

The Land of Israel's Loyalty to the Jewish People

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

As Parashat Behukotai and the book of Vayikra draw to a close, Hashem delivers a stinging rebuke and warning to our people. This rebuke, known as the Tochahah is the first of two such rebukes in the Humash (the second being towards the end of Sefer Devarim). This section contains a series of frighteningly prophetic descriptions of the tragedies that will befall the nation should they fail to follow God's ways. Indeed, so frightening is this Tochachah that Torah is read this section in a lower voice. There are even some synagogues where the rabbi or Torah reader is called for the Aliyah that contains the Tochachah, as some would rather avoid being called for this Aliyah.

In the midst of the very dark cloud of these warnings of punishment and exile in Parashat Behukotai we find a silver lining. The Torah promises (Vayikra 26:32) that after our people will be exiled from our land, our enemies will fail in their endeavors to settle the land. Ramban, writing in the twelfth century, notes that this is an extraordinary promise to us as there is no other place on earth that at one time was settled, lush and fertile but is now utterly desolate and destroyed. He observes that this promise has most obviously been fulfilled in that from the time we left our land, it has not accepted any other nation, despite their many efforts to develop the land. Indeed, the Romans, Arabs, Crusaders and Ottomans failed miserably in their efforts to settle the land of Israel. It ranked among the poorest nations in the world until the return of the Jewish People to their land in large numbers beginning in the 1880's. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik so eloquently described this phenomenon as the Land of Israel remaining loyal to the Jewish People in their absence. It is as a wife remaining loyal to her husband while he is stranded abroad. The land itself enters into "sleep mode" when we leave the land, patiently waiting for us to return.

Ramban's comments reflect his assessment of the Land of Israel when he moved there in the late twelfth century. Years later in 1867 a well-known non-Jewish author made a similar observation regarding the Land of Israel. Mark Twain, recounting his adventures in the Middle East in his popular work *Innocents Abroad*, describes the land as follows:

"Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. Where Sodom and Gomorrah reared their domes and towers, that solemn sea now floods the plain, in whose bitter waters no living thing exists -- over whose waveless surface the blistering air hangs motionless and dead -- about whose borders nothing grows but weeds, and scattering tufts of cane, and that treacherous fruit that promises refreshment to parching lips, but turns to ashes at the touch. Nazareth is forlorn; about that ford of Jordan where the hosts of Israel entered the Promised Land with songs of rejoicing, one finds only a squalid camp of fantastic Bedouins of the desert; Jericho the accursed, lies a moldering ruin, today, even as Joshua's miracle left it more than three thousand years ago.... Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper

village; the riches of Solomon are no longer there to compel the admiration of visiting Oriental queens; the wonderful temple which was the pride and the glory of Israel, is gone. The noted Sea of Galilee, where Roman fleets once rode at anchor was long ago deserted by the devotees of war and commerce, and its borders are a silent wilderness; Capernaum is a shapeless ruin; Magdala is the home of beggared Arabs. Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? "

Mark Twain's visit was well timed as he came only a few years before Jews began to return to the land of Israel in large numbers and the land began once again to be productive and yield its fruit. Indeed, in reading Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren's outstanding work "Power, Faith and Fantasy" one learns of the many Americans who visited the land of Israel who made similar observations and encountered extraordinary difficulties and often death even when simply visiting the land.

By contrast, when visiting today's Israel and view a productive and beautiful land as it was in the time of the early prophets we should contemplate the Neis Nistar (subtle miracle) of our land which waited so patiently for us for nearly two thousand years and now gladly yields bountiful crops that are sold not only in Israel but worldwide as well. Upon hearing that economists are upgrading Israel from an emerging market to a developed market we should marvel of the transition in the past century and how we witness the promise of Leviticus 26:32 unfold before our eyes.

In Religious Zionist Synagogues in Israel and abroad, the prayer for the State of Israel is recited and describes the Land as the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. The breathtaking resurgence of the Land led Religious Zionist leaders such as Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook and many others already in the early twentieth century to conclude that a new era had begun where the downtrodden Jews will be revitalized along with their loyal land. The flourishing of the Jewish People on its land has likely exceeded Rav Kook's expectations with its burgeoning economy and a majority of the Jewish People living within its borders. May we merit the full redemption of the land and the realization of another even more glorious promise in this week's reading "And I will bring peace to the Land". Shabbat Shalom.