

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE EXODUS

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Masei

The Geography of the Exodus

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (4:7), "The beginning of wisdom is to acquire chochmah / wisdom; from your every acquisition acquire binah / understanding." Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher z"l (Spain; 14th century) writes: King Shlomo is teaching that one should acquire the wisdom of the Torah before acquiring other forms of wisdom. And, after a person has acquired chochmah, he must acquire binah, which is the ability to "understand one thing from another" (i.e., to draw inferences from one's knowledge). In truth, without binah, the acquisition of chochmah is incomplete. Therefore, "from your every acquisition acquire binah." Even if it costs you all of your belongings, acquire binah, for that is true wealth.

R' Bachya continues: It was important for King Shlomo to teach us to acquire the wisdom of the Torah before acquiring other forms of wisdom because one who studies other subjects before studying Torah acquires false beliefs or values. In contrast, if one has a solid grounding in Torah study, he has a foundation upon which he can build using other wisdoms, and they will not harm him. R' Bachya notes that the word "teva" / "nature" is also the root of the verb "to drown." The reason is that one who exposes himself to nature (science) before he has a solid grounding in Torah is doomed to drown in false beliefs. In particular, one must be aware that G-d controls the physical world and performs super-natural miracles as He sees fit.

It is to teach this lesson that the parashah we read this week opens with a list of the places where Bnei Yisrael camped, writes R' Bachya (citing the Rambam z"l). Lest one think that the Exodus was a natural event and that Bnei Yisrael camped at oases in the desert, the Torah informs us of the places where they stayed so that (if we knew where they were) we could see that they are desolate places where no one could survive for 40 years except through Divine intervention.

"Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: 'Command Bnei Yisrael and say to them-- Since you come to the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you as an inheritance, the land of Canaan

according to its borders." (34:1)

R' Ishtori Ha'Parchi z"l (see below) writes: Here and in the verses that follow, the Torah identifies the borders of the entire Land of Israel, just as a field that is being sold has its borders listed in the deed. This is the primary place in the Torah where the borders of Eretz Yisrael are mentioned, just as the parashah of tzitzit (Bemidbar 15) is the primary place for that mitzvah and the parashah of Pesach (Shmot 12) is the primary place for that mitzvah. [In other words, even though each of these is mentioned in passing or to a small degree elsewhere in the Torah, each one has a primary place where it is mentioned. The significance of this is that here the borders are mentioned in the form of a commandment.]

R' Ishtori continues: Any other place in the Torah where the borders of Eretz Yisrael are mentioned is for a specific reason related to the context of that passage. In some of those cases, commentaries say that those verses are prophecies for the future. One of these is the verse (Devarim 11:24), "Every place where the sole of your foot will tread shall be yours--from the Wilderness and the Lebanon, from the river, the Euphrates River, until the western sea shall be your boundary." [Midrash Lekach Tov explains that this verse refers to the time of mashiach.] Another prophecy is the verse (Devarim 34:1), "Moshe ascended from the plains of Moav to Mount Nevo, to the summit of the cliff that faces Jericho, and Hashem showed him the entire Land - the Gilad . . ." [The Gilad is in present-day Jordan.]

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Following this introduction, R' Ishtori begins to define the borders of the land. Our parashah states (34:5), "The border shall go around from Atzmon to the stream of Egypt, and its outskirts shall be toward the Sea." R' Ishtori explains: The "stream of Egypt" is the southwestern boundary of Eretz Yisrael. This is the river called "Shichor," which is not the Nile. [Rashi to Yehoshua (13:3) writes that it is the Nile.] R' Saadiah Gaon z"l (9th century), writes R' Ishtori, says that the "stream of Egypt" is Wadi El Arish, a name that is still in use today. It is well known even today, R' Ishtori adds, that the boundary between Eretz Canaan and Egypt is Wadi El Arish.

