

A GIFT OF G-D

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

It is after hearing very sad news that I sit down to write this week's parshah sheet. A young, well-respected member of our community had passed away earlier in the day after fighting a prolonged and difficult illness. Although I did not know him well personally, I knew enough about him to know that not only was he a talmid chacham, but a kind and soft-spoken individual as well, committed to the service of G-d. Therefore, I dedicate this week's parshah sheet in his memory, Pinchas ben Chaim Leib, zt"l, and hope that the learning of it will be an illui nishmat.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Six years you may sow your fields, and for six years you can prune your vineyard and gather in the harvest. However, the seventh year will be a shabbat of strict rest for the land, a shabbat to G-d. You will neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard. (Vayikra 25:3-4)

This coming Rosh Hashanah will mark the beginning of a new Shmittah year, the previous one having been in 5761. Even though we still lack the Temple today, it is only a rabbinical mitzvah to let the land lie fallow for the entire year, but religious Jews take it quite seriously and act as if it is a Torah mitzvah. Besides, we know that if a Jew attempts to perform a mitzvah and is prevented from doing so for reasons he cannot control, it is to his credit as if he did the mitzvah nevertheless. (Brochot 6a)

Agriculturists agree that letting land rest about once every seven years is good for the land, just like nutritionists agree that not eating certain treif foods is good for your health. This is not surprising since the Torah also commands us to take care of our health, but certainly health is not the basis of the mitzvah, just as the land's welfare is not the basis of the Shmittah year. There are always far deeper, more Kabbalistic reasons for any of the mitzvot that G-d has commanded us to observe.

When it comes to mitzvot dependent upon the land, in general, they are designed to make us recall to Whom the land really belongs, and Who is the cause of our success. When it comes to the mitzvah of Shmittah, this is especially so since miracles happen before, during, and after Shmittah. We truly learn to be completely dependent upon G-d, as we should be even if we are working for ourselves.

However, there is another more fundamental reason for the Shmittah year, something that has to do with the very special property of Eretz Yisroel itself. Rabbi Natan Shapiro, in his remarkable sefer "Tuv HaAretz", makes this point:

Eretz Yisroel only atones for unintentional sins; forgiveness for intentional sins performed in Eretz Yisroel is only through suffering and the person going against his own negative nature. Rebellious sins performed in Eretz Yisroel are only forgiven as a result of teshuvah and Torah study, according to Rav Moshe Cordovero. However, it is possible to be more precise. It says in the Talmud: "Rebi Elazar said that anyone who lives in Eretz Yisroel does so free of sin, as it says, 'A dweller will not say, "I am sick"; the people dwelling there shall be forgiven of sin' (Yeshayahu 33:24)" (Ketuvot 111a). If so, that would mean that even intentional sins are atoned for by the land. But how can that be if the person who lives there does nothing? How then does the land atone for his sins? The answer is as taught by the Yalkut Shimoni on Tehillim: "G-d, You have favored Your land, You have returned the captivity of Ya'akov' (Tehillim 85:2). As the posuk says, [Eretz Yisroel is] 'a land which G-d, your G-d, cares for' (Devarim 11:12), that is, The Holy One, Blessed is He, continuously 'turns it over' and pays attention to it until her actions become favorable to The Holy One, Blessed is He. [This refers to the mitzvot that we are commanded regarding it, so if the Jewish people take ma'aser and observe the Shmittah years, at that time her actions become favorable before The Holy One, Blessed is He. Thus it says, 'Then the land will enjoy her rests' (Vayikra 26:34), and therefore, 'G-d, You have favored Your land...' (Tehillim 85:2). Who carries their sins? The land upon which they dwell, as it says, '...the people dwelling there shall be forgiven of sin'. That is true for those who are still living; what about people who have already died? The Torah says, 'and He will appease His land and His people' (Devarim 32:43). Who atones for His people? His land. Happy are those who dwell in Eretz Yisroel, for they have no sin or transgression, not in life and not in death. Thus it says, 'You have forgiven the iniquity of Your nation, You have covered up their sin, Selah'" (Tehillim 85:3). (Yalkut Shimoni, 843; Tehillim 85:2)

What an amazing concept! Who ever heard of such a thing, of a land atoning for the people living on it? And, not just for sins committed accidentally, but even those committed with intention, providing that the mitzvot tied to the land are performed to the best of one's ability, and in particular, Shmittah. This will help put into context a concept that, sadly, too many people rely upon as an excuse to not even consider the idea of living in Eretz Yisroel — unwittingly holding off the Final Redemption for everyone.

