

THE LIVING LAND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

The land you are about to occupy is not like Egypt, the place you left . . . (Devarim 11:10)

How is Eretz Yisroel different from Egypt, and for that matter, other lands of the world? The Torah answers this question:

It is therefore a land constantly under G-d, your G-d's scrutiny; the eyes of G-d your G-d are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.

Eretz Yisroel is a land of intense Divine Providence, where nothing escapes the notice of G-d. And what about the Diaspora? Obviously not. Then what does the posuk mean? It means that not only does G-d pay close attention to all that happens in the Holy Land, but He also lets its inhabitants know that as well, by responding to their every move.

There should be a sign up over the border of Eretz Yisroel: Sinners beware! Sinners keep out! 24-hour Divine surveillance!

Talk about your satellite-tracking system!

What's interesting, though, is that when the Torah talks about reacting to the sins of the Jewish people on holy soil, it does say that G-d will expel us from the land, but:

. . . The land became defiled, and when I directed My Providence at the sin committed there, the land spit out its inhabitants. (Vayikra 18:25)

It was the land that spit out the people, not G-d Himself. "But," you will tell me, "the Torah is only being figurative. Of course it was G-d who threw out the evil inhabitants!"

And, of course you would be right. However, why does the Torah mention it in this way? Why blame the land for an act of Divine Providence? Why imbue the land with a sense of humanity it can't possibly have - or can it?

Recall the following posuk from Parashas Devarim:

And you murmured - vatayragnu - in your tents and said, "Because G-d hated us He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to give us into the hand of the Amorites to exterminate us." (Devarim 1:27)

Vatayragnu: This denotes loshon hara, as it says, "The words of a nirgan . . ." (Mishlei 18:8); that is, of a

man who brings a false report. (Rashi)

When the Spies returned from their tour of Eretz Yisroel, and ten of them spoke derogatorily about the land, they sealed the fate of that generation to die in the desert. And not only their generation, but all of the generations to come until the arrival of Moshiach. For, after the Jewish people finally entered Eretz Yisroel 39 years later under the leadership of Yeshoshua Bin Nun, the wandering did not stop. Rather, we have been wandering in and out of exile after exile since that time.

However, as Rashi explains, the Spies not only spoke badly about G-d's gift to the Jewish people, they spoke loshon hara, which raises the question: Considering the nature of the loshon hara, how does one speak it about a land?

SHABBOS DAY:

If the snake is permitted to bite before it is charmed, there is no point in having the charmer. (Koheles 10:11)

Raish Lakish asked, "Why does it say, 'If the snake is permitted to bite before it is charmed, there is no point in having the charmer' (Koheles 10:11)? Because in the future, all the animals will come to the snake and say, 'The lion preys and eats, the wolf tears and eats, but you, what pleasure do you derive?' He will answer them, 'What pleasure does the one who speaks loshon hara have?' " (Arachin 14b)

The sin of speaking loshon hara is an unusual one and has prompted many volumes of explanation to clarify why it is such a severe transgression. For example, the Talmud writes:

One who speaks loshon hara is like someone who has denied Torah . . . increases his transgressions until Heaven . . . deserves to be stoned . . . G-d says that He cannot live with him . . . increases his transgressions until they correspond to the three transgressions: idol worship, illicit relations, and murder . . . (Arachin 15b)

Granted that speaking loshon hara is not in good taste, but is it so spiritually destructive as to be put on par with the three sins that Jews are supposed to die for rather than commit the sin? Most societies say no. The Talmud says yes. The question is, why?

To begin with, consider what it is a person is really saying when he speaks loshon hara. In his opinion, is he merely commenting on an action a person has performed incorrectly, or is he making a statement about the person himself? If he was only commenting on a particular action, would the Torah's reaction be so severe?

Of course not. Indeed, the very fact that the Torah commands us to criticize our fellow Jew indicates that we are allowed to evaluate and respond to the actions of another, to the extent that the Sanhedrin can even carry out capital punishment if need be.

But even then, it is an evaluation of the perpetrator's action, not of the person himself, for such an

evaluation is beyond the realm of human capability. For, to properly know if a person is truly evil means to know everything about him: all of his incarnations, the situations he was born into, the family that raised him, the school that taught him, the experiences that affected him, etc.

All of it goes into shaping a person and his outlook on life, and must be put into the balance when deciding just how good or bad the person has become. A person can only be held responsible, ultimately, for what he could have made better and did not. The rest, G-d, and only G-d, takes into account in determining a person's final judgment.

In other words, when a person speaks loshon hara, evaluating a person as either good or bad, he is, in fact, playing G-d, and that is as serious an offence as one can commit.

However, having said that, the original question becomes even stronger: How does one speak loshon hara about a land? Does it have a soul that can be misjudged? It sure seems like it.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals during all the years of its desolation . . . (Vayikra 26:34)

There we go again. Why play word games? Why not say it outright? Say: Then you will be punished for all the Shmittah years you didn't keep while in captivity away from the land. What does the land care whether or not we keep Shmittah? I mean, there is no question that the land benefits from going fallow once every seven years, but there are a lot of lands that get worked non-stop, and they don't seem to seek revenge against their inhabitants!

