

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #12—Parshat Reah 5761

"When God brings you to the Land which you are to occupy, you should declare the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curses upon Mount Ebal. They are...[near] Alon Moreh" (Shekhem/Nablus).
(Deuteronomy 11:29-30)

In God's Infinite Compassion upon me, I had the good fortune several times in my life to stand at the foot of these mountains, in the Samaria district of Israel. And a very interesting fact was brought to my attention. While one can see trees, grass and other vegetation on Mount Gerizim, Mount Ebal is barren! Apparently, this is because upon entering the Land, the Jews were commanded to place six tribes upon Mount Gerizim to symbolically accept the blessings for all of Israel that God will bestow upon us for observing the Torah. At the same time, the remaining six tribes stood upon Mount Ebal to symbolically accept the curses for all Israel, should the Jews fail to observe the Torah (see Deuteronomy 27). It was quite an experience, seeing first hand, the effects of blessings and curses of 3300 years.

And it taught me a very important lesson. A blessing is something that needs time to take root. Like vegetation, it must be "watered and nurtured," and only after a period of time, can one see the results of that blessing. Not so a curse. It is immediate. Instantaneous. And the results can last a long time. A very long time.

Dateline: Jerusalem, Thursday August 9, 2001, 2:00 PM: A Palestinian terrorist enters a pizza store packed with innocent men, women and children and blows himself to smithereens, murdering in cold blood 14 decent human beings, maiming and wounding over 130 others. Five members of one family, infants, elderly people, etc. are scattered lifeless in the center of Jerusalem. A country mourns. But Palestinians celebrate the "incident" of malicious, willful, intentional, premeditated murder. "Avinu Malkeinu! - Father in Heaven! Avenge before our eyes the blood of Your servants which was spilled!" (From the "Avinu Malkeinu" prayer, recited on fast days, including Yom Kippur.)

As I see it, a blessing is something that requires time and effort. It requires investment. It requires steadfastness and zealousness. Perhaps these things can be said about a curse, as well? Then what's the difference?

The difference can be seen in the final outcome, the results of one's efforts. In the history of the Jews, a blessed nation. Wherever we have gone, wherever we have been exiled, wherever we have found ourselves, we have built. We built educational systems. In a medieval Europe, when the vast majority of Europeans were ignorant, and kept ignorant by both the lords and the church, the Jews had established systems of education where their children were not just knowledgeable but many were even quite learned. In Europe, the Indian subcontinent and throughout the Mid-east and the Mediterranean basin, the Jews established "bikur cholim" (hospice, home-care) societies, to tend to the sick and nurture them to life. Throughout the Jewish Diaspora, throughout their long years of suffering and oppression, charitable

aid committees were established in each city, town and village, to tend to the needs of the poor, the widows, the orphans. As the prophet Isaiah said succinctly, "Their seed shall be known by the nations, and their descendents amongst the people; all those who see them shall recognize them as those whose seed God has blessed" (*Isaiah* 61:9).

Not so those who are not blessed, those whose very existence gives testimony to the curse that they represent. Wherever they go, destruction. No contributions to society and nothing ever offered to civilization, any civilization. Barren. Waste. Destruction. That is their contribution. Death. Senseless deaths, which they perpetrate even upon themselves!

Surviving the cauldrons of the Holocaust the Jews literally rebuilt a nation. People united to rebuild a nation, to build a country, to reclaim their former Land; they forged human beings out of ashes, ashes of previous curses, of earlier attempts at destruction. So there are deep lessons we can learn from our sojourns at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. We can learn and observe the results of a curse. We can sit back and let it take its [non-]roots. And we can most certainly await the results of those curses. Or, we can relearn to unite and rebuild. To contribute to "all of us." We can come to the Land: we can build it, we can plant it, we can study in it, we can pray in it; for we are "the nation that God blessed." It is part and parcel of our makeup. we've got thousands of years experience. It's in our genes, our DNA.

