

KOHANIM AND THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The emphasis that the Torah places on the location - Mount Sinai - where Moshe received the Torah and its commandments, and the particular commandment regarding the observance of a sabbatical year, has been an issue of much interest to the commentators on the Torah over the ages. Rashi, quoting the famous rabbinic dictum, states that the words "Mount Sinai" indicate to us that just as this particular commandment of the sabbatical year was taught to Moshe on Mount Sinai so too are we to understand that all of the commandments of Judaism emanate from the revelation at Mount Sinai.

But perhaps there is another nuanced lesson here in the mentioning of Mount Sinai, as being the location where this commandment regarding the sabbatical year was first uttered and delivered. The Sinai desert is one of the most barren and inhospitable geographic areas on our globe. The Torah itself describes it as a great, awesome and frightening place, parched of water and short of sustenance, a place of snakes and scorpions.

To speak of a sabbatical year in this context, where and when fields and crops are not to be tended to, seems at first glance to be incongruous, to say the least. We could understand the statement of such a commandment when the Jewish people stood on the brink of entering the Land of Israel or, even more so, when they actually entered the land.

Hearing the command of letting one's fields lie fallow for a year while living in a trackless and arid desert certainly seems to be strange. But the Torah, which is eternal and not bound by time or place, comes to teach us an important lesson regarding life generally and Jewish life particularly.

I had a friend and congregant of mine during my years as a rabbi in Miami Beach fifty years ago. He was a Holocaust survivor, a man of material wealth and clever intellect. He once told me that he was a very wealthy man in Hungary before World War II. In the very late 1930s he visited the Land of Israel and on a whim purchased an apartment here in Jerusalem.

In late summer 1944, together with hundreds of thousands of other Hungarian Jews, he and his family were deported to Auschwitz. His family could not survive the ordeal, though somehow he did remain alive, and eventually he rebuilt his life and once again created a family and material success in America.

He told me that every night in the barracks of the labor camp, to which he was assigned, lying on the wooden pallet that served as his bed, in his mind he furnished the apartment that he purchased in Jerusalem. In his mind, he bought the finest furniture and wall coverings and arranged them so that

the apartment shone in splendor, good taste and elegance.

He said it was this imaginary scene of the better tomorrow that kept him alive and gave him the spiritual and mental fortitude not to give up completely and just pass away, as unfortunately so many others did. To survive the desert of Sinai the Jewish people had to imagine the lush fields of the Land of Israel and a sabbatical year that would bring blessing and prosperity upon those fields and their owners.

The Torah emphasizes to us that the sabbatical year was commanded to Israel in a forbidding and dark place because of the fact that it would give hope, optimism and vision for the great blessings of the Land of Israel that they would yet live to experience.

Shabbat 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