnessed murder hornets but the overall experience feels very similar. We have lived through amazing miracles and G-d has blessed us with the ability to protect ourselves against innumerable enemies; we may not have murder hornets but G-d has enabled us to assemble a

pretty impressive air force! We are back in the land that we have dreamed of for over two millennia.

Two thousand years of dreams often stokes unrealistic expectations. In our dreams, we sometimes expect the return to be immediate and "electric". When we struggle or when the process lags, we sometimes lose our enthusiasm and, sometimes, even our faith. Evidently, G-d has others plans for our return; evidently now, as then, the process will be more staged than electric. Evidently, then, as now, there are both internal as well as external reasons for the delayed process.

The external reasons for this delay surround G-d's desire to conduct our return to Israel through the historical process. Though God can "impose" redemption upon history, He often chooses to "stream" redemption "through" human history. Rather than wrecking the historical order and introducing apocalypse, G-d often works within historical factors. In Egypt, G-d could have effortlessly and immediately emancipated the Jews, yet he chose to operate within Egyptian politics; our fate and ultimate redemption was streamed through the will of Pharaoh, who ultimately became the driving force of our release from Egypt.

Our return to Israel has, so far, been similar to the liberation from Egypt. Our return in 1948 occurred within the most historically dramatic decade of the past century. During the 1940s, wars raged, Communism ascended, Fascism was defeated, European colonies were dismantled and the maps of Europe were redrawn. This events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century served as the historical platform for our return to Israel. If the return of Jews to Israel is meant to repair all of humanity, the process must be embedded within the history of

humanity. However, if redemption evolves within history it will also be slowed by geopolitics, diplomacy and various other historical pressures. The pace of our return may be slow since, at least at this stage, G-d has chosen to encase our redemption within human history and within human historical factors. The "seas of history" haven't parted yet, and we are still struggling for our homeland within the battlefield of history. If Mishpatim warns the Jews about the beasts of the jungle, today, we face the "beasts of History"!

However, beyond the "external factors" delaying the process there are also internal "holdups". Rebuilding our national identity after two thousand years of dispersal isn't an easy task nor can it be completed in one or two generations. Israel has assimilated Jews from fifty-two dialects and from vastly different cultures; creating a common national identity will take time. Additionally, and sadly, our country is still badly split between religious and secular Jews and, regrettably, the Corona experience is likely to exacerbate these tensions. Incredibly, we have built a robust democracy but evidently haven't "bred" the type of visionary and selfless leaders which the "founding generation" enjoyed.

Additionally, there are many specific "thorny" issues which probably cannot be solved in our generation. Hundreds of thousands of Jews in Israel, many of them emigres from Russia, seek Jewish and Israel identity without a desire for full halachik conversion. We can't compromise our standards for conversion but we also can't ignore so many "Jews" living in Israel but without halachik Jewish identity. Another dilemma surrounds the status of the kotel which should, and does, serve as a magnet for different Jews across the world and across many different denominations. The proper standards of prayer-which includes separation between men and women- must be

preserved at the kotel. Alternatively, we must carve out space for people who, currently, don't desire or adhere to those standards. It would be a pity if we severed Jews from the kotel and from greater Jewish identification. These, and many other issues, will probably take time to solve and, evidently, G-d has decided to give us the time and the opportunity to devise our own solutions. G-d can always decide to shuffle the historical deck, descend into our world, and immediately resolve all these dilemmas and challenges. Until that day we all need a little patience. Building a nation will take some time, and G-d is giving us the opportunity to iron out the wrinkles.

History is all about patterns.