

IT'S THE REAL THING

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In this week's portion, there is a brief conversation that may get lost in the myriad activity of some of its more fascinating stories and commands. Moshe beseeches his father-in-law, Yisro, to continue travelling with the Jewish nation. "We are travelling to the place of which Hashem has said, 'I shall give to you.' Go with us, and we shall treat you well" (Numbers 10:29).

Yisro replies by saying that he would like to return to his land and family. Moshe implores Yisro by telling him that he must accompany the Jews. After all, he knows the encampments and would be eyes for the Jewish people.

Whether Yisro was influenced by his son-in-law's arguments is debated by the commentaries. The Torah does not refer to the outcome. What interests me, however, is that Moshe never tells Yisro where the Jews are going. He just tells him that "we are travelling to the place of which Hashem has said, 'I shall give to you.'"

It is reminiscent of Hashem commanding Avraham to travel to Canaan with the petition "go from your land and your birthplace to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). But Moshe is not the Almighty, and the entire nation knew of the land where they would be going. After all, the land of Canaan was the focal point of the Exodus.

Why, then, does Moshe describe it to Yisro in a mysterious manner, not by defining its location, longitude or latitude, but rather identifying it as "the land that Hashem has promised to give us"? Would it not have been easier for Moshe to tell Yisro, "We are travelling to the Land of Canaan and we want you to accompany us"?

New York Times columnist Ralph de Toledano had a different view of the world than that of his editors. Despite protestations of the editorial board of the Times would always capitalize the words Heaven and Hell in any context.

His editors called him to task citing that heaven is only capitalized when it is a alternative for the Deity as in "Heaven help us." Moreover they insisted hell never got a capital H. De Toledano, however, insisted that any reference of those two places be spelled with a capital first letter.

"You see," the conservative columnist explained, "Heaven and Hell must always be capitalized. I want my readers to understand that Heaven and Hell are real places just like Scarsdale!"

When describing the Land of Israel, Moshe does not take a topographical approach. He delves

deeper. Moshe Rabbeinu does not refer to the land of Israel merely as the land of Canaan. In telling his father-in-law where the Jews would be going, he does not offer the longitude and latitude. He does not even describe Eretz Yisrael as the land flowing with milk and honey. Moshe's only descriptive was, "the land that Hashem told us, this I shall give to you."

That statement describes Eretz Yisrael in stronger terms than agricultural potential, natural beauty, or strategic location.

It tells us that Eretz Israel is the place that Hashem promised. Any other quality is temporal. Bounty withers, beauty erodes, and natural resources dry-up. But the promise of Hashem remains eternal. It makes us understand that like both extremes of the world-to come, the Land of Israel is real.

Good Shabbos

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