

## ***Praying with my back to the mountains***

Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

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The view from our seventh floor hotel room in Denver was spectacular. Beyond the rooftops and parking garages adjacent to the hotel, the majestic Rocky Mountain range was so clearly visible. We were in Denver last weekend for my nephew Avi's bar mitzvah, and although it was the end of April, there was a full blown snowstorm on Friday night. The trees and mountain tops were still glistening with snow as I pulled open the shades on Sunday morning. As I put on my tallit and tefillin to recite the morning prayers before going to the farewell brunch, I thought, what could be a more inspiring, exalting view than this? We literally say in the early morning psalms:

*Ha'notein sheleg ka'tzamer, k'for k'eifer yifazer, God's word sends snow white as wool, scattering frost as thick as ash.*<sup>1</sup> I was looking at a beautiful blanket of snow and frost covered roads and treetops!

We say:

*He'harim v'chol geva'ot, etz peri ve'chol arazim...mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars all praise God's glory.*<sup>2</sup>

And I was looking out the window at mountains and hills and aspens and pines and spruces...

A great view, beautiful scenery, a gorgeous sanctuary for that matter, can really have a positive effect on your davening! It can really enhance your *kavannah*...your sense of spirituality and focus. I sort of blissfully continued reciting my morning prayers, my eyes darting between the pages of the siddur and the glorious vista in front of me. But then as I came to the *Amidah*, it occurred to me that I had actually been facing west instead of east. As I was drinking in all that beauty, my *back* had been toward *Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim, the Kotel*. I had a momentary crisis...I began to rationalize, 'just this one time God would surely understand if I faced west instead of east, in order to continue to gaze at what after all was God's glorious creation!' 'How often,' I argued with myself, 'do I get to daven before the largest mountain range in North America! It would be a *shonda* to turn away from it!' But something, perhaps it was God, perhaps it was the tug of the unbreakable cords that connect my Zionist heart with the land of Israel, something turned my body around to face the second-rate framed artwork on the wall of my Doubletree hotel room, rather than those spectacular views of mountains and nature. I took three steps back, then three steps forward and began the *Amidah*, facing Jerusalem, about 7,000 miles to the east of where I stood.

It is so easy for us to take for granted the existence of the third Jewish commonwealth in the land of Israel. For anyone younger than 75, Israel has existed as a Jewish state for our entire lives. We have never known a world without a Jewish state! For those 75 or older, you know there are so many other countries that are much newer than the State of Israel: like Armenia, Bosnia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Eritrea, Kosovo, Serbia, Slovakia, S. Sudan, not to mention the re-unified Germany or Yemen of the former Soviet republics...to name a few. Although it's only been 75 years since Israel's declaration of independence, it's hardly the youngest sovereign nation on the map. So we are lulled into thinking it's

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 147

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 148

been there all along, and that it will be there forever. It seems inconceivable that for nearly 2,000 years—over 100 generations of Jews existed in this world without a Jewish nation. While we can hop on a direct flight from Dulles to Tel Aviv three times a week, for most of those 100 generations it was impractical and probably impossible to travel from wherever they lived to the land of Israel. It was the stuff of dreams...it was the poetry of prayers, the stories of the Bible, the aspirations at the end of Passover seders and Yom Kippur fasts, but that was it. How did our ancestors preserve this undying ambition, this hope to someday return to that land? Well, one way was that wherever they were in the world, when Jews rose to pray, whether three times a day or three times a year, it was always in the direction of Jerusalem. The needle of the Jewish compass always pointed toward *Eretz Yisrael*; a constant reminder of where we came from, and where we hoped to be going. Perhaps this is why the Shulchan Aruch, the great code of Jewish law states:

*B'komo lehit'palel, im haya omeid ba'chutz la'aretz, yachazor panav keneged Eretz Yisrael...* When one gets up to pray, if that person is in the Diaspora, their face should turn toward the land of Israel.

*Vayichavein gam liyerushalayim, u'lemikdash, u'veit kodshei ha'kodsahim...* And one should also focus their heart on Jerusalem, and on the Temple, and on the Holy of Holies...<sup>3</sup>

By focusing our hearts and turning our faces toward *Eretz Yisrael ha'kodesh*, it remains firmly implanted in our souls. It even seems not so far off...when we regularly stand and face that place.