SHABBAT DAY:

"I am G-d, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be G-d to you" (Vayikra 25:38)

Most Jews who read this posuk would not think twice about it, even though they live in the Diaspora. They don't see anything disconcerting about it, so they read on as if nothing has been said that addresses their situation. The Talmud thinks differently:

One should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a town most of whose inhabitants are idolaters, but let no one live outside the Land, even in a town most of whose inhabitants are Jews; for whoever

lives in the Land of Israel may be considered to have a G-d, but whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as one who has no G-d. For it says, "I am G-d, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be G-d to you" (Vayikra 25:38). He does not have any G-d? Rather, it is to tell you that whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as one who worships idols. Similarly it was said in [the story of] David, "For they have driven me out this day that I should not cleave to the inheritance of the L-rd, saying: 'Go, serve other gods.'" (I Shmuel 26:19) But who said to David, "Serve other gods"? Rather, it is to tell you that whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as one who worships idols. (Ketuvot 110b)

Well, THAT is certainly disconcerting! It is one thing to be accused of not yearning for life in Eretz Yisroel, but is something altogether different to be accused of being an idol worshiper for simply remaining in the Diaspora! Ah, but fortunately there is the famous Rabbeinu Chaim mentioned in Tosfot to save the day. He says:

This is not the custom in this time, since it is dangerous to travel there, and Rabbeinu Chaim has said that there is no mitzvah to live there now, because there are many mitzvot dependent on the land and many punishments, and we are not able to be careful concerning them or able to fulfill them. (Ketuvot 110b, q.v. Hu Omer L'alot)

Well, it certainly was dangerous (in the time of Tosfot) to travel there. It was still the time of the Crusades, and a time that Christians and Moslems alike fought over Jerusalem and Israel, in general, often at the cost of Jewish lives. Not only this, but since both constantly pillaged Jewish lands and took all their produce, if they had been successful at all to grow anything edible in the first place, they often left Jewish families on the verge of starvation, making it somewhat impossible to properly keep the laws associated with the land — even if the people knew the laws or how to properly perform them! Who was there to even teach the people that knew Torah?

No, at THAT time it was prudent to stay away from the Holy Land. At that time, yes; at THIS time, no. For, as Rabbi Shapiro is telling us, it is one thing to not be able to control one's behavior while living in Eretz Yisroel and to perform sins; it is far more dangerous to do so if one also does not know how to observe the mitzvot dependent upon the land, for then the land cannot atone for the people dwelling there, and exile becomes inevitable.

But today? Today, people do not only keep the "mitzvot talui b'aretz" by choice, but today the laws are known and available, and there are shiurim offered everywhere, not to mention the countless seforim written on the topic, explaining in great detail how to properly and faithfully observe each and every law. The stores take Terumot v'Ma'aserot, and those who are uncertain take it a second time, either out of doubt or just to be stringent.

Furthermore, there are several Va'ad HaKashrut established in Eretz Yisroel who affix their stamps of approval, complete with details as to the level of kashrut on products that observe all the appropriate laws related to the land. Orlah? Not a problem. Terumot and Ma'aserot? Already taken.

What about Challah? That was taken too. Shmittah problems? None, since this manufacturer observes the laws of Shmittah, not even relying upon "Heter Mechirah" to avoid the issue.

Dangerous to travel here? Parents send their children to learn in yeshivot and seminaries all year round, and visit them a couple times a year. Problems with mitzvot talui b'aretz? Only if you go out of your way to make such problems for yourself and others. Rabbeinu Chaim? If he were alive today, he'd be living in Eretz Yisroel for sure. A mitzvah? It all depends upon which one you're talking about.

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

G-d told Moshe, "Send men to spy the land of Canaan which I will give to the Children of Israel. From every paternal tribe send one man; one prince from among them." (Bamidbar 13:1-2)

The episode of the Spies is one of the most dramatic in Jewish history, since it was THE turning point that left us stranded in exile until this very day. Yes, eventually we went into the land and even built the temple. However, none of that was permanent, so in a sense, we never really "took" the land, but rather have "borrowed" it several times until Moshiach finally comes and completes the deal between G-d and the Jewish people.

Being such an important turning point in Jewish history, it is dealt with by many commentators until this very day, all of them trying to offer some new insight that was never brought out before. You would think that there wouldn't be anything new to come up with after the first 1,000 years, as how many ways can a single event be explained and still remain true to its most obvious meaning? However, sometimes insights only become apparent after the passage of time, after history reveals things about man and his world that were hidden from previous generations.

Nevertheless, one thing is for certain: the Spies did a very evil thing. They deliberately came back and gave a damaging report about Eretz Yisroel, totally intimidating the people waiting for them back in the camp, causing them to lose hope and heart about making aliyah. As a result, the people refused to go, cried all night about it, which gave birth to the disastrous day now called "Tisha B'Av." The spies did a big evil!

However, before distancing ourselves from the Spies, as if to say, "We'd never have done what they did if we had been there," we ought to consider the following so that we can realize that not only would we have done what they did, but that we are doing it again in our own generation! As they say, "history repeats".

To begin with, let's consider who sent them: Moshe Rabbeinu. Had Moshe Rabbeinu not wanted to enter Eretz Yisroel, we can assume that he chose Spies based upon their own lack of desire to make aliyah as well. This would have guaranteed exactly the kind of crooked message he would have needed to convince the people to not want to make aliyah as well.

However, as we see in Parashat VaEtchanan, more than anything, Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to bring the people into Eretz Yisroel, so it is safe to assume that whomever he hand-picked for such a

sensitive and crucial mission, were men on a level high enough to increase the chance of bringing back a positive and encouraging report.

