

RETURNING HOME TO OUR LAND

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha describes the two very different situations in Jewish life that have been present throughout our long history as a people. One situation is when we inhabited and controlled our own land - the Land of Israel. That is clearly indicated in the opening words of the parsha - *ki tavo* - when you will come into your land. The second much more difficult situation is outlined again in the parsha in the bitter, lengthy and detailed description of the lot of the Jewish people in exile, scattered amongst hostile nations and violent hatreds.

Over the many millennia of the Jewish story, we have been in exile far longer than we were at home in the Land of Israel. It is significant that the recounting of the troubles and persecutions of the exile of Israel from its land occupies greater space (and perhaps even greater notice) in the parsha than does the section relating to our living in the Land of Israel.

The Land of Israel carried with it special commandments and rituals as described in the parsha such as various types of 'maaser' - tithing - and 'bikurim' - the first fruits of the agricultural year. The description of the exile posed problems of demographic extinction and continued tension, fear and a constant state of uncertainty. In the words of the parsha itself, the conditions of the exile were capable of driving people into insanity and fostered hopelessness.

Yet the strange, almost unfathomable result was that the Jewish people survived, created and at times even thrived under the conditions of the exile, while our record as a national entity living in our own country was much spottier. Jews are a special people but our behavior is oftentimes strange and counterproductive. We don't seem to deal too well with success and stability.

By the grace of God we are once again back in our lands. After seeing the words of the parsha, in all of its terror fulfilled, literally, seventy years ago, we have nevertheless restored our national sovereignty, built a wonderful country and an intriguing society, and are engaged in facing great challenges as to our future development here in the Land of Israel.

We would indeed be wise to remember why we failed in the past in our nation building and why, paradoxically, we succeeded in achieving major successes while in exile and under very negative circumstances. Straying from the path of Torah and tradition has always brought us to harm. Adopting foreign cultures and fads that are temporarily popular and extolled is not the way to fulfillment of our national interest and purpose.

Our historical experiences both in the Land of Israel and in the exile have taught us this clear lesson.

It would be foolhardy in the extreme to repeat these errors once more. Coming into our land carries with it the challenges of living in holiness and having a special relationship with our Creator. Our efforts should be concentrated in strengthening and broadening that relationship. It may be wise for us to discard the bath water of the exile now that we have returned home. But we must preserve at all costs the baby - the Torah and its values - that has brought us home to the land that the Lord has promised to us.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com