Our parashah continues (34:7), "This shall be for you the northern border-- from the Great Sea you shall turn to Hor Hahar / Mount Hor." R' Ishtori writes this is the mountain referred to in the Gemara as "Turei Samnos." [In our versions of the Gemara (Gittin 8a) it is called "Turei Amnon. Below, R' Ishtori apparently identifies this mountain as a peak 25 miles south of the range in present-day Turkey called "Toros Amanus."] This is not the same Hor Hahar that is associated with the death of Aharon; that Hor Hahar is outside of Eretz Yisrael to the east, while this one is on the northwestern corner. Neither is this Hor Hahar the same as Mount Chermon, even though Chermon has many names.

Regarding the identification of this Hor Hahar, I (i.e., R' Ishtori) struggled and searched for a long time, and thank G-d I found the answer. Know that from Mount Carmel northward past Akko (Acre), there are many places where the land juts into the sea. All of these are part of Eretz Yisrael, including Tyre, Sidon and Beirut. North of there, near R'as al Basit, there is a very tall mountain which is called in

Arabic, "Jabal Al- Akra," which means "Bald Mountain." This is a lone mountain, and its base juts into the sea. It has on it very tall Erez trees and also nut trees. It also has springs of water and small villages that live off the blessing of the springs. About half a day's journey south of there is the town mentioned in Tractates Shabbat (119a), Menachot (85b), and elsewhere, called Ludkiyah (i.e., Al Ladhiqiyah on Syria's Mediterranean coast). I say, R' Ishtori continues, that this is Hor Hahar that we are seeking because all of the other peninsulas south of it are not mountains. Furthermore, all the towns mentioned as being within the Twelve Tribes' territories are south of there. Finally, Hamah, which is mentioned as being on the border, is three days journey east [actually south east, as R' Ishtori mentions below] of there. [However, some say that Hamah of the Torah is Antioch / Antakya, Turkey]. Two days south of there is Halba (Lebanon) in the territory of Asher.

When one stands at the top of this mountain facing eastward, then in front of him, a little to the south will be Hamah. About two days south of there, on the coast, is the city that the Torah calls "Sin" and the Arabs call Tarabulus (Tripoli). Near it is Arka, and about those two places the Torah says (Bereishit 10:17), "the Arki and the Sini." Two days further south, also on the coast, is Beirut, which is mentioned in Yechezkel (47:15). (Kaftor Va'ferach Ch.11)

[Note: Comments in square brackets are from the editors of the Machon Le'limudei Mitzvot Ha'aretz edition of Kaftor Va'ferach (Yerushalayim 5757). Also note that nearly all of the places mentioned in the above description have eponymous counterparts on modern day maps, presumably at or near their original locations.]

R' Ishtori Ha'Parchi z"l

R' Ishtori Ha'parchi was born in Provence, a province in southern France, in about 1280. His teachers included his father, R' Moshe; his relative, R' Yaakov ben Machir ibn Tibbon; and the important posek / halachic authority, Rabbeinu Asher ("Rosh"). In 1306, R' Ishtori was expelled from France together with the rest of that country's Jews, and he began the wanderings for which he is best known.

After a stay in Spain, R' Ishtori set out for Eretz Yisrael. For seven years, he toured the Land, studying its geography and history. (He writes that he spent two years studying the Galilee and five years in the rest of the Land.) He then settled in Bet Shean, where he compiled his magnum opus, Kaftor Va'ferach, a thorough study of the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael and the identities of cities mentioned in Tanach, Talmud and Midrashim. Kaftor Va'ferach was well received by later scholars and is crucial for identifying which areas are or are not subject to the agricultural laws that apply exclusively in Eretz Yisrael, for example terumah and shemittah. The work has been reprinted several times, most recently in Yerushalayim in the 1990s (with an extensive commentary). [An excerpt from Kaftor Va'ferach with the new commentary appears inside this issue.]

Besides Kaftor Va'ferach, R' Ishtori wrote several other works: Batei Ha'nefesh on ethics, Shoshanat

Ha'melech on the sciences mentioned in the Talmud, and a Talmud commentary called Sha'ar Ha'shamayim. He also translated some medical treatises from Latin into Hebrew.

R' Ishtori passed away in about 1345.

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

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