

REACHING GREATNESS: LIVING IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Relocating one's self is a challenging task at any age. Doing so in the later stages of life is doubly challenging. It is no wonder that the rabbis of the Mishnah characterized our father Avraham's move from Mesopotamia to the Land of Israel as being one of the ten major tests of his turbulent life. Leaving all that is familiar and attempting to integrate one's self in a new and strange environment is a very taxing experience.

We are all aware of the immigrant experience of our forebears, whether in Western countries or here in the State of Israel. The language is different, the streets are unfamiliar, the customs and mores of everyday life are foreign to us and one has a feeling of being a permanent alien.

Avraham himself expresses this feeling when, after decades of successful living and earning the respect of the local population, he describes himself as a mere stranger and a sojourner in their midst. He is not native born, he speaks the language with an accent and though his inner spiritual self tells him that this place - the Land of Israel - is his God-given true home, he nevertheless feels the angst of being considered a stranger in a strange land.

Avraham becomes the prototype for Jewish existence throughout the millennia. And even when returning home to the Land of Israel, it has taken generations for Jews to fully realize that they are finally home and are no longer strangers or aliens in someone else's country.

If Avraham been born in the Land of Israel, perhaps all of Jewish and human history would have been different. But the Torah itself describes Avraham as a wandering Aramean and so he remains throughout Jewish tradition and Torah commentary.

The Lord, in telling Avraham to leave his home, does not specify the exact location where he is now allowed to reside. God promises him that He will yet show him the new place. Avraham instinctively travels to the Land of Israel and it is there and only then that God confirms that this is to be not only his place of residence but the eternal home of the Jewish people.

There is an inner drive of holiness within human beings that brings them to come to the Land of Israel. Whereas it was persecution and the absence of other options that brought hundreds of thousands of Jews to settle in the Land of Israel in the twentieth century, the overwhelming trend of new immigration to our country today is by choice. The inner drive of connection to our homeland - to our past and future at one and the same time - is the driving force of the recent increased immigration of Jews to the State of Israel.

The rabbis taught us that Avraham's personal greatness could only be realized in the Land of Israel. The truth be said, the development and fulfillment of the greatness of the Jewish people apparently is also contingent upon their living in the Land of Israel. As such, we have only to emulate our father Avraham, in his attitude, fortitude and love for the land that spoke to his soul and guaranteed his eternity.

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