

SPIRITUAL CLIMATES

by Shlomo Katz

Parshios Haazinu & Elul / Rosh Hashanah

Spiritual Climates

We read in this week's parashah (32:8), "When the Supreme One gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of man, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of Bnei Yisrael." R' Yerucham Levovitz z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Mir Yeshiva; died 1936) writes: When we look at the natures of places, we see a remarkable thing. Every place is different--different climates, different minerals, different plants and crops, etc. And, the people who live in these places have different personalities and characteristics which somehow reflect their respective places. We tend not to view this as remarkable for we take it for granted; indeed, it makes perfect sense to us.

R' Levovitz continues: [Many people are skeptical of the idea that G-d is "found" in Eretz Yisrael more than in the Diaspora or that greater spiritual growth is possible in Eretz Yisrael than elsewhere.] Since we accept the idea that G-d gave each place unique physical characteristics, why should we not accept that Eretz Yisrael has unique spiritual characteristics also? We don't ask why etrogim grow in Eretz Yisrael and not in Poland! We understand that Poland simply is not the place to grow etrogim.

In the kinot for Tisha B'Av, we refer to Eretz Yisrael by the following terms, among others: "There the Divine Presence resides;" "the royal palace;" "G-d's throne;" "the air of your land is the life of the soul;" "who can compare to your anointed ones, your prophets, your Levi'im, your singers?" Why aren't these characteristics found elsewhere? Simply because G-d gave each place its unique characteristics, plants, climate, etc., and these are the characteristics He gave to Eretz Yisrael. (Da'at Torah p.130)

"Yeshurun [i.e., Yisrael] became fat and kicked." (32:15)

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) writes: We have a tradition that there will be a spiritual revolt in Eretz Yisrael and among the Jewish People in the very era in which the national life of our People reawakens. The reason is that the material

tranquility that part of our nation will experience will lead it to believe that it already has attained its ultimate goal, thus causing the soul to become smaller, so-to-speak. Yearning for lofty and holy ideals will cease, and, as a natural consequence, the spirit will sink. Eventually, a storm will come and cause a revolution, and then it will be apparent that Yisrael's strength lies in the Eternal Holy One, in the light of His Torah, and in the desire for spiritual light. (Orot p.84)

"He will say, 'I shall hide My face from them and see what their end will be--for they are a generation of reversals, children in whom there is no confidence. They provoked Me with a non-god, angered Me with their [things that were] nothing; so I shall provoke them with a non-people, with a nation that is no nation I shall anger them'." (32:20-21)

R' Avraham Saba z"l (1440-1508; Spain and Portugal) writes: Hashem says in these verses, "I want to hide My face from them as if I don't see what's going on because they act like children who are inconsistent. I wish, so-to-speak, to see how far they will go--'what their end will be'--for they are a 'generation of reversals,' constantly changing their deeds. They are children in whom there is no confidence [i.e., no truth], for they don't maintain one position for very long. Maybe they will yet regret their deeds. Maybe, just as they abandoned Me for other gods, they will abandon those other gods and return to Me."

But, G-d continues, they didn't do that. "They provoked Me with a non-god, angered Me with their [things that were] nothing; so I shall provoke them with a non-people, with a nation that is no nation I shall anger them." Hashem responds measure-for-measure. This, writes R' Saba, is a recurring theme in our parashah. For example, Hashem gives us wealth so that we may study Torah in comfort, but, instead, we allow the wealth to cause us to rebel and forget G-d, as we read (verse 15), "Yeshurun became fat and kicked. You became fat, you became thick, you became corpulent--and it deserted Elokah its Maker, and was contemptuous of the Rock of its salvation." Therefore, we read (verses 23-24), "I shall accumulate evils against them, My arrows shall I use up against them: bloating of famine . . ." The parashah continues (verse 29), "Were they wise they would comprehend this, they would discern it from their end." We possess enough wisdom to discern that our troubles follow from our sins. (Tzror Ha'mor)

"Were they wise they would comprehend this, they would discern it from their end [literally, 'to their end']." (32:29)

