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The Prize Of Patience

We live in an age of immediacy where few of us have the patience we once had. Instant messaging encourages us to expect instant replies. Downloads which used to take hours can now be done in minutes, yet we become frustrated after seconds.

As a teacher I have also seen the gradual eroding of intellectual patience in students who not only demand, but often psychologically need, answers to their questions now. Even though some questions can, and should, be temporarily shelved, to be revisited when one is more mature and experienced, it has become increasingly difficult for people to muster the patience to accept growth and development over the longer term.

Parashat Lech Lecha is a tutorial in the imperative and ultimate spiritual reward of patience. Avraham receives two repeated promises from God – that he will have a large number of descendants (12:2, 13:16, 15:5, 17:6, 22:17) and that he and those descendants will inherit the land of Israel (13:15, 13:17, 15:7). The former promise can naturally only be achieved slowly over generations and God promises Avraham (15:4) that he will, even at this late stage, have a child from whom later offspring will descend. There is no indication

at this point that the child must be born miraculously through Sarah, and Avraham is confident in God's promise.

However, conquest and possession of Eretz Yisrael was promised to Avraham personally and, after his stunning defeat of the 4 superpower kings in Chapter 14, it seems that a quick military victory over the tribal chieftains of Canaan is within immediate reach. But when Avraham pushes impatiently for progress (15:8), he receives some sobering news. The land will indeed come to him and his descendants, but only after 400 years!

The Kli Yakar (15:8 s.v. bema) cannot accept the explanation that this long delay could be a response to Avraham questioning God, even if that challenge was inappropriate on some level. Rather the Divine plan is methodical and unfolds over centuries, not days or even years. The Bechor Shor (15:8) explains that something can be promised to an individual but only comes to realization after generations. The individual achieves the goal, but only through their descendants in whom they live on.

Another more subtle focus in the Parasha on the importance of taking the long view comes in Chapter 14, when the Torah spends valuable verses listing the indigenous peoples who were destroyed by the 4 kings during their devastating rampage through the Middle East and the countries laid waste by their defeat: the Rephaim destroyed in

Ashteroth Karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh Kiryathaim, and the Horites in Seir.

The Malbim asks what possible interest anyone could have in this information, which was ancient history even when the Torah was given. In response he flags the only other time in Chumash where these people are mentioned – in Devarim Chapter 2, where Moshe encourages the Jewish people to have confidence in their ultimate conquest of Eretz Yisrael. These first nations had been destroyed by the 4 kings, who were themselves also now consigned to the dust of history. But the lands that were laid waste eventually came into the possession of the family of Avraham – Ammon, Moav and Esav – as a fulfilment of God’s promise. In turn, these lands and others would come to the Jewish people, but none of this could have happened without the slow development of history and politics.

These ideas should resonate with us today. Anyone with an appreciation of the historical and political events leading up to the creation of the State of Israel cannot fail to be overwhelmed by the sheer improbability of any of these events happening independently, let alone their unimaginable combination. We look back with the confidence of hindsight but, in those moments, only someone with the patience to take a long view on redemption could have pieced things together and remained calm and confident.

There is nothing wrong with calling out stridently for Mashiach or for Peace. But when this becomes “Mashiach Now” or “Peace Now” things usually start to unravel. The former British Prime Minister John



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Major said: “The first requirement of politics is not intellect or stamina but patience. Politics is a very long run game and the tortoise will usually beat the hare.” Major discovered that this truth was not popular with an impatient electorate (who preferred the leporine excitement of fast-moving Tony Blair!) But we cannot afford to make such a mistake in our perspective on Geula and the redemptive process.

Every day in our prayers we look forward expectantly to the possibility of God’s salvation, which can come in the blink of an eye. But, as faithful descendants of Avraham, we patiently push forward – step by step – the process of redemption, in the comfort that the ultimate and complete Geula will indeed come to us, but perhaps through our great-grandchildren. ■