

YAAKOV AND THE LAND OF CANAAN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah parsha begins with the simple narrative statement that Yaakov settled and "dwelled in the land of the sojourn of his forefathers, the Land of Canaan." That last clause in that sentence - the Land of Canaan - seems to be superfluous. We are already well aware from the previous parshiyot of Bereshith that Avraham and Yitzchak dwelt in the Land of Canaan. Since every word and phrase in the Torah demands our attention and study, the commentators to Torah throughout the ages examined this issue and proposed a number of different lessons and insights.

I believe that the lessons for our time from these words that open our parsha are eerily relevant. Yaakov is forced to live in a hostile environment. The story of the assault on Dina and the subsequent violence and bloodshed between Yaakov's family and the Canaanites serves as the backdrop to this type of life that living in the Land of Canaan entails.

Yaakov is living in a bad neighborhood, amongst many who wish him and his family ill. He is forced to rely on the sword of Shimon and Levi to survive but that is not to his liking or ultimate life purpose. The Land of Canaan is not hospitable to him and his worldview.

The Philistine kings who wished to kidnap and enslave his mother and grandmother are still around or at least their cloned successors are. At the funeral of his father at the Cave of Machpela he must have ruefully mused as to how his grandfather was forced to pay such an exorbitant price for a burial plot.

The Land of Canaan had many unpleasant associations connected to it for Yaakov to contemplate: a king's ransom to Eisav, a rock for a pillow, and crippling encounters with an anonymous foe. All of this and more was his lot in the Land of Canaan.

So what is Yaakov's stubborn attachment to living in the Land of Canaan? Why does he believe that he will be able to eventually dwell there in serenity and security? The answer to these issues is that he realized that this was the land of his ancestors and that the Lord had entered into a covenant with them to grant them that land.

Now it could be that it is called the Land of Canaan but eternally it would be called after his name, the Land of Israel. The land would know many populations and rulers but that would never change its eternal nature of being the Land of Israel. The land is home for Yaakov - the land of his past and his future. It is what binds him to his great ancestral heritage and mission - and he will demand to be buried there as well.

Yaakov overlooks the difficulties and challenges inherent in the Land of Canaan because he lives not only in its geographic confines but rather in the ideal land of his forefathers - in a land of Godly revelation and holy purpose. Yaakov will undergo much more pain and suffering in the Land of Canaan before he returns there in final tranquility. But his descendants, the Jewish people will always know it to be the land of their fathers, the Land of Israel.

Shabat shalom

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