

PARSHAS HAAZINU - LOCATION IS NOT EVERYTHING

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Location is Not Everything¹

For Hashem's portion is His people; Yaakov is the measure of His inheritance.

Nations, we suppose, are products of people living alongside each other long enough to develop bonds of language, history and culture. Location is said to be important in other applications, but it is all the more so in regard to the formation of large identity-groups that persist for generations. This is because location is more than the backdrop against which developments bring people together. Geographical proximity is an active agent in creating shared identity. The nature of the land - its resources, its terrain, its location in relationship to other peoples - leaves a deep imprint upon the common identity, as river people, desert people, and mountain people each dealt with the challenges of their environs in different ways. Agrarian societies grouped together people who shared the rough soil under the fingernails; other societies to this day see that soil as part of their legacy, if only in a figurative sense.

No factor was as important in creating the sense of us-versus-them than the sharing of territory, and protecting it against the usurper. Even ancient religion - whose modern forms have succeeded equally well in pitting nation against nation, and culture against culture - was imprinted deeply by territory. Those peoples addressed the different challenges they faced by identifying deities who presided over the solutions to their problems, and paying homage to them.

One nation broke this mold. Klal Yisrael became a nation in a territorial vacuum. It was born in foreign lands, and nurtured in a wilderness. It was only allowed to take possession of its land after it had matured, blossomed and developed. Klal Yisrael was allowed its place on earth after it had achieved all that other nations accomplished because of their land. Klal Yisrael was to impose itself upon its land, to further its already-articulated mission, rather than have the land form it. (Indeed, many of the other tasks of building up the land were left to caretaker peoples, who would occupy the land and ready it for the entrance of the Jewish people at the time Hashem saw as appropriate.)

Why? Because "Hashem's portion is His people." Klal Yisrael and HKBH are linked and bonded as geography is wedded to other peoples. Yisrael is His portion, as it were - and He is ours. What shared space is to others, focus upon Hashem must be to us. The sole factors that are to shape our culture are the mission statements of our people as articulated in the Torah. Our instructions are to take a bundle of social, economic, and moral values - all flowing directly from the Torah - into the

land, and apply them there.

The importance of landlessness is reflected in the name Hashem assigns us in this pasuk. We are not called Yisrael here, but Yaakov. "Yaakov is the measure of His inheritance." Yaakov lived his life "grabbing on the heel" of another. He did not have his own land, and depended on others for sustenance and even survival. He brought to the challenges of life neither power nor special skill - other than the one that mattered most: complete confidence in Hashem.

For close to two millennia, his children followed Yaakov's lead. They were left unskilled, untrained, and destitute. With no place of their own, they had neither power nor basic security. Because of this, they were spurned and derided by the nations with which they interacted - even though their abject poverty and all it brought with it was engineered by those same nations.

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Klal Yisrael became Hashem's portion. While other nations had no need for Him, or served Him bizarrely or superficially, Am Yisrael remained focused on its mission of taking G-d's presence seriously.

We had nothing. Because of this, we had everything.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 32:9
