

LAND LESSONS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week we read the tochacha, the admonitions and prescient warnings of disasters that will befall our people almost as a natural reaction to our misdeeds. The frequent use of the words tachas, meaning instead of, remind us of the quid pro quo that was meant to help us understand the meaning of Heavenly retribution. Had we heeded the lessons and understood the message of Heavenly admonition, then perhaps the Jewish nation would have been exiled only once.

G-d does not exact retribution. He teaches. He gives us difficult tests for us to endure and hopefully grow from. Each punishment is a calculated lesson, something we can learn from.

It was not always to be the case. A seventy year-exile in Babylonia made us no wiser, and ultimately we were back, if not by our own choice, then by our misdoings, to an enduring exile less than half a millennium later.

And despite brief respites, physical and spiritual, we still are scattered in the Diaspora. Perhaps it is worth looking at one tit-for tat reprisal, mentioned this week, that ought serve as a lesson for us all.

In the portion of Behar, read last week, the Jewish people were commanded to let the land lie fallow every seventh year. They didn't. As a result they were exiled, and then the Torah tells us: "I will scatter you among the nations; I will unsheathe the sword after you; your land will be desolate, and your cities will be a ruin. Then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals during all the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your foes; then the land will rest, and it will appease for its sabbaticals. All the years of its desolation it will rest, whatever it did not rest during your sabbaticals when you dwelled upon her." (Leviticus 26:33-35)

The Talmud in Shabbos (33a) tells us that Hashem's goal -- that the land shall rest -- will ultimately be accomplished. . If the people do not let the land rest while they inhabit it, then it will rest in their absence. The calculation is frighteningly precise. There were seventy Sabbaticals that Israel had dishonored before and during the period of the First Temple. As the Babylonian exile lasted for seventy years, the land was compensated for the "rest" of which had never been observed.

But the question is obvious. Does land need rest? Does land get tired? The reason for Shmittah is not for the land but rather for us to rest from the mundane world of toil and physicality, and to leave our existence in the hands of the Almighty while we bask in His commands and study His laws. Why then does the land lying fallow in the desolation of our enemies help it or us? How is the message of Shmittah taught that way?

In his book about the 20th Century, Peter Jennings tells the story of Tom Sgovio. Tom was born in 1916 to immigrant parents who were enamored with the visions of Marx and Engels, and the equality they espoused would come under Communist rule. As a youngster Tom was active in the Communist movement, joining rallies and protests, even getting arrested for various pro-Communist activities.

Following the glowing reports of liberals like George Bernard Shaw, he brushed off the lurid descriptions of life under Stalin by Hearst and the American press and yearned for the Lenin's Utopia.

Disheartened at the state of poverty of this nation in the 1930s, he was convinced by Stalin's propaganda machine that in the Soviet Union life would be blissful. In fact, he was going to receive a free education in the Art Institute of Moscow, something no impoverished American had a chance to have in this country. To his friends he boasted about the wonderful education that would be provided, free of charge, by Mother Russia.

Upon his arrival, he was whisked to a hotel designated for political immigrants, and life was difficult yet bearable. But in the ensuing few years, he drifted out of his "suggested" confines to see the bitter poverty, and the drunken squalor of the peasants who allegedly were enjoying life to the fullest.

Contrasting that to the luxury of the ruling class, he began to complain. His timing could not have been worse. Within weeks, a hand tapped him on the shoulder and he was under arrest, a victim of Stalin's purges. Days later he was transported to Siberia to spend the next four years languishing in one of Stalin's forced labor camps. But his biggest conciliation came when a fellow prisoner told him that though the means were unfortunate, he realized his objectives. "You came here for an education? Well you're getting one! You graduated the Academy of the Gulag. And you learned more about human nature than you'll ever learn at Oxford or Cambridge. Here you learned why communism will never work! Because you won't change human nature!"

People disobey Shmitah. They feel that they know who controls the future themselves. Shmitah is there to tell us that the land is not in our hands, and it is not in our control. We are to remind ourselves of that by following the dictates of Hashem and realizing Who really is in control. But unfortunately we did not. We thought we had it all figured out and we can do as we pleased. And so we were sent into exile. And the land lay fallow for the amount of years that we illegally worked it. We received an education. It was not the way it was intended. We could have learned it by understanding the truth of creation and control. Unfortunately, we learned it in the gulag.

Dedicated by Yehuda and Beth Honig and Family in memory of Zoltan Honig

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Drasha is the e-mail edition of FaxHomily, a weekly torah facsimile on the weekly portion which is sponsored by ***The Henry and Myrtle Hirsch Foundation***

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