R' Simcha Zissel Ziv z"l (1824-1898; the "Alter of Kelm") writes: It is the nature of "regular" people to admire that which rich people admire, to draw close that which rich people draw close, and to

distance that which rich people distance. In contrast, they are not moved to love that which the King of the world loves--i.e., "Awe of Hashem [which] is His treasure" (Yeshayah 33:6)--or to hate what He hates--for example, smooth talking and haughtiness; may Hashem save us from these things. This is all the result of man's ignorance of his obligation to apply his mind to figure out what his obligations are. This what our verse speaks about: "Were they wise, they would comprehend this"--i.e., they would apply their minds to find ways to comprehend; "they would discern to their end"--they would worry about the ultimate day of judgment.

The Gemara (Shabbat 153a) relates that Rabbi Eliezer told his students, "Repent one day before you die." They asked him, "Does man know when he will die?" He replied, "Then repent every day!" The Alter asks: Rabbi Eliezer's students were great people, among them Rabbi Akiva. Did they really need the answer to be spelled out for them? The answer is that we all know we can die any day, G-d forbid, but we don't think about it. Rabbi Eliezer's message was that man must think about the fact that he will die, for this will spur him to repent and to seek an understanding of his obligations in this world. Knowledge does not lead to action, writes the Alter. Only thought leads to action!

The Alter continues: Notably, man has no trouble worrying about far-fetched risks to his property and he never stops making plans to protect his material assets, while he doesn't apply the same level of concern to his spiritual assets. This, the Alter writes, is proof that there is reward and punishment for man's actions. G-d made it challenging for us to focus on our spiritual gains and losses so that we would deserve reward for doing so. Our Sages say that man must serve Hashem with his yetzer ha'tov and his yetzer ha'ra. How so? Man must ask himself: Why has my yetzer ha'ra taken hold of me so strongly? It must be so that Hashem can reward me for overcoming it. (Sefer Ha'katan)

"See, now, that I, I am He, and no god is with Me. I put to death and I bring life, I struck down and I will heal, and there is no rescuer from My hand." (32:39)

R' Yisrael Hofstein z"l (1744-1823; the Maggid of Kozhnitz) explains: "I" implies importance. Thus, Pharaoh declared (Bereishit 41:44), "I am Pharaoh!" In reality, however, the only "I" is Hashem-"I, I am He." The proof is that no one else can do what I can do. (Avodat Yisrael)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written by R' Hirsch Broide z"l (Lithuania and Yerushalayim; 1865-1913), son-in-law of the Alter of Kelm z"l (see page 3). It is believed to have been sent to R' Baruch Marcus z"l (1870-1961; Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Israel for 55 years), a student of the Alter. The letter is printed in Kitvei Ha'Saba

V'talmidav Mi'Kelm Vol. I p.288)

I am writing to you what his honor, our teacher, said:

Our Sages state (Midrash Rabbah 30:24): "The world cannot contain the reward for mitzvot." What is this teaching? There is already a mishnah (Avot ch.4) which states: "One hour of contentment in Olam Ha'ba is greater than all of existence in this world." If this world cannot contain even one hour of contentment in Olam Ha'ba, certainly it cannot contain the reward for mitzvot!

The Gemara says that, when Rabbi Abba went to Eretz Yisrael, he prayed, "May it be Hashem's will that I will say something that will be accepted." There is a difference between hearing something and grasping it with one's mind. Sometimes a person hears something that he doesn't really understand. It rings true and he senses that it's not a false statement, but he can't confidently assert that it's true. Generally, a person will not fully accept such a statement.

This is the meaning of the statement, "The world cannot contain the reward for mitzvot." The people of the world cannot grasp the reality of reward in Olam Ha'ba. If physical man would hear how great the reward in Olam Ha'ba is, he could not grasp it. Man, who is physical, cannot have even an inkling of the awesomeness of the spiritual world, let alone a solid grasp of it. Therefore, man tends not even to believe in it. This is an important foundation for further study. [In a companion essay that was apparently mailed with this letter, the Alter discusses how much man must fear the punishment for sins, which also is beyond anything that we can imagine. See Chochmah U'mussar Vol. I p.71.]

All of this, I was instructed by our teacher to write to you.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](https://torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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