

THE WANDERING JEW

by Rabbi Berel Wein

God begins Avraham's career as the father of the Jewish people by commanding him to be a wanderer. In this, He heralds the future of the Jewish people. It has been for millennia that the appellation for the people of Israel is "the wandering Jew." Avraham will leave his home in Mesopotamia and head for the Land of Canaan. Then, he will travel to Egypt and then once again return to the land of Canaan. In that holy land, Avraham will wander from Chevron to Beersheva to the Philistine coast and to the Mountain of Moriah. He apparently does not stay put for any permanent stay, always moving or ready to move. What is the lesson of this wandering state of Avraham and of his descendants throughout the ages? Why, even when the Jew has seemingly struck deep roots in a country and its society, is there always a storm that pushes the Jew on to a new home and a different Land? In our century, Jewish Europe was decimated and almost completely destroyed. The Jewish wanderer has now settled mainly in North America and in Israel. Are these more or less permanent homes for us or are they also only temporary havens (God forbid)? Why was it the Jewish fate to be the wanderers of the world?

The commentaries to the Bible have dealt with this problem of wandering in Jewish history. The idea of wandering has been represented in terms of punishment for the sins of Israel; in terms of spreading Godliness and Torah ideas through out the world; and in terms of collecting spiritual souls that are scattered throughout the world and allowing them to become part of the eternal people of Israel. Other philosophical answers have also been advanced throughout the ages of Jewish scholarship. I am fascinated however by an insight mentioned by the great men of Mussar based upon the words of Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman in his commentary to the beginning of the book of Bereshit. Their view is that the torah comes to teach us that all mankind, each and every one of us, is a wanderer. When Adam and Chava sin they are sent wandering from the paradise of Eden. When Kayin murders his brother he becomes a wanderer. When the brothers sell Yosef as a slave, they become wanderers. Yakov wanders to Aram and the house of Lavan. We are all wanderers. There is no permanence to any aspect of human life. The only permanence in the world is that God orchestrates man's fate according to man's behavior and actions. It is this realization of God's omnipotence and omniscience and man's impermanence and wanderings that Avraham is the first human to truly appreciate and that sets him apart and allows him to be the founder of the people of Israel.

The wanderings of Israel, which logically should have led long ago to our demise, instead served as the main lesson of Israel to the world. Namely, that the world belongs to God and not to man, and

that man makes a grave error by assuming his permanence and security. The events of history constantly buffet and blindside us. Events always mock our assumptions and certainties. We are all wanderers in God's world. The echo of "lech lecha" can always be heard in the ears of our soul and deepest being. Then we are able to hear God's voice that speaks to us and we no longer need fear our status as wanderers in His world. Avraham travels the known world of civilization of his time, but he is not a lonely wanderer for he hears the heavenly voice within him that drives him. Avraham is not afraid of his impermanence, he is however well aware of it. The Jewish people throughout its history has been profoundly affected by its impermanence but it has remained the eternal people precisely because it appreciates God's control and man's wanderings. The Midrash tells us that God told Avraham to go forth "for your good and your benefit." That message has not changed in the 3500 years since Avraham left his home to find his destiny and shape all future human civilization.

Shabat Shalom.

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