

THE REST OF THE NATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When you come into the land which I will give to you, The land will have to rest; it is a rest to God. (Vayikra 25:2)

It's not often that *Parashas Behar* comes by itself as it does this year, at least for those of us living in *Eretz Yisroel*. Thanks to the eighth day of Pesach being on Shabbos this year for Diaspora Jews, *Behar* and *Bechukosai* come together next week when we all finally get to the same page.

It's also only once in seven years that we read *Parashas Behar* during a *Shmittah* year, also only relevant in *Eretz Yisroel*. This is a good time to discuss it again, and not just because it is the first *mitzvah* in the *parshah*. A better reason is that it is such an all-encompassing *mitzvah* that is also a key to the Final Redemption. It has a lot to say about the situation today and will with each passing day.

We know that the Jewish people were exiled to Babylonia for 70 years because that is the amount of *Shmittah* cycles they failed to keep (*Vayikra* 25:18). This was more than just measure-for-measure. This was a Divine statement about the level to which the Jewish people fell, as the Torah states and Rashi explains. First the Torah says:

So I said to you, "You shall possess their land, and I shall give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am God your God, Who has distinguished you from the peoples." (Vayikra 20:24)

Then it states:

And you shall distinguish between clean animals and unclean ones, and between unclean birds and clean ones; thus you shall not make yourselves disgusting through [unclean] animals and birds and any [creature] which crawls on the earth, that I have distinguished for you to render unclean. And you shall be holy to Me, for I, God, am holy, and I have distinguished you from the peoples, to be Mine. (Vayikra 20:25-26)

which Rashi explains as follows:

And I have distinguished you from the peoples, to be Mine: If you are separated from them [through your observance of Torah], you will be Mine, but if not, you will belong to Nebuchadnezzar and his allies. (*Rashi*)

What does one have to do with the other? How do we know that exile is the response for not living

separate from the nations of the world? Because the verse, just prior to the one about being distinguished from other nations, talks about the Land of Israel as gift to the Jewish people from God, to live as a separate nation.

Therefore it follows, if the Jewish people decide to live like the nations of the rest of the world then they do not need a separate land. If they choose to "integrate" with the "family of nations" then, God says, let them go out and live among them, and see just how separate they really are. If the Jewish people do not appreciate their uniqueness as a people, they will once they try to assimilate among the other nations.

I know that the essence of the Jewish people is Torah and *mitzvos*. I am aware that the Jewish people are first and foremost a Torah nation, wherever they may be in the world. I am well aware of the belief that *Eretz Yisroel* only makes that easier, not possible. I have seen how for many living in *Eretz Yisroel* is only icing on the cake, so-to-speak, but not the cake itself.

I also know that the Torah says:

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

I know how the Talmud uses this verse and others to conclude that God is only truly our God when we live on the Land (*Kesuvos* 110b). And this was written by rabbis who lived in the Diaspora at the time, in Bavel, one of the holier Diasporas of Jewish history.

I have seen the Rashi that says that the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, does not dwell in the Diaspora (*Moed Katan* 25b), where he himself lived. He did not distinguish between Temple and non-Temple times because the Diaspora is the Diaspora at all times. The *Shechinah* may go into exile with the Jewish people, but it won't dwell there with them.

What's the difference? I compare it to going on speaking trips which I used to do. Basically, it was life out of a suitcase for a couple of weeks, even when I stopped in Toronto and stayed with my parents. You never really get a chance to settle down, nor do you want to since you know the time will come when you have to pack it all up again and move on.

That was the part about vacations I used to not enjoy. I would start one knowing that with in a week or so I'd have to pack up and leave. So the first thing I would do upon arriving is unpack my things into drawers to at least give me the impression that I was settling in for a while.

That was harder to do on speaking trips since I often only stayed for a couple of days in each place. Even though I was there I never actually felt as if I was there. I was unsettled the entire time, even when I relaxed and enjoyed myself. It was the nature of the experience of being "on the road," and it affects the way you live while on it.

Likewise, the *Shechinah* is constantly on the move in the Diaspora even when we're there for long

periods of time. It never settles down, and remains ready to leave at a moment's notice, the way we're supposed to. Otherwise we sink roots into foreign lands and "planting" ourselves there, we become part of the soil, so-to-speak, even when still living by Torah and *mitzvos*.

