

Parsha Ponders

Eikev | August 18, 2022 | 21 Av 5782

Truthful exaggerations¹

שמע ישראל אתה עבר היום את-הירדן לבה לרשת גוים גדלים ועצמים ממך ערים גדלת ובצרת בשמים
Hear, O Israel, that you are passing over the Jordan River today². [You are] coming to inherit greater and mightier nations than yourselves, and walled cities that reach³ the Heavens⁴

Moshe's goodbye speech includes a call to action to conquer the land of Israel. In this speech, his words aren't exactly encouraging. He wants them to be fully aware of the threats that they face, and that Hashem is on their side. As part of his description of the foreign nations that they can plan to conquer, he says that they have fortified cities that reach the Heavens. This sounds quite astonishing, and is even hard to swallow. Indeed, our Sages say⁵ that this is an example of the Torah exaggerating. Another example is, "the earth shattered from the noise of their commotion"⁶. The Torah does this sometimes, so we shouldn't be surprised.

However, this *is* quite surprising. How could the Torah speak imprecisely⁷? More importantly, the Torah adjures us⁸ to distance ourselves from falsehood. Something exaggerated isn't one hundred percent truthful, and if we are to *distance* ourselves from falsehood, why doesn't the Torah do so as well? The truth is, exaggerating is to be avoided. These examples that our Sages point out are different than regular exaggerating. When someone exaggerates, you don't immediately realize that they aren't being precise. This isn't true for our verse, and others like it. When we are told that the enemy has fortified cities that reach the Heavens, we all realize it's an exaggeration. It clearly means something to the effect of their walls being seemingly impossible to assail, as if they reached the Heavens themselves⁹.

In fact, our Sages use our verse as *the* source for the concept that the Torah sometimes speaks in exaggerations, and this isn't considered lying. Why is this the source? We could answer this by using a *Midrash*, which says: Hashem doesn't punish a nation until He punishes that nation's guardian angel¹⁰. Meaning, each nation has its own guardian angel in Heaven, running things behind the scenes. For a nation to fall, Hashem first has to "take care" of its guardian angel. Otherwise, it's impossible to conquer that nation. This is all alluded to in our verse, which says they have cities fortified up to the Heavens. That is, their guardian angel in Heaven is preventing them from being conquered. We see then that this verse is in fact precisely telling the truth. The only thing is that the verse, when read simply, does in fact sound like an exaggeration. We see from here that the Torah sometimes speaks exaggerations, and yet nothing false is being uttered.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on [Rav Chaim Kanievsky zt"l's Ta'amah D'Kra](#) to [Deuteronomy 9:1](#) and [Orchos Yosher § Emes](#)

² See [Ibn Ezra](#) and [Chizkuni ad. loc.](#)

³ [Targum Onkelos](#) and [Targum "Yonasan" ad. loc.](#)

⁴ [Deuteronomy loc. cit.](#)

⁵ [Chullin 90b](#): דברה תורה

⁶ [I Kings 1:40](#)

⁷ [Rashi](#) to [Chullin loc. cit.](#) says this is the intent of [הואי] (הבאי): someone who says something without precision

⁸ [Exodus 23:7](#)

⁹ Someone subsequently pointed out to [Rav Chaim zt"l](#) that [Rav Avraham ben HaRambam](#) says this in his [Hamaspik L'Ovdei Hashem](#) Chapter 37 *Al Chiyuv HaEmes Velssur HaSheker*

¹⁰ [Devarim Rabbah 1:22](#). See also [Shir HaShirim Rabbah 8:12](#)