

## Why the Land of Israel?

In this week’s Torah portion, *Matot*, God speaks to Moses, saying:

וְהוֹרַשְׁתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּשְׁבֻתֶם־בָּהּ כִּי לָכֶם נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֹתָהּ:

And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land to you to possess. [Numbers 33:53]

Indeed, God made it abundantly clear He had destined the land of Israel for the Jews. He told Abraham:

Leave your native land and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you.... I give it to you and to your descendents... forever. [Genesis 12:1-3, 13:15-16]

God later confirms that promise to Abraham's son Isaac [Genesis 26:3] and then to Isaac's son Jacob [Genesis 28:13].

Why did God want his Promised Land to be the Land of Israel in particular?

After all, it was poor in natural resources. There was much better real estate in Egypt, which built its mighty civilization around the Nile valley, or in Mesopotamia, in the so-called Fertile Crescent, where Babylonia and Assyria built theirs around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Holy Land was and is water-poor. There, they relied on rain to survive. Even Moses warned the Israelites about that as they were about to enter:

For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come... [It] is a land of mountains and valleys. It is irrigated by the rain of the heaven. It is a land to which the Lord you God attends. His eyes are upon it constantly – from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. [Deut. 11:10-12]

Some of the Israelites were aware of that. They did not want to go there and preferred to settle on the east side of the Jordan River. In our Torah portion, we read:

The descendants of Reuben and Gad had an abundance of livestock ... and they saw that the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead were places for livestock... They [said to the leaders:] ... Let this land be given to [us and] do not take us across the Jordan...

Moses said “Shall your brothers go to war while you stay here?” Why do you discourage the children of Israel from crossing over to the land which the Lord has given them? This is what your fathers did [in the incident of the spies and God was angry and made us wander in the desert for forty years]... And behold, you have now risen in place of your fathers as a society of sinful people... If you turn away from following [God], He will leave you in the desert again, and you will destroy this entire people.”

They approached [Moses] and said, “We will build here pens for our livestock and cities for our children. We will then arm ourselves quickly [and go] before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place. Our children will reside in the fortified cities [... but] we shall not return to our homes until each of the children of Israel has taken possession of his inheritance. We will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on the east bank of the Jordan.”

Moses said to them, “If you do this... you shall be freed [of your obligation] from the Lord and from Israel and this land will become your heritage before the Lord.”  
[Numbers 32:1-22]

That is what was done in the end. The tribes of Gad and Reuben were given the land they wanted, on the east side of the Jordan, and they fulfilled their obligation to help the other Israelites settle.

But, comparatively speaking at least, Israel was not exactly “a land flowing with milk and honey”, [Ex. 3:8] as it is frequently described in the Torah. Droughts and famines frequently drove out its inhabitants, including all three patriarchs.

Later in history, we found out that the Land of Israel was also one of the rare places in the Middle East that did not have any oil!

Moreover, unlike the superpowers around it, the land was (and is) vulnerable. It is at the crossroads of three continents, which makes it a prime target for invasion and ensuing strife, as history has shown. Its borders are not easy to defend. Security there would forever be a problem. They would have to learn to live like... like... like a fiddler on the roof!

## **So what was God's thinking?**

**-Creating dependence.** Nachmanides writes that living in the Holy Land creates a strong dependence on God. He must provide the rain essential for survival, and will do so only if the Jews scrupulously observe the Torah.

The Land is therefore the testing ground for the Covenant. The Torah makes this explicit. Moses says:

Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For God's anger will flare up against you, shutting up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that God is assigning to you. [Deut. 11:16-17]

Judah Halevi, the famous 12<sup>th</sup>-century poet, writes in *The Kuzari*:

For if the Divine Presence is among you, you will perceive -- by the fertility of your country, by the regularity with which your rainfalls appear in their due seasons, by your victories over your enemies in spite of your inferior numbers -- that your affairs are not managed by simple laws of nature, but by the divine will.

The Jews could not take anything for granted in the Land. They had to look up at the sky, and not down at a river. Like the manna in the desert, their water came straight from the heavens.

However, note that a rain-based economy is not without its advantages. In Egypt, much manpower was needed to transport the water for irrigation. In Israel, this was not needed since God sent rain directly and gravity makes the water flow automatically from mountains to valleys, so it can grow food.

**-Special relationship.** God has a special relationship with this land.

Moses said:

It is a land to which the Lord your God attends. His eyes are upon it constantly -- from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. [Deut. 11:12]

The Midrash says:

[God started] building the world from the spot on which the Temple was to stand. [Numbers R. 12:4]

The Talmud even tells us that the entire Holy Land was created first:

The Sages taught: Eretz Yisrael was created first and the entire rest of the world was created afterwards. [Ta'anit 10a]

The Mishnah concludes flatly:

The land of Israel is holier than all other lands. [Kelim 1:6]

In the Torah, God incessantly "advertises" the Land, even as the Israelites had their doubts. The Midrash says:

The [Children of Israel] said: Perhaps we will not enter a land as beautiful as [Egypt]. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He said to them: The land that you are coming to inherit is superior to it. [Sifrei Devarim 37:1]

When the people seemed to accept the ten spies' negative report on the land, God punished them by making them wander forty years in the desert.

Moses echoes God's "advertisements":

For the Lord your God brings you into a good land, a land of water courses, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey; a land in which you shall eat bread without scarceness. You shall not lack any thing in it. [Deut. 8:7-9]

As Ben-Gurion once said, "We do not believe in miracles. We *rely* on them."

We do not understand why God was attracted to this land in particular.

**-Easier to conquer**, sparsely populated, weak and divided population -- unlike big empires.

**-Using hard work and brains.** The Jews will have to work hard in it, and use their brains to the utmost to survive. This will hone their skills and create a work ethic. Necessity is the mother of invention. Did the Land make us what we are today?

**-Staying peaceful.** Being surrounded by powerful empires, they would not be tempted to fight them, and would learn to value peace.

**-No temporal power.** They will be unlikely to have temporal power, which corrupts. As we read in Zechariah:

Not by might and not by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord. [Zechariah 4:6]

**-No empire.** They will be unlikely to be the seat of an empire, which leads to riches and ultimately decadence.

**-Creating community.** External threats create community.

**-Location.** Being at the crossroad of three continents encourages interaction with neighbors, trade, spreading message.

**-Not too numerous.** Being in a small area, they will be unable to grow too numerous, and will have to learn to ration resources wisely. They could never rely on numbers, but on skill.

**-Creating state of mind.** It's all in the state of mind. If it's drilled in your head that it's a good and beautiful land, you will see it as such and it will *become* so through your efforts.

Finally, did God command us to live in Israel? The matter is in dispute. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and parts of the tribe of Manasseh were allowed to settle right outside of it in biblical days. The answer is not clear because the Talmud does not list the 613 mitzvot, so there is no definitive list. The Rambam's list is the most often quoted and used. It does not include a commandment to live in Eretz Yisrael. But the Ramban's list does. Both sages acted on their beliefs. When the Rambam was forced out of Spain, he lived only very briefly in Israel, then moved to Egypt, did all his work there and died there. When the Ramban was forced out of Catalonia, he went directly to Israel and worked and died there.

We are certainly on the way to fulfill God's expectations. Israel has transformed a land left desolate by gentiles for 2000 years into a powerhouse of prosperity and ingenuity. The Lord sure works in mysterious ways!

Shabbat shalom.