And, yet they didn't. How could this have happened?

Furthermore, why was the punishment for the rejection of Eretz Yisroel so severe? Had the Jewish people broken a mitzvah? Not yet, since they had yet to be commanded to cross the border and enter the land. They had fears and doubts by the Red Sea, and yet G-d was patient with them there and saved them anyhow. So, why didn't He just tell them now, "Yeah, yeah, but I'm not telling you to go into the land now, just to spy it out. A lot can happen in three days time to make it easier for you to take the land. So, in the meantime, keep your loshon hara to yourself and just sit tight."

Not only did G-d not respond in a patient matter, but His response suggested that, whatever the generation of the Spies did, it interfered with history in a big way, it undermined the entire reason for having destroyed Egypt on their behalf, and for bringing them to the land. After all, the posuk from this week's parshah does say:

"I am G-d, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be a G-d to you." (Vayikra 25:38)

Interesting how the posuk seems to make the actual giving of Eretz Yisroel a prerequisite for G-d to become OUR G-d. Perhaps this is what G-d was hinting to when He inserted the words, "the land of Canaan which I will GIVE to the Children of Israel" in the directive to the Spies. And, you can't give something if there is no one on the receiving end.

MELAVE MALKAH:

If you will say, "What will we eat in the seventh year? We may not sow nor gather in our harvest!" I will direct My blessing towards you in the sixth year, and it will cause a bumper crop... (Vayikra 25:20)

If the Spies were such great men, how could they commit what seems to us to be "suicide" by having rejected Eretz Yisroel right to G-d's face so to speak? The answer is, they thought it was a mitzvah to do so. That's right, a mitzvah. Indeed, such a mitzvah that they had expected G-d to agree with them, which is why they were so shocked when He not only didn't agree, but took them to task for even thinking such a thing.

The question is, which mitzvah did they think it was?

The answer is, which mitzvah do you want to talk about?

Talmud Torah? It was non-stop in the desert. Shabbat? With a double portion of manna falling each Erev Shabbat; Shabbat was Heavenly. Family Purity? With personal hygiene being supernatural, there were no such issues, especially with the Be'er Miriam following them everywhere they went in the desert. Kashrut was simply no issue at all (Heaven was the caterer, and Moshe Rabbeinu was the mashgiach). There was certainly no issue of orlah, or terumah, or shmittah to worry about while

traveling around the desert!

However, in Eretz Yisroel with the conquering of the land being an issue, and the setting up of an infrastructure after victory a concern, when would there be time to learn, at least consistently? Kashrut? Certainly, an issue 30 days after entering the land after the manna runs out, and we had to turn to the land for food. All of a sudden, after entering Eretz Yisroel, a Jew had to work hard to keep Torah in all its details, which made the possibility of error, and therefore punishment, much greater. Why enter a land under the threat of exile?

To answer this question, we have to go back to the basics of Judaism, and the reason for Creation in the first place:

G-d's purpose in Creation was to bestow of His good to another... Since G-d desired to bestow good, a partial good would not be sufficient. The good that He bestows would have to be the ultimate good that His handiwork could accept. G-d alone, however, is the only true good, and therefore His beneficent desire would not be satisfied unless it could bestow that very good, namely the true perfect good that exists in His intrinsic nature... His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of His true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible. For the intended purpose to be successfully achieved, the means must exist through which this creature can earn perfection. Man was therefore created with both a yetzer hatov and a yetzer hara. He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires... [Therefore,] the Highest Wisdom decreed that man should consist of two opposites. These are his pure spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body. Each one is drawn toward its nature, so that the body inclines toward the material, while the soul leans toward the spiritual. The two are then in a constant state of battle. (Derech Hashem 1:2:1-1:3:2)

With this, I can conclude this week's parshah sheet, because the Ramchal has thoroughly answered our question. It's all about giving, about G-d's giving, which has to be the most perfect giving that we, mankind, can receive. And, that greatest good is G-d Himself, which can only be received by people who earn the right to be attached to Him, the most effective word here being "earn", something that can only really be done, in the full sense of the idea, in Eretz Yisroel.

Why? The Torah answers this question as well in this week's parshah:

The land will yield her produce, and you will eat your fill, and live there in security. If you will say, "What will we eat in the seventh year? We may not sow nor gather in our harvest!" I will direct My blessing towards you in the sixth year, and it will cause a bumper crop... (Vayikra 25:19-20)

And, then we can truly know what it means to live "yaish m'Ayin" (something from nothing), or more accurately, from "Ayin", one of the most sublime levels of Hashgachah Pratit (Divine Providence) that man can know. This is the true and ultimate level of Eretz Yisroel, but as a result of our own efforts and sacrifices, not as a free gift in the desert. And that is the greatest and most perfect gift of all, as the Ramchal has explained, that G-d could ever give to the Jewish people. Are you there to receive

it? C-H-A-Z-A-K!

Have a great Shabbat,

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Text

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