

ABANDONING THE LAND

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Abandoning The Land¹

I am Hashem your G-d Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be G-d unto you.

Rashi: "To be G-d unto you" tells us that He is G-d to whomever lives in the land of Israel. But whoever leaves it is as if that person worshiped avodah zarah.

Maharal: These are strong words. Doesn't avodah zarah imply substituting another deity for Hashem, either by wholesale rejection of Him, or by assigning roles and attributes that only apply to Him to some other imagined being? How can one's mailing address be tantamount to avodah zarah?

The core idea behind Rashi's words, however, is well known. The holy land of Israel is identified as His land, as it were. The kind of protection that people associate with G-d is extended primarily in the land that is identified as especially belonging to Him. His special providence can be felt here, because, as it were, He pays more "direct" attention to what happens in it.

We understand, of course, that everything is overseen by Hashem, and absolutely nothing happens that is not a manifestation of His Will. Yet we also realize that there are different styles or modes to His oversight of the world. Every place outside of His special land, His providence is a bit more scripted and mechanical. Some of that oversight appears to us to run according to some algorithm or program. Of course, all the consequences of that program are foreseen and intended by the Programmer responsible for it. Nonetheless, that program seems, at times, to have fewer degrees of freedom than when He seems to respond to every individual and every exigency.

In the programmed mode, it is as if various structures of the metaphysical universe governed the outcome of things. We understand that they have no independent power, and make no decisions. Yet, the outcomes of things are somewhat limited by their nature. We call these entities "directing angels." In Israel, these angels are irrelevant. Hashem bypasses them; His providence is direct, resulting in a different relationship with people. He can be experienced fully as a personal G-d.

Outside of Israel, however, Hashem's hashgachah works its way through these directing angels. The role they play masks the all-important influence of Hashem; to the unsophisticated, they lessen the ability of many to see the Will of Hashem operating in the world He created. When we live under their influence, we in a sense add to the prestige of their influence by inflating the population over

which they seem to reign. Living in Israel, we are servants and subjects only of Hashem Himself.

We now understand why the aveirah of avodah zarah is relevant, how living outside of the Land is indeed on a continuum with idolatry. What we still do not understand are Rashi's words. The two conditions that Rashi speaks of conspicuously lack parallelism. Living in Israel should have contrasted with living outside of Israel, not with leaving Israel.

We can, however, explain this easily. A person born outside of Israel does nothing to enhance the prestige and importance of the directing angels, because he has made no choice to leave the direct supervision of Hashem's hashgachah for a system in which the angels take on a more important role. One who leaves the presence and focus of Hashem for another country, there to place himself under the supervision of the intermediaries, turns his back on the King, and seems to serve a competitor.

In a similar passage² Rashi does speak of one who lives outside the Land, rather than one who leaves it. "Whoever does not live in the land of Israel is as he had no G-d." That choice of words does not conflict with the explanation we just gave. In Bereishis, Rashi depicts living outside the Land as seriously wrong - so wrong that the person is considered G-dless. Not having a full, personal relationship with G-d, however, is not as serious as serving a different god.

Rashi's choice of words in both places is measured and precise. His comments in Bereishis are set in the context of our entering into a covenant with Hashem to accept Him as our G-d. He lets it be known that He can only act fully as G-d to those who live in His land. The pasuk and Rashi are not interested in any other repercussions. They simply want to emphasize that the covenant - and its blessings - are contingent upon living in proximity to the King. When we are in the Land, we are in that relationship. Outside, we miss the boat.

In our pasuk, however, there is no such context. To the contrary, our pasuk deals with the full relationship between Hashem and an individual - not just the formal covenant of Bereishis. Here it is appropriate to speak of all the implications of that relationship. Here it is appropriate to speak of both sides of the Divine coin. On the one hand, living close to the King has its spiritual and material rewards. On the other hand, spurning that closeness by removing oneself from His direct supervision is in itself a terrible statement of insubordination, of *l'šse-majestā*. That rejection indeed is a kind of avodah zarah.

Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Vayikra 25:38 and Bereishis 17:6
2. Bereishis 17:8