Then again, no other land atones for its inhabitants like Eretz Yisroel does, and not just for the sins committed accidentally, but for those committed with intention as well:

Rav Elazar says, "All those who dwell in Eretz Yisroel do so without transgression (seemingly even intentional ones), as is said 'A dweller of Jerusalem shall not say, I'm ill, for the people dwelling there shall be forgiven of sin' (Yeshayahu 33:24) (Kesuvos 111a)." This seems to also include those sins done intentionally! How is it possible that by merely sitting and doing nothing that one can be forgiven for intentional sins? The solution comes from the Midrash (Yalkut Shimon, Tehillim, 115d): The posuk, "G-d, You have favored Your land, You have returned the captivity of Ya'akov" (Tehillim 95:2), is best understood with the help of the posuk, "It is therefore a land constantly under G-d, your G-d's scrutiny . . ." (Devarim 11:12). This implies that G-d seeks out ways and places, His eyes upon her, until her actions are pleasing to G-d. The commandments performed such as tithing and keeping the laws of Shmittah cause G-d to be pleased with the actions of the Jews. Thus, the Torah says, "Then the land shall be appeased for its Sabbaticals . . ." (Vayikra 26:34), and thus G-d will be appeased by the land. (Tuv HaAretz, p. 71)

What a remarkable concept! A land that atones for the sins of its inhabitants that are done both accidentally and with intention! What a place to live! Why isn't everyone running here to have the

time of their lives with complete amnesty? Why live anywhere else in the world?!

Wait a second. Isn't this the land that spit out its original inhabitants, and then later threw out the new ones? Weren't both Temples destroyed with untold suffering imposed upon the people of those times? Haven't we been at war internally in every decade, and also externally with our neighbors? What is this, a trick?

The Leshem answers this question in his treatise on Bitachon. According to the Midrash, the Continual Offering brought up every morning in Temple times, atoned for the sins that occurred during the night. The offering that was brought up just before nightfall, atoned for the sins of the Jewish that occurred during that day. Asks the Midrash: One would think that the Jewish people forever lived without sin!

The answer is no, but why not? Because they sinned by relying on the Continual Offering atoning for them, like a person who sins and then plans to atone for the sin on Yom Kippur. As the Talmud explains, sinning on the condition to repent makes repentance ineffective. Thus, the Temple was destroyed because the land would not atone for the sins of people who performed them with the confidence that they could later atone for their sins. Instead, the sins just piled up until the land had enough and threw out its inhabitants.

However, if the potential for atonement is not the basis for the sin, then the land itself absorbs it, and releases its burden through the mitzvos that the Jewish people perform that are directly connected to the land. And, in the case of the Jews who were exiled into Babylonia, the land had to rest 70 years to clean the slate in advance of the returning exiles.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and with your descendants after you throughout the generations, an eternal covenant; to you and your descendants I will be G-d. I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land in which you now live - the entire land of Canaan, as an eternal possession. I will be their G-d." (Bereishis 17:7-8)

A friend of mine put it like this. As we know, the giving of Torah represented a marriage between G-d and the Jewish people, G-d playing the role of the groom and the Jewish people playing the role of the bride. And, like every good husband, G-d immediately made sure that a house existed in which His new bride could live: Eretz Yisroel.

Like every new house a person moves into, you start working right away to transform the house into a home. That means adding all the personal touches that help to create a bond between you and the house. And, as a result, over time the home actually begins to take on a life of its own and feel like a member of the family. Moving from the house decades later becomes a traumatic experience, like moving away from a loved one.

Does the house actually take on human qualities? Of course not. What happens is that we humans

have the ability to feel sentimental about inanimate things because of what they have meant to us over the years. We imbue the lifeless world with our own sense of life that we gained through the thing we have come to cherish, because it has played some role that another human being might have.

There is no question that this is true about Eretz Yisroel and the Jewish people, except that it goes even further in this case. In Creation, the source of all life is kedushah (holiness). Thus, the more kedushah something has, the more "alive" it is, until eventually it results in an actual soul, like we have.

What makes Eretz Yisroel so special is its kedushah, which translates into its closeness to G-d Himself. It is not as holy as a soul, and therefore there are limits to how far we can sacrifice ourselves for the land. However, compared to other lands which belong to the side of spiritual impurity, and whose ministering angel is from that side as well, it is extremely holy because it has imbued the land with an aspect of His own holiness, to facilitate closeness between the land's inhabitants and their Creator.

Thus, though the land may not be as alive as a human is, there is a certain level of life to it by virtue of the kedushah with which it is imbued. It is called the "living land." And, as the Spies found out the hard way, it is alive enough that speaking badly about the land can actually constitute speaking loshon hara, as if it was a person. It is this that creates the inseparable bond between the Jewish people and their land, something very important to recall while those who have no appreciation of this gave her away.

Have a great Shabbos,
PW

This week's parshah sheet is dedicated to my aunt, Terry Kates, z"l, who passed away this last Friday, right before Shabbos. For as long back as I can remember, she has been like a second mother to me and all of my siblings, a fountain of love and concern for all of her family members. Even though she suffered much throughout her life for one reason or another, it never showed up in her outward appearance, and she never, ever questioned or doubted Hashem and His ways. As the Talmud states, righteous people, even after they die, are considered to be living, and there is no question in my mind where she is heading: to the ultimate land of the living, evident by the fact that she died just before Shabbos.

Text

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