But we must not forget why it's so deeply rooted in us. We were given a Torah. It is the Torah which states the Land is ours. It is Torah which gives us our claim. Remove the Torah from our history and what have we? There can be no claim to the Land. For that matter, without Torah there can't even be a claim to being Jewish. Why are the descendents of the Irish living in America called Irish-American? Or why are there, for example, Anglo-Americans, Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans, and so on, despite their having lived in America for several centuries? Why aren't we, as Jews, called Polish-American, Austrian-American, Swiss-American, English-American, French-American, African-American, etc. Why are we are called Jews, after having lived for centuries, even millennia in certain countries?

"Bereishis," for "reishit," (the first), the world was created. "Reishit" refers to the Torah. "Reishit" refers to the Jewish nation (Midrash). Rebbe Nachman explains that each and every part of this world was created by God to reflect the pride He would receive from each and every Jew, from the nation as a whole, from each individual as a distinct human being and from each particular part of that person (Likutey Moharan I, 17:2). Thus, each part of Creation reflects the pride God has from us. But this can only take place when this pride is well placed, when we conduct our lives with the other "reishit," with the Torah. Then we have a claim to being Jewish, and we have a claim to the Land.

It is a Torah which makes us Jews, which defines us as Jews. It is this definition, this source, that is the Book of our "GENE-ology," our DNA, the power that makes us a nation of builders. It is our connection to our Land, it is the source of our affinity to it. It is our connection to each other and the power which unites us to build a beautiful future together for all of us. Let us not succumb to the curses and destruction that others seek for us. Let us not fall victim to their continuous attacks. Let us mourn the loss of our brothers and sisters and use their curse of destruction as a catalyst for building, to become more determined than ever to remain a UNITED NATION of builders. And this is the greatest revenge we can have. To continually build despite the enemies proclivities to destroy. Let others revel in their history of the genocide; we will revel in our productive history. Let the others celebrate the deaths of the innocent; we will be more determined than ever to establish our lives as constructive human beings. To each his own history; to each his future.

The Talmud teaches, "Why did Omri merit becoming king (of the Ten Tribes)? Because he built a city in Israel" (*Sanhedrin* 102b; see *1 Kings* 16:23-24). Interestingly, the city he built was Shomron, i.e., Samaria, from where we learn the value of the blessings of Mount Gerizim and the result of the curses and devastation of Mount Ebal. If we truly wish to assert our authority, to show that the Land is really ours, then let us BUILD it, not destroy it. Then, we too, can become "king" and rule with a positive approach, to establish life and decency in a place of death and destruction.

"Avinu Malkeinu! - Father in Heaven! Avenge before our eyes the blood of Your servants which was spilled!" Help us unite to build together, help us to avenge the spilt blood by surging forward and by not becoming what our enemies want us to become (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 55). And in this merit may God build our Temple and gather us all in from the four corners to our Land, speedily, without further delays and suffering, Amen.

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Next week is already the Month of Elul, which heralds a whole New Year together with Rosh Hashanah (in Uman), Yom Kippur and Sukkot. On a personal level, it also means many overseas trips between Sukkot and the end of December, mostly to North America, East and West Coasts. Though we're quite busy with several projects, I'll do my best to keep this series going. Planned essays include: the origin of Yishmael's claim to the Land (after all, historically they NEVER had it, so how can they be so brazen as to claim it?!); why we've got to suffer the way we are suffering now - and what we CAN do about it. Essays will also focus on connecting the forthcoming festivals to the Holy Land and essays on the Book of Genesis showing how the Land cannot be anyone else's but ours. Because of the travel schedule, in order not to leave the screen blank, we will try to insert the lessons of Rebbe Nachman which speak of the Holy Land. Even if they lack interpretation, you will easily get the feel of the Rebbe's reverence and love of, the Holy Land.)

Meanwhile, have a good week, with only good news, good health and a real lasting peace.

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