Ironically, the parasha this week, just days after we celebrated Yom Ha'atzmaut, is the first time in the Torah where the prospect of exile from the land is mentioned. The Jewish people haven't even entered the land of Israel yet, but the Torah wastes no time in informing them that this land grant was not unconditional. If you defile the land, the Torah warns, if you don't uphold the mitzvot and the values expected of you in this Torah, the land will "vomit" you out, just like the people before you who didn't merit to live on its holy soil...It's such striking language: the land throwing up and throwing out its inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish people dwelling in *Eretz Yisrael* is a privilege that must be earned and maintained. I think that certain ministers of the current government may want to study these passages very closely!

But lest we become too disillusioned or overwhelmed by the high stakes of Jews living in the land of Israel, the Haftarah, in the words of the prophet Amos,<sup>5</sup> has a reassuring message. Whatever happens, even exile, *bayom hahu*, someday, *v'shavti et shvut ami Yisrael*, I will restore My people Israel, *uvanu arim n'shamot vayashuvu*, and they shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them; *v'natu cheramim veshatu et yeinyam*, they will plant vineyards and drink their wine. *Ve'asu ganot ve'achlu et pri'hem*, and they will plant gardens and eat their fruits. *U'netatim al admatam ve'lo yinatshu od*, and I will plant them upon their soul, never to be uprooted again.

Is this the time period that the prophet is referring to? Has the long, dark night of exile finally ended? Are the rebuilt cities and sprawling metropolises of modern Israel what the prophet foresaw? And what about those vineyards and wines? Israel harvests 60,000 tons of wine grapes per year and produces 40 million bottles of wine on annual basis! Is that enough to fulfill the vision of Amos? Does this iteration of

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<sup>3</sup> Orach Chayim 94:1-2

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 18:28

<sup>5</sup> Amos 9:13-15

a Jewish homeland even count, so to speak, as it was established by people, many of them secular rather than by the *Mashiach* or overt supernatural intervention. Is this, as we say in the Grace After Meals, *reishit tzmichat ge'ulateinu*, the very beginning of the long process of national redemption?

No one can answer these questions for sure. I would like to hope that *lo yinatshu od*, that the promise of never uprooting the Jewish people again from our homeland is indeed fulfilled, now and forevermore. I would like to hope that the land does not suffer from any gag reflex that would eject the Jewish people from its midst...that our brothers and sisters would be morally deserving of this great gift of having returned to the land.

The story is told of Rabbi Dov Berish Weidenfeld, also known as the “Tshebimer Rav,” an illustrious Torah scholar from Galicia, now Ukraine. The Rabbi was so renowned that his picture appeared in *Der Sturmer*, the virulent Nazi propaganda tabloid, where he was marked, along with other Jewish leaders, for persecution. Miraculously, he slipped across the Russian border in 1940, but was quickly apprehended by Communist forces and sent to Siberia. Six years later he was able to make his way to Jerusalem, on Erev Pesach 1946. Many years later the Tshebimer Rav said that he was so happy living in Israel. That he missed nothing about living outside of the land...except for one thing! He said that before he was able to emigrate, he let a tremendous longing, a profound emotional pull to be in the homeland of the Jewish people. Now that he was home in Israel, he didn't feel those pangs, that yearning anymore. And he said that he actually missed those feelings. He never wanted to take for granted the incredible blessing of a Jew who was alive at a time when he could settle in the one and only Jewish country in the world.<sup>6</sup>

There are times, Sari will tell you, when I think to myself, ‘What am I doing in *chutz la'aretz*? How can I be living in the diaspora when there is a Jewish country in the world?! What am I doing? What will my descendants say about this decision I've made (at least so far) to not live there?!’ The truth is that we have a lot of legitimate reasons to be where we are right now. It's not so simple to pick up and move to Israel. We have jobs, and families, and people who rely on us here. It's expensive, it involves learning a different language, and on and on. I have reasons; you have reasons. Far be it from me to say that any of these reasons are illegitimate. But what we should all consider to be on the level of a mitzvah, a sacred obligation, is to feel the *ga'aguim*, the longing to be in Israel. Even if we can't or won't ever move there. We should feel the pull, the yearning, the loving desire to be there. For as long as the Jewish people have that longing, our connection to the land of Israel will never be severed.

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<sup>6</sup> I heard this story from Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb in his shiur “Sadness together with Simcha. Reflections on Yom Ha'Zikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut,” 4/25/23