This is why even if there is a *halachic* basis to remain in the Diaspora, it is not the reason why many Diaspora Jews do not want to leave. The *halachah* is just the "shield" many hide behind when justifying their innate attachment to foreign lands, for whatever the reason. First their hearts tell them to stay, then their minds use *halachah* to rationalize why they are not wrong for feeling that way.

There is a reason why the Talmud says that is better for a Jew to live in *Eretz Yisroel* in a community that is mostly gentile than to live in the Diaspora in one that is mostly Jewish, as in Torah observant (*Kesuvos* 110b). Support for one's lifestyle does not only come from those around us, but also from that which is below and above us. As the Talmud states, even the air of *Eretz Yisroel* makes one wise (*Bava Basra* 158b).

The long and short of this is that *Eretz Yisroel* is not just the homeland of the Jewish people. It is the land that allows the Jewish people to be the Jewish people. It is a unique land meant for a unique people, and it remains their unique land as long as the Jewish people remained a unique people. This uniqueness is something that can only be defined by the Torah itself.

Shmittah helps with this. There is no *mitzvah* to leave land fallow once every seven years in the Diaspora, even though *bitachon* and *emunah*—trust and faith—is a *mitzvah* incumbent on a Jew no matter where he lives in the world. Shabbos is applicable to all Jews at all times and in all places. Why shouldn't the Shabbos of the land be as well?

The answer is because *Shmittah* is not only about letting the land rest and recalling that God is the Source of our livelihood. It is also a message that reminds the Jewish people of their uniqueness and need to remain separate from the rest of the nations of the world. Ironically, this is a message that applies also, and maybe even more so, to Jews living in the Diaspora even when they cannot actually perform the *mitzvah* itself.

The Torah speaks about how God took us out from Egypt as one nation from the midst of another nation. The holiday is called "Pesach" because God had to pass over the houses of the Jews while killing the firstborn of Egypt. This was obviously because we had become integrated among the Egyptians over time, necessitating separation.

The process is often compared to the smelting of silver. Extreme heat is used to extract the precious metal from the non-precious rock and impurities. Only once it has been separated out and purified can it be used effectively and polished to the point of shiny brilliance. The Jewish people are no different, and if we do not "smelt" ourselves then history and Divine Providence will do it for us, vis-a-vis Nebuchadnezzar and his allies.

This is why *Shmittah* is not only a rest, but a rest to God. It is not like Shabbos itself during which God

Himself ceased "working." It is like Shabbos inasmuch as the rest helps to return a Jew back to God. It is not a time for spacing out, but a time to increase one's learning of Torah and spiritual growth to return to God in ways, that he cannot during the six working days, and the six working years.

I have spoken in the past about the process of "*birur*." It means "separation," or "selection," and it is the Kabbalist explanation for the process of history. For many life just seems like a journey and survival is a matter of overcoming the obstacles that "pop up" along the way. From a Kabbalistic point of view, these obstacles pop up to test us, to force us to decide our directions in life, to prove who we are, what we believe, and where we are going in life.

There is nothing random about it. God orchestrates all of it. He custom designs the events of our lives, as interconnected and intricate as they may be. He is the Master Maestro, and whether we act alone or with others it is to test our spiritual mettle, and to see how and if we fit into Jewish history. It is too difficult to comprehend how it is true, which is why faith is necessary to believe it.

This is why the *mitzvah* of Shmittah more than most other *mitzvos* is particularly associated with the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai, as the *parshah* begins. It embodies a very deep message about the fabric of a Jew and what he must do to maintain it. This is true whether he or she actually lives in the Diaspora, or in *Eretz Yisroel* with a Diaspora mentality.

We have plenty of such Jews living here in *Eretz Yisroel*. Rather than embrace the uniqueness of the Jewish people they work vociferously to erase it. They dream of being no different from the rest of the world's population and despise those who interfere with their transition. They even stab their own people in the back, politically speaking, endangering them, physically speaking.

That won't be for much longer though. It is clear from the direction of history that things will occur, historical events of one nature or another, that will either sever them from the Jewish nation or compel them to do *teshuvah* and rejoin it. Why wait? Now is the time to do it and reap the spiritual and physical benefits of having done